

MY DANGEROUS JOURNEY

Selihom was just 4 years old when she escaped from her country on foot, with only her 10-year-old brother to protect her.

The frightened girl stayed close to her brother as they hid behind rocks and bushes. The 4-year-old knew she couldn't make a sound. Armed soldiers patrolled the area and had orders to shoot on sight.



Selihom Kidane

country of Sudan (see map on page 6).

During the blazing-hot days, the brother and sister hid and tried to sleep. Under cover of night, they trekked through the cold

darkness. They had nothing but some food and water and the clothes on their backs.

This **perilous** journey was their only hope of being reunited with their mother, who had fled to the U.S. nearly three years earlier.

"I was scared," remembers Selihom, who is now 12. "But I knew that if I cried, I would put my brother and the other people with us in danger."

A Painful Decision

Selihom and Yafiet are among the more than 400,000 refugees who have fled Eritrea in the past decade. Life in that country is a struggle. It is one of the poorest



Forced to flee: Eritreans walk to find safety at a camp for refugees.

countries in the world, and Eritreans have few of the rights that Americans have. They are not allowed to vote for their leaders and can be jailed for speaking out against the government. Many people are **persecuted** for their religious beliefs. Until recently, most Eritreans were not allowed to leave the country.

In 2008, police came to arrest Selihom's mother, Selam, because of her religion. In a split second, she made the most painful decision of her life: to leave 20-month-old Selihom and her brother behind. As the officers

burst through the front door of their home, Selam ran out the back. She hid with friends until she could flee to Sudan. From there, she made her way to the U.S. and began figuring out how to get her kids to join her.

After Selam's escape, her two young children lived with their grandparents. They were in constant danger. The Eritrean government often punishes the families of people who have fled the country.

No matter what, Yafiet knew his future would be grim if he stayed. In Eritrea, nearly every

teenager is forced into the military after 11th grade. Once he became a soldier, there would be no telling when—or if—Yafiet would ever be free again.

Selam grew more desperate to get her children out of Eritrea. She finally saved up enough money and put a plan in place. It was dangerous, but there was no other way: Selihom and Yafiet would have to cross the desert.

On the Move

During the long, hot days in the desert, Selihom tried to be brave. Yafiet distracted her with

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ...

REFUGEES

Refugees are people who have fled their home countries to escape from danger. Many leave because of war or violence. Others are at risk because of their religion, race, or political beliefs.

- There were 25.4 million refugees worldwide last year.
- More than half of them were under the age of 18.
- Nearly 175,000 child refugees were unaccompanied, or traveling without an adult.

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Cover: Noah Willman (Selihom Kidane); Peter Wiggles/Panos Pictures/Redux (background); StockPhoto/Getty Images (photo frame); Pages 4–5: Noah Willman (Selihom Kidane); Stefan Boness/Panos Pictures/Redux (refugees)

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word games. He told her about their mom and the amazing life they would have in America.

“Yafiet was always positive,” Selihom recalls. “Whenever I was hungry or needed a drink or was scared, he made sure I was OK.”

After walking about 80 miles in seven days, the exhausted kids crossed the border into Sudan. But their journey was far from over.

During the next few months, they traveled across Sudan and made their way into another country, Ethiopia. There, they would wait for the U.S. government to give them permission to go to America.

Their mother had set up a network of family members and strangers to take them in along the way. In all, the kids stayed in at least 10 different places.

“We had to trust people we didn’t know,” Selihom says. “Yafiet and I only had each other and a bunch of courage.”



Selihom and her mom sit together in their Maryland home. Left: Yafiet and Selihom before they escaped from Eritrea.

Together and Free

In December 2012, Selihom and Yafiet boarded a plane to Washington, D.C. A year and a half after leaving their home in Eritrea, they arrived in the United States. They stepped through a door in the airport and saw their mother for the first time in more than four years.

“I kneeled down and hugged Selihom,” Selam remembers. “And we all cried.”

Today, Selihom is a bubbly

sixth-grader who lives with her mother in Maryland. She often texts with Yafiet, who goes to college in North Carolina. If she were sitting next to you in class, you might never know the bravery it took for her to get to America. But her long journey will always be a part of her.

“These obstacles that my family had to overcome made me who I am,” Selihom says. “I’m very lucky.”

—by Jennifer Li Shotz

NATION IN THE NEWS: ERITREA

Population: About 6 million. (In comparison, the U.S. population is 328 million.)

Size: About as big as the state of Pennsylvania

Daily Life: Most people live on less than a few dollars per day. Food shortages are common.

War and Peace: In 1998, Eritrea went to war with Ethiopia for control of land along the countries’ shared border. They finally reached a peace agreement last year.

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank



Jim McMahon/Magnum® (Map); Noah Willman (Selihom with her mother); courtesy of the Kidane family (Selihom with her brother)