

I Only Had One Chance to Flee

Name: Hanfare

Arrived in Sweden: 2011

From: Eritrea

Aspiration: To become an airplane technician

My name is Hanfare and I come from Eritrea. I left my mother there in December, 2010. My father is dead. He died in the war against Ethiopia.

In Eritrea everything was so different to Sweden. My mother and I had no electricity, just a kerosene lamp, and sometimes we didn't have enough money to buy kerosene. At my school there weren't any desks, or chairs, or books. We sat on tin barrels. I belong to the Afar people. In Eritrea, many people think that Afar people are all nomads, and that's why we get called "farmers". There are nine clans and nine different languages in Eritrea. That's why I think children should be taught at an early age to respect one another.

After secondary school, everyone in Eritrea has to do military service. My mother had a brother who did military service and never came back. Nobody knows what happened to him. My mother didn't want to take the risk that the same thing might happen to me. Because my father is dead, I'm the only person she's got. That's why I had to flee to my uncle in Yemen. If I'd been caught fleeing from military service, I would probably have been jailed and killed. This is why I only had one chance to escape.

The last thing my mother and I did together was to cook food. We didn't talk for long, we just hugged. It's not easy to say goodbye.

At the time, I hadn't planned to travel all the way to Sweden. The idea was to return to my dear mother when everything had calmed down in Eritrea. I was given a present, a prayer mat, which I brought with me and still have.

First, we travelled to the coast and slept close to the sea for four days. One day, the border police came and said that I would have to pay them if I didn't want them to send me back. I gave them my food money, but they also took all my papers. My school reports, grades, and birth certificate.

I travelled by boat at night with a fisherman who sells fish in Yemen. The captain said that I should say that I was helping him fish if there was a control, but we were lucky and never got stopped.

I arrived in the city Al-Khokha in Yemen, where my uncle lives. It's a poor city; there's no hospital there and not a lot of food. Many Eritreans who flee from the war come there and are forced to beg. Many become sick from the bad water, but can't get any help, and there's no medicine available.

Yemen also had many other problems at this time. People protested on the streets against the government, and they threatened all the immigrants. I couldn't go outside. My uncle helped me to pay a smuggler. I got a European passport and on the 22nd August 2011 I was able to flee to Sweden. I didn't even know there was a country with that name.

In my village there were no planes, but I had dreamt about them since I was 7 years old and learnt to fold paper airplanes. Now I was able to fly for the first time. Once, I had seen an American film about a boy who helped to expose a terrorist with a bomb on board a plane. So now it felt like I was in a movie.

I remember that it felt cold in Sweden. First I arrived at a halfway house in Märsta, and then at a house in Skutskär. Everyone was nice and I was given food 3-4 times a day. Before that, I'd only eaten once in the morning and once in the evening.

I have friends who have fled from Eritrea and ended up in other European countries. They haven't been given as much help as I have. Some don't have anywhere to live and others aren't able to go to school. I also have friends who are in jail in Yemen. I hope that the UN can help to free them.

It's hard not knowing anything about mum. I thought about her so much that I didn't want to go to school. But the staff helped me. Especially a man named Pontus. He joked to get me to laugh and he convinced me to come and play football even though I didn't feel like it. I was also able to go to a psychologist. In the end, I realised that I had to go to school to learn the language. I have a chance to fulfill my dream and become an airplane engineer.

After a month in Sweden I got hold of a phone number to my uncle in Yemen. He contacted a trader who sometimes travelled to Eritrea on business. Through him, I was able to find out that mum was alive and doing well, but that she was worried about me.

I don't normally tell people what I've been through. Only one friend knows. There's a risk that the government in Eritrea could find out about my story, and I'm worried about my mother. Even here in Sweden, you have to pay money at the embassy if you want to get a permit to travel back for a visit.

Here in Sweden I feel free. I can do what I like. If anyone comes and hits you here you can call the police. They even help you if you're not rich and can't pay them a lot of money. Now I have studied Social Science, History, and Home Economics. It was nice to learn how to cook food. After five months, I managed to pass the SFI-test (Swedish for Immigrants).

I would like my mother to come to Sweden. I miss her a lot because of what she's meant, and still means, to me. But mum can't get out of Eritrea and travel here legally, because I fled my military service. And fleeing the country would be too difficult for her. She's not young like me, able to sleep outside and hide myself at night.

I've been lucky with friends in school. Without them, I wouldn't be able to go there. There's a group of us who usually meet in the common room and talk about all kinds of things, about life. Since I don't have my family here, I have to have friends.