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# A Refugee's Tale

As a bright young girl in a re-settlement camp in Kenya, Meron Gadda faced a world of hurdles she had to get past before she could find her future

*By Riyah Lakhani*



*(Photo courtesy UNHCR.org)*

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AKUMA CAMP, in the Turkana region of the northeast, is one of the largest refugee settlements in Kenya. Approximately 180,000 people from neighbouring East African countries call Kakuma home. It was set up in 1991 by the Kenyan government, and reflects the in-between life of its people. Mud huts with aluminum roofs fall in neat lines, with all 180,000 people lined up neatly and compactly within those lines. But, within the neatly assembled rows, lies the plight of a people who have fled bloodshed, poverty and discrimination, only to live a life of the same uncertainty and poverty.

In Kakuma, the earth is orange, like the colour of skin tarnished by the plight of the world, used and left alone with no nurturing. It's an earth so malnourished that deep cracks run through it like exposed veins, broken and begging the elements to cure it of its disease. The semi-arid climate makes it ill-suited for agriculture – residents of the camp are dependent on food aid, and getting clean drinking water is a struggle. This is a place where water is given to cattle and sheep, while people die from dehydration. Crime rules. Neighbours kill neighbours with machetes and kerosene lamps, tools that are supposed to make daily life bearable.

Employment is limited, and people are dependent on aid for basic necessities such as food, clean water and clothing. Few people are able to earn an income, either by working for the NGOs in the camp, by money sent from family outside the camps, or by selling extra food from their aid packages. Plumbing is a foreign concept and electricity is a luxury enjoyed by a few wealthy households, which have managed to scrape money together to buy a generator. They set themselves up as tiny power companies, and make additional money selling electricity to the handful of houses that can afford to buy it.

The people are limited to the space within the walls of the camp, and a pass from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Kenyan government is required if one wants – or needs – to go outside.



*Kakuma refugee camp is a parched, crime ridden, temporary home for some 180,000 refugees from Kenya's neighbouring countries.*

Children quickly turn into adults. Their reality and perception of the world is limited to the dust, the heat and the mud huts with aluminum roofs – and the flash flooding when the rains hit. They wear tattered school uniforms, face unemployment and endure daily ethnic violence.

This is all they know, and their reality hits them in the face every time the sun sets on the African horizon.

This is where Meron Gadda's story begins.

### **The beginning**



S MANY Ethiopians have before her, Gadda had to flee her home country at the age of five. Drought, famine and human-rights violations

committed by their own government left many Ethiopians homeless.

*no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city  
running as well.*

**Home, Warsan Shire**

Gadda's mother died giving birth. Her father is rumoured to be a political prisoner. She doesn't know whether he's alive. As an orphan, she only had shelter provided by a family friend, a woman who had promised she would take care of Gadda if anything happened to her mother.

A girl with no family, Gadda is accustomed to calling people close to her "sister," "brother," "aunty" or "uncle." This is a sign of respect and a coping mechanism, and perhaps a way of creating a family where there was none.

"Because I don't have family, it was hard," she says. "I don't have a mum and dad to talk to about how I feel. My aunty raised me and she was super rude. She wasn't a nice woman."

"Aunty" accused Gadda of being responsible for her mother's death. She forced Gadda to work at her hotel, where Gadda was required to clean, cook and serve the guests. This was not required of Aunty's two sons, who were around Gadda's age.

She sent her sons to a private school, while Gadda went to one of the local refugee schools and was instructed by inexperienced and incompetent teachers.

Aunty's husband tried to sexually assault Gadda, who was advised not to press charges, to spare her aunt the hurt and embarrassment – and because it could impede Gadda's refugee application process.

“My life was hell. The only thing that I was loving about my life was my education. My education was my life.”



Education was the key to improving her life, and Gadda realized that. Despite being in the “local refugee school” with sub-par educational standards, she worked to educate herself. She recalls her teacher coming to school drunk, and stumbling and slurring his way through the lessons. The serious students had to teach themselves, and the weaker ones would bribe the teachers for passing grades.

Always in the top three students of her class, Gadda soon found she'd had enough of her aunt and her teachers. She moved on to a boarding school, where she would be surrounded by other motivated students and would be free of the tyranny of her aunt's house.

*Meron Gadda understood the importance of her time at Kakuma, but stresses that it's not a place to live.*

She had applied for the school that was opened by actress Angelina Jolie, who also is a UNHCR goodwill ambassador. Though the school was basic by international standards, it was the best in the camp, and only the top students were accepted.

Gadda passed her entry test and secured a place in the school.

“Angelina Jolie’s boarding school” (as it is called in the camp) gave Gadda a good education, and skills that would help her pass her Grade 8 examination, which is a pivotal point in Kenyan schooling systems. Much like the SATs, the examinations are held simultaneously throughout the country, and are regulated and graded by government-appointed teachers. A failing grade means a student doesn’t carry on to high school.

She made friends there and she was happy. But then she got sick. Her digestive system wasn’t used to the food at the school, primarily githeri (a mixture of corn and beans in a tomato sauce), maharage (kidney beans), ugali (a dough made from maize flour), and occasionally rice (a luxury in the camp). Gadda’s illness caused her to miss so many days that she fell behind. The school was so competitive that it didn’t allow room for mistakes, and she had to drop out, and was forced to move back to her aunt’s house.

She managed to get funding from her “brother,” a local businessman, who paid 7,000 Kenyan shillings (\$91) – all the money he had – for her to take her Standard 8 national exams at a local private school.

She passed with flying colours.

## Coming to Canada

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NOW 19, GADDA looks back on her life in the camp with a mixture of nostalgia and grief.

“Kakuma is a nice place,” she says. “But it’s not a good life. It’s not a good life to live. If you want to live, you don’t live there.”

Women risk their lives every day just to collect firewood and water. Abduction, rape, female genital mutilation and child marriage are common. Female education is at a low.

But Gadda says the little things gave her joy, like being with her community and having friends. Time went by and more and more of her friends were granted refugee visas to Europe and North America, and Gadda continually felt as if she were being left behind.

“All my friends forgot about me,” she says of those who left ahead of her. “I don’t know what it is that they eat, but they just forget me forever ... I really wished that I could just leave. My life was basically school, go home, read, work, go to school. You’re doing the same thing every day.”

Before long, Gadda got the good news for which she had been longing – her name and her family’s name were posted on UNHCR’s notification board with a request for interviews. This would be the first step toward getting out and going abroad. She recalls the process as a blur: interviews turned into medical checkups, which turned into hasty goodbyes with loved ones. Before long, Gadda and her family were on a plane headed for Canada.

Jan. 23, 2013, Gadda and her makeshift family stepped onto Canadian soil. They were greeted at the airport in Winnipeg by a government-appointed welcoming committee and were taken to a shelter for refugees. There, in true Canadian fashion, immigrants

*you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land*

**Home, Warsan Shire**

from the Philippines, the Middle East and other African nations surrounded her. Gadda wasn't accustomed to North American food and it was the first time that she had seen snow. Making friends was a challenge, too.

Refugees are granted monthly support determined by provincial social assistance rates, which, according to the CIC website, is "the minimum amount needed to cover the most basic food and shelter needs."

Gadda's cheque is a little less than \$850 a month, which is meant to pay rent, groceries and transportation, and miscellaneous expenses. As she was underage, she didn't see any of the money the government granted her. It went directly to her older sister, who didn't pass on the money to her.

Now, she gets the money herself, but it allows her to just scrape by, with nothing left over.

The whole experience has been a blur, she says. After seven months in the country, looking for better opportunity and lower cost of living, she left Winnipeg for Edmonton with friends from Kakuma, whom she considers her brother and sister here. She wants nothing to do with her real sister and legal guardian.

Gadda is upgrading her education at Centre High Campus, but the process hasn't been easy. English classes are mandatory, despite the fact that she came here from Kenya, a country whose national language is English. She was also placed in classes reserved for students who need more attention and help academically. This has been a blow to her self-image. In Kakuma, her identity was based on her academic performance; education was her life. In Canada, like many refugees before her, she had to re-build her identity.



*you broke the ocean in  
half to be here.  
only to meet nothing that wants you.*

*–immigrant*

**Salt, Nayyirah Waheed**

“When you know something and someone puts you down, you forget it. I know maths, I’m from Africa. In Africa we don’t calculate with a calculator, we use our minds ... Just because you’re from Africa, they think you don’t know English. I mean I’m from Kenya. Of course I know English! People ask me how my English is so good. That’s the way that treat us.”

Sitting in her living room, surrounded by the children of family friends, whom she is babysitting, it’s hard to imagine the hardship that she has endured. Standing less than five feet tall, she doesn’t wear the magnitude of her experience on her shoulders. Her bright eyes twinkle as she talks about her experiences and the things she misses about her friends and her home.

She jokes about being Canadian, and how she has adapted to the Canadian winters. She wears a denim jacket and, like a true Albertan, she finds it sufficient protection from the -5 C weather. As she sits enveloped in the smoke of luban (frankincense), you can see her past and present converging.

The little things tell her story. Her hair is styled in cornrows, like those worn by girls in East Africa. Her laughter is genuine and hearty and musical – like that of so many other strong African women.