



KEMEY DE HAN W'ALU  
KIBRA'S STORY

# Kemey de Han w'alu Kibra's story

Keiron Galloway and Kibra

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Kemey de Han w'alu

## Kibra's story

I trust I soon shall dry my tear  
And leave forever hence to roam,  
Far from a residence so dear,  
The place of beauty - my native home.

George Moses Horton - "*The Southern Refugee*"

Dear Kibra, may you be safe and happy and live with ease in your new home.



# Kibra

Kemey de Han w'alu. My name is Kibra and my homeland is Eritrea. I was born in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. My brothers and sister still live there and I am afraid for them every day. Life in Asmara is very hard.

## My life in Eritrea

When I was young I loved to sit with my grandfather and listen to his stories about our family. He could recall twelve generations of family history. I can remember three.

I am the eldest of five children, three boys and two girls. My parents were very young when I was born. My mother was only nine years old when she married my father. The marriage was arranged by their families but they loved each other very much.

When I was young, Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. When the fighting between the Ethiopians and the Eritrean freedom fighters was very bad my parents took our family to stay with our grandparents in their village. They lived in the mountains about an hour and a half from Asmara.

There were freedom fighters in the village. They were always laughing and happy and I would buy them cigarettes and sugar.

I finished school after year nine. When I was eighteen I went to work at a government store. I also went to night school to matriculate.



Kibra in **Australia** May 2014

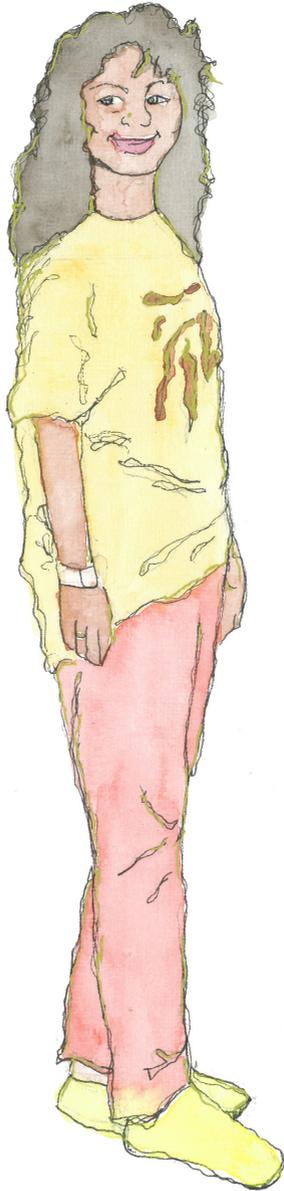
At the store where I worked the supply of goods was controlled by the government and had to be purchased with coupons. It was my job to prepare the coupons and collect the money. People then took the coupons to the guys who worked at the back of the store to weigh and package the goods.

We never knew who we could trust. People in Eritrea were always watching and reporting other people to the police. One day I came to work and found that the guys had been taken by the police for questioning. There was a problem with the store scales and sometimes they had given too much and other times too little.

Soon the police came to collect me too. They came in a plain car, not a police car. They questioned me for many hours about banking the money from the store. I was supposed to bank it daily but sometimes I kept it overnight in the safe at the store. They also questioned me about my association with the freedom fighters. I would not answer their questions.

After a long time I was taken to a remand prison. My belongings were taken away and I was locked in a big room full of other women. There was only one toilet and the room was very hot. I was also very scared.

I was crying because I was afraid and I didn't know who I could trust. We slept on the concrete floor. It took time before my family found out where I was and brought me blankets and food.



When Kibra lived in **Asmara** she worked in a government store

Some of the other women in the room had been my friends at school. When we were at school we danced and laughed together but not at the prison.

Bad things happened at the prison. We were often questioned and we would never know when it would happen. We were tortured and some people were hurt very badly. They would come at night and take women away. We were afraid of every noise and didn't sleep well.

Women, and men, who had been in the prison before had written their stories on the walls of the prison. They wrote about what had happened to them in the prison and about their families. This was all around us and made it hard to sleep.

I was in the prison for months until my uncle paid a guarantee for me and the guys from the store.

I had to go back to work in the store. After a few months I went to work in another area of Asmara. I sat a government exam to be a store auditor. I was one of only three people to pass the exam. Then I flew to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, for a one month holiday

## Addis Ababa to Kenya

While I was in Addis Ababa the freedom fighters were successful in gaining back parts of Eritrea. Because of my past activities I



*Addis Ababa streetscape*

*Scott Pennicott 2013*

could not return to Eritrea. I could also not stay in Ethiopia because I would be persecuted and put in jail.

I had to leave Addis Ababa but I only had papers to be in Addis Ababa and I didn't know how to escape. I knew a lot of people through my family and church. I am an Orthodox Christian. I asked a woman from my church if she knew anybody who could help me. She didn't but she also wanted to find a way for her son to escape.

A family member arranged for me to meet a people smuggler who could help me travel to Kenya. He didn't want to take a woman because it is such a difficult journey. I told him he could leave me if I wasn't able to make it.

He charged a lot of money, 3500 Ethiopian birr (Br) for each person. I paid a deposit of 3000 Br for myself and two friends. I had enough money then.

We waited about a month for the smuggler to tell us it was time to leave. I didn't say goodbye to anybody.

The smuggler had arranged for us to travel by bus and to stay in different hotels. We were told to treat him like a stranger and not show that we knew him. He told us to tell the police that we were travelling to a medical clinic for treatment. Each time we stopped we were searched and questioned and we were very afraid.

At one stop the police took my papers and it wasn't until the people smuggler paid them that I was safe. He signalled for me to get back on the bus.



*Fabulous church of the Holy Trinity in Addis Ababa*

After several days of travelling and staying in different hotels we spent a day walking to meet our transport to the mountains. A Landcruiser picked us up when it was dark. We hid in the back under tarpaulins. We drove through the forest towards the mountains. We were told that if the police were following us we would need to jump out of the Landcruiser and run into the forest. We were very afraid because we didn't know where we were or where we would run to if we had to run through the forest.

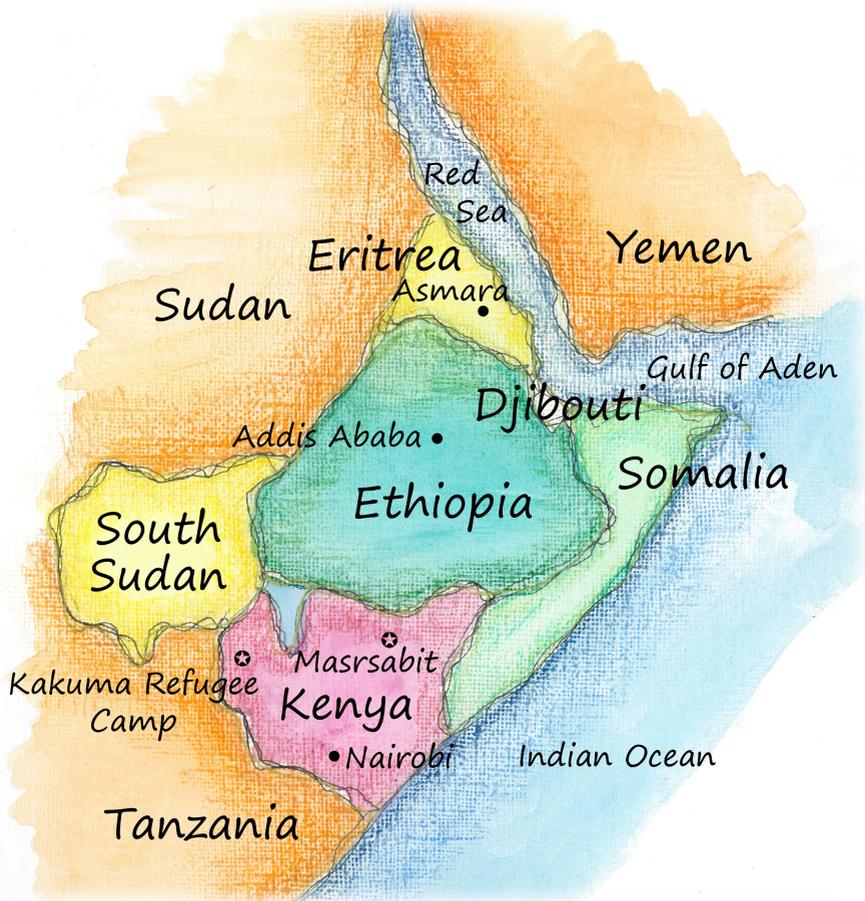
After the drive in the Landcruiser we had to walk across the mountains. We walked at night on hard rocky roads. We had no food or water. We walked and hid for eight days and nights. We were very afraid and we were in a bad state.

## Kenya

I was very sick when we arrived near the Kenyan border. I told my friends to leave me but they would not. One of the people smugglers left to go back and two of them stayed to show us the border. We slept in the forest. We were very afraid because we could hear wild animals like elephants and hyenas.

We crossed the border to Kenya at Sololo. We went to the Police Station. They felt sorry for us but they told us to go back. We refused and stayed outside the Police Station for three days. After three days the Police agreed to take us to Marsabit where they said there was a refugee camp.

There was no refugee camp in Marsabit. We stayed on some vacant land near the Police Station and made shelters from



*Kibra moved from her homeland of **Eritrea**, through **Ethiopia**, and then lived in **Kenya** as a refugee for twenty years*

cardboard and plastic given to us by shopkeepers. The camp filled up with Eritreans and Ethiopians. The police were afraid our cooking fires would make a fire and they often came and told us to stop cooking.

We would often complain about the camp conditions to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They would come on a helicopter to check the camp. They also paid a local hotel to provide food but the food they provided was very bad.

I hated living in the camp and I wanted to get to Nairobi where I could work and live a better life. I tried several times to run from the camp and paid drivers to take me to Nairobi.

Once the driver took my money and drove for a while and then left me and other people at a cafe several hours from the camp. He did not come back and we had to find our way back to the camp.

Another time, a driver took me and others to a place outside Nairobi and then we had to catch a bus into the city. In Nairobi we registered at the Tikha refugee camp. Even though Tikha had much better conditions than other camps, it didn't feel like home. With no family and friends Kenya was a very hard place to live and life was difficult. I escaped from the camp by cutting a hole in the wire that surrounded the camp. I caught a bus into Nairobi.

In Nairobi I was a refugee with no papers. This meant I had to work in peoples' homes cooking and cleaning. I was very



Kibra arriving in **Hobart** in June 2010, with caseworker Suzanne, and volunteer Betty

depressed and angry. People did not treat me kindly. It was very difficult to make enough money to eat and live.

An Eritrean director of The African Education Program (ARAP) told me that I should apply for a scholarship to study. This would allow me to qualify as an asylum seeker, live legally in Nairobi and would pay for my living costs and education.

I applied several times and eventually found a sponsor. I wanted to study electronics. The college would not accept me because there were no other female students. I had to study hairdressing. I hated hairdressing but I received my diploma because I passed all the tests. I graduated in August 1993. My scholarship finished and I had to go back to the camp.

Then I was promised another scholarship to study dressmaking. I was sponsored by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the scholarship was for five years. I was very happy. After three years I had to leave the course when my sponsor said there was not enough money in the budget to continue to pay my scholarship. Then things were very hard and many bad things happened to me.

In 2006 the Kenyan government said that anyone without papers had to leave. I did not have a mandate and I went to the UNHCR to register. I was refused because I was already on their computer. Some people tried to register with false names but I could not do that.

The UNHCR told me to go to the Kakuma refugee camp. This is a very bad camp. By then the other camps had closed so I did not have a choice



Kibra with certificates from Morris School of Hairdressing  
and the World Federation of Hairdressing School

I kept going back to the UNHCR office. Eventually I was interviewed by a lady from Cairo. She asked me a lot of questions. I answered all of her questions truthfully. Sometime after that the UNHCR called me to say they had extended my mandate. I could stay in Nairobi and I could also start the process to resettle in another country.

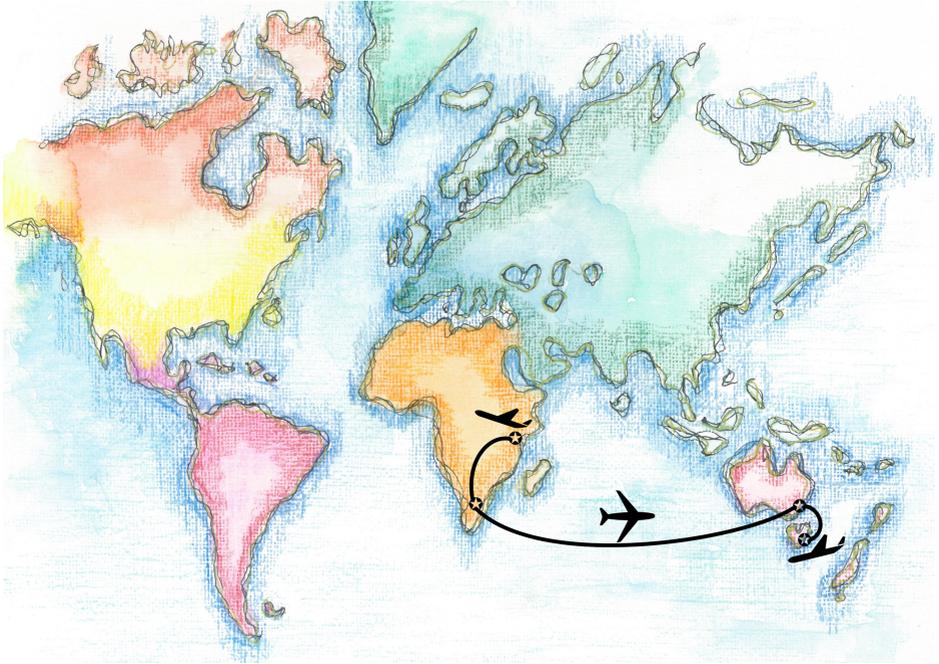
I waited a long time, filled out many papers, and attended many interviews. About a year later a lady called me to say, "Congratulations, you have been accepted to settle in Australia". She said I needed to have a medical assessment and then the arrangements would be made.

I looked up at the picture of Christ on my wall. I was laughing and crying and I said, "God, I thought you had forgotten me but you are with me always".

## Nairobi to Hobart

Finally, the time arrived to fly to Australia. I had to leave a lot of my belongings behind. I flew with others from Nairobi to Johannesburg. Transit took a long time and I was afraid. From Johannesburg I flew to Sydney. I did not know what to expect at the Customs or Immigration checks. I was very tired and confused and afraid. From Sydney I flew to Hobart.

I arrived in Hobart on 29 June 2010. I was met by my case worker, my volunteers and people from the Eritrean community. They had cooked food for me and had prepared a home for six weeks.



*In 2010 Kibra flew from **Nairobi**, in **Kenya**, to **Hobart***

My volunteers, Betty, Wendy and June, are like family to me. Wendy and Betty have been with me since I arrived in Hobart. June volunteered as my English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor. They have helped me to do all the things I need to do like catch the bus, find a home and make medical appointments. They support me when I am not well and when I am sad or lonely.

## My future

When I first came to Australia I was in a hurry to get a job and work. Now, I am sometimes unwell. I would still like to work and earn money and make new friends.

When I am an Australian citizen I will save to visit my family in Eritrea.

I am a Christian, and I thank God that he brought me to Australia. He took me away from a bad place to a quiet, nice place with kind people. I can live a safe life in Australia. I still worry a lot about my family. I think about them and worry about them every day. I have missed them for a very long time.

I know that things will get better little by little. I cannot lose hope.

# Resource list

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

[www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)

Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL)

[www.tcal.org.au](http://www.tcal.org.au)

The Department of Education Tasmania

[www.education.tas.gov.au](http://www.education.tas.gov.au)

TasTAFE

[www.tastafe.tas.edu.au](http://www.tastafe.tas.edu.au)

26TEN

[www.26ten.tas.gov.au](http://www.26ten.tas.gov.au)

Migrant Resource Centre

[www.mrchobart.org.au](http://www.mrchobart.org.au)

Refugee Council of Australia

[www.refugeecouncil.org.au](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au)

Kibra's Story is the second book  
in the Namaste Book Series.  
This book tells Kibra's story  
of her journey from Eritrea to Australia.

