

Sometimes I think I should stop trying to bring her closer to me. That only leads to more fear and alienation. She blames me for leaving her behind, for fleeing Africa without her. But during my journey to Europe I have witnessed a lot of bad things that I can't unsee. The guards with their guns were asking the women to stand in line, they picked the ones who were most attractive, closed the fence and started touching these women. I don't want my wife to take this route as well.

Our story started in childhood. S. and I went to the same elementary school in Eritrea. We knew in our hearts since high school that we were drawn to each other and started dating during college at 17 or 18 years old. We did not tell our parents. Then suddenly after five years there was a demand from her parents that she had to marry someone. She did not have a choice. It was not up for debate. The other man was older, financially comfortable, an American man. They were looking for security for their daughter. We tried to convince her parents. They ignored everything. The only way out was to get married. Although it was on such short notice, the church arranged for us to become husband and wife. But even at this stage her parents wouldn't support us. Only her sister came to our wedding. There is no record of the ceremony. I had just finished college and I did not have any money to hire a music band or a photographer.

After the marriage, I started working for the government as a geologist and I was sent out to do research in the border zone between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The border guards asked me: 'What are you doing here?' I had a permit but because I had regional maps with me, they thought I wanted to cross the border and flee. They locked me up in prison for eight days, an absurd situation. Out of the blue came an opportunity to break out and so I did. I went to the capital to hide. There I found a smuggler to Sudan and I knew I would never go back. I was in contact with my wife. She wanted to come too, but I said no because she was in the middle of her school year. I promised I would find a way for her to flee the country. Her parents wanted her to divorce me, they said that I would forget about her. But we had each other and nothing really mattered. One month after I left S. fled to Sudan as well, where she stayed with her uncle. She wasn't allowed to meet me, she could not go out. But if you want to be with someone, nothing can hold you back and we managed to secretly meet up a few times. Then I had the chance to flee to Libya, and through Italy, I came to the Netherlands. The journey took me two months, through the desert, then by sea. I had to pay a lot of money, 6000 dollars, to reach Italy.

I live in Amsterdam for three years now. I asked for a family reunification but the government rejected my request. They said: 'You are not married for a long time. Your papers don't qualify as official because they are only church papers and no state papers. You don't even have documentation of your wedding celebration.' I asked for an appeal but we heard nothing for over a year. It drove us crazy. Her parents pressured her, she thought of suicide. Maybe I gave her false hope. Her family in the end, kind of, won. I cannot get her here, I am powerless. S. now applied for a school in Sweden. She had to go to Uganda to apply for a visa and is trapped there now. She asked me to help her find an illegal way to go back to Sudan but I sense that she gave up on us. I know that we have a chance together, we still have a deep connection but the ongoing uncertainty has shattered our love. I am no longer looking for a solution, I just want her to find peace.