**Michael**

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| **Author: Dick Wilde*****Editor’s Note:*** *Each year UNHCR helps resettle thousands of refugees to the United States, where they are able to start a new life. Refugees who reach the United States via UNHCR’s worldwide efforts have shown a well-founded fear of persecution in their homelands. Each refugee’s story is unique. Michael, a young refugee from Sudan, recently arrived in New Hampshire. This is his story.*

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It is quiet in the small, sparsely furnished walk-up apartment off Main Street in Manchester, NH. Michael sits on a low stool, leaning forward slightly, his hands clasped tightly together. Asked to describe his long journey to the United States, he speaks quietly, almost in a whisper at times, and with great care.Michael was born in 1978, in a small village in far south of Sudan. He was born in period of relative peace in Sudan, which has been ravaged by civil war for much of the past 75 years. The war pits the Arab/Muslim majority in Khartoum against the non-Muslim African rebels in the south.***Murder and Mayhem in a Small Village***The oldest son of a vendor in the village’s open air market, Michael and his family enjoyed a quiet life until civil war broke out anew in 1983. In 1989, roaming pro-Government Islamic militias called Marahallin raided Michael’s town in search of rebels and rebel sympathizers. In a series of home raids, militias killed an uncle and two of Michael’s aunts. Later, they returned and murdered his father in the town’s market. Michael, his mother and young brother were suddenly without any means of support or protection.Then the Marahallin came for Michael and the rest of his family. Arriving at his house late at night, the militias took Michael, his mother, and brother away at gunpoint. They were beaten and crammed into buses which drove them to the north. Days later, they militia men forced them from the buses at a roadside where a group of local men waited. It was a slave market and Michael and his mother and brother were separated and sold as slaves to the highest bidder.***Slavery and Freedom***An Arab Muslim from the north ‘bought’ Michael and he was taken to the man’s home in another northern town. He tended goats, cleaned the man’s house, watched his children, and was regularly beaten. The man threatened him daily and assured him he was a slave and could kill him at any time, “as he liked.” Michael slept outside in the stalls with the animals, and wondered where his mother and brother might be. For food, the man gave him rancid, rotting food, which made him sick for months at a time.He dreamed of escape, but knew that if he were to try to leave on his own, the man would almost certainly track him down and kill him on the road.Three years passed. Three years marked by beatings, hunger, illness and infestation. One spring day, Michael’s ‘master’ left the property for three days to visit a neighboring village to buy more livestock, leaving Michael to tend the animals. Michael waited until nightfall of the second night and made his escape under cover of darkness. Staying out of sight of the roads, Michael walked for four days and nights.With help from some southern men he encountered at a railroad station, Michael made it by train to the capital city of Khartoum where he hoped that he could not be found by the man who enslaved him. A Catholic Church there protected Michael and took him in for three months. He later recognized a distant relative of his mother’s walking outside the church, and ran to greet him. The relative, a second cousin, agreed to take Michael in and protect him. Michael eventually found a part time job cleaning at Khartoum’s Pepsi bottling plant, and was able to live in a house with a group of university students near his age who were also from the south of Sudan.Michael’s life began to regain some degree of normalcy, and he was able to resume his basic education. Then, everything changed for good.***Arbitrary Arrest and Torture in Khartoum***At 1:00am one morning, the Sudanese government’s notorious Security Forces smashed in the door of Michael’s home and arrested everyone they could find in the house. The security forces accused Michael and the two university students in the house of being rebel sympathizers. They accused them of organizing secret meetings, and recruiting young men for the rebel forces in the south.Michael and his housemates were dragged to a prison in central Khartoum and beaten and tortured for days. None of the group admitted to any contact or knowledge of the rebels they were accused of supporting. They were strapped down and shocked with bare electric wires. They were tied to iron bar suspended from the ceiling and spun by an electric motor until they lost consciousness. After three days of this torture, one of the student prisoners died. The policemen halted the ‘interrogation’ and had Michael and the remaining two students taken to the security forces medical clinic. The police doctor told the officers that the prisoners were too injured to immediately resume the interrogations, and suggested that they should let them recover at the clinic for a week or so before resuming their ‘questioning.’ The officers agreed, and left one officer behind to guard the prisoners in the clinic.***Sandstorm***It was at this moment that Michael decided that he must escape, or die in the process. To Michael, it was only a question of days or hours before he would die from the police’s various forms of physical torture. With his father, uncle and aunts dead, and his mother and young brother enslaved and possibly already dead somewhere in the vastness of Sudan, Michael concluded he “had nothing to lose.”In his second day in the clinic, a security officer escorted Michael to the bathroom, stationing himself just outside the door. At that moment Michael closed the door, a fast-moving sandstorm enshrouded Khartoum, darkening the city with an impenetrable black cloud of swirling sand and dust. The guard outside the bathroom door began to panic and demanded Michael come out. The small ventilation window above Michael was broken out, and he “knew instantly that this was the moment, I felt it.” At 21 years of age, tall and alarmingly thin, Michael was able to squeeze through an opening far too small for most men. He did not know how far above the ground the window was and he did not care. It was his last and only chance; he “expected to die, one way or the other.”He fell just ten feet to the ground. Blinded and disoriented in the deafening storm, he ran into the blackness, toward nothing. If he was pursued in the midst of the storm, they were never able to see him. After three hours running and walking, the storm subsided. Michael found himself in a section of the city he recognized from his time as a student and part-time office cleaner at the PepsiCo bottling plant in the city. He went to the home of the man he worked for, who took him into his family’s home immediately.Michael was not safe in the city. The security forces would be looking for him and it was likely they would look for him at the bottling plant and at the home of his former boss. Michael’s former boss told him he must flee Khartoum, and Sudan, immediately or he would most certainly be captured and summarily killed.***Sanctuary***Thanks to the help and selfless bravery of Michael’s boss and his associates, Michael reached a port city in eastern Sudan and boarded a ship bound north for ports in Egypt. After some days, the documents and money Michael was given helped him reach Cairo where he found the Egyptian office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](http://www.unrefugees.org/site/lookup.asp?c=lfIQKSOwFqG&b=4865427)).Michael told his story of slaughter, slavery, torture and flight to the UN officials who interviewed him. The United Nations granted Michael refugee protection in Cairo. It helped him begin the exhaustive process of finding a country where he could resettle without fear of arrest or attack.Like many non-Muslim Sudanese men and boys orphaned by marauding pro-government militias, Michael was put forward for resettlement in the United States. UNHCR staffers introduced Michael to American immigration officials at the United States embassy in Cairo, who interviewed him at length. Michael recalls these interviews with a small smile, as he describes a sympathetic INS agent named Robert who interviewed him and managed his application for refugee status. After his paperwork was complete and fully reviewed, Michael was approved for resettlement to the United States.***America***On November 13, 2002, [UNHCR](http://www.unrefugees.org/site/lookup.asp?c=lfIQKSOwFqG&b=4865427) helped Michael board a commercial flight at Cairo’s international airport bound for Frankfurt, and then Chicago and, finally, Manchester, NH.http://www.unrefugees.org/atf/cf/%7bd2f991c5-a4fb-4767-921f-a9452b12d742%7d/Michael_UNHCR004.JPGMichael was met upon landing at Manchester’s tiny airport by staff members from Lutheran Refugee Services, the local social services agency which works with the US State Department in helping resettle refugees in New Hampshire. Michael was welcomed, and brought to his new apartment, where he would share with another recently arrived young refugee, also from Sudan.At this writing in April 2003, Michael has started his first job at a local New Hampshire packaging plant. A local volunteer donated a used PC for Michael and his roommate, and they are learning to navigate the internet to reach out online to others from their country, and their southern province.Michael’s greatest wish, he says, is to become strong enough in his English language skills so that he can educate others about his country and the untold tragedy that is playing out there every hour of every day. By the end of the year, he hopes he will be able to make presentations at schools and before local civic groups. “People are sold as goods in my country,” he says, staring at the bare wooden floor of his new apartment. “Children are dying, they are being killed. They have no chance. Americans must know this, what is happening there.”Most of all, Michael seeks news and information from his country. He has not seen or heard of his mother or younger brother since they were sold as slaves at the roadside in 1987.He says they are always in the ‘front’ of his thoughts. His greatest hope is to find them.  |