

Dark, early morning, Jan. 6, 2009. A big bang on the door woke me. The mailbox flapped and clanked. More bangs. My mother went downstairs, opened the door. I trembled in my bed. Two men came upstairs, into my bedroom, told me to get out of bed and go downstairs.

Downstairs, the room was full of people. My sister came down escorted by more people. A man carrying a big file was talking in a loud voice telling my mum about removal dates. My mum has always told us at prayer times every evening to be calm and always depend on God in difficult times. So we stayed calm and said silent prayers.

Another man appeared at the door with three sacks. I was taken to my bedroom to pack. I was confused, so I packed dirty and torn clothes; no underwear, no pyjamas. I did make sure to pack my school uniform because I thought we would still go to school. I was rushed downstairs without going to the toilet or brushing my teeth. I felt very bad.

My sister, who was almost 17, was escorted into her bedroom to pack her belongings. And finally, my mum was too. Like criminals, we were taken out of the house, put into a van and driven away.

We were driven to a nearby reporting center. We were taken into a building with no carpet or heaters, with plastic chairs attached to the wall and a toilet. The door was locked and we sat there trembling. It was very cold. I wondered how long we were going to be there. My mum told us not to hate these people — they were carrying out orders. She said to keep praying to God for help. Soon my heart felt better and some strength came back.

A man with a bandage on his hand opened the door and asked us if we needed anything to drink. My mum asked for a cup of tea. The door was locked again. Then opened again. The same man pulled a huge heater towards the door. The flex was too short so the heater was left in the doorway. The warmth barely reached us, but I was thankful because the room was freezing.

At 8:30am our bags were loaded into a police cage van. We were taken into the van and told we were going to a very nice family detention unit, four hours away — “One of the best detention centers in the country.” We were locked in the van. I felt like a criminal.

On the way, we could not talk to each other. I felt sick inside. I thought about friends left behind and wondered about my future. I felt like screaming. My lips and throat were dry, and my head was spinning. A woman and the driver watched us on a screen in the front of the van.

Everything was snowy white at Yarl's Wood (immigration removal center in Bedfordshire, central England). The van stopped outside a huge gate and we could see razor wire around the perimeter. It looked like a prison. It was very quiet and deserted. The gate finally opened and the van entered. Then, another black gate. The van stopped again. We waited anxiously. The female officer in the van came and opened the back door. “Wait here,” she said.

She asked us: “Have you ever seen snow before?” I felt angry, as she seemed to be mocking us. My mum calmly said yes it also snows in Leeds, in the north of England where we lived and where I went to school. The woman sneered.

Then the gate opened and a woman came out. She searched the car and scanned our bags. Then we were handed over to the detention team, and were searched by officers wearing latex gloves.

We saw many detainees with sad faces. My mum told us not to wear sad faces or do anything stupid, but to be cooperative. It was hard. A day had gone without us being in school. I sobbed inside. They took us to a different room. We were kept there until 6:30pm. I had missed school for the first time in my life. I had never even been late for school before. Education was the only thing that promised a future for me, that would take me out of the many problems my family faced. But now it looked like that chance had gone.

An officer told my mum that we could take anything from the fridge or make a drink from the machine, but we were still frozen inside. He said: “Make sure you take fruit.”

While we were waiting to be taken to our rooms, a woman

came in. We went to the fridge, but suddenly she shouted: “WHO TOLD YOU TO TAKE FOOD FROM THE FRIDGE?”

I could see tears in my mum's eyes, and I felt traumatized. I was told to carry my own bag, which was too heavy for me. So I dragged it. Life had totally turned against me.

The officer strode off and told us to walk fast as she unlocked door after door. We dragged our heavy bags up the stairs. We entered our two-room accommodation. We chose where we would sleep and sat there like stones.

Meanwhile, my teachers had sent my mum text messages to find out what had happened to me. She told them that we were detained at Yarl's Wood, and that we were going to be deported back to Malawi on Jan. 11.

I've since learned that my friends cried when they were told about this, and that some told their parents, who started a big campaign for us.

That night I couldn't sleep. I just shook. My mum read us Bible verses and told us to be strong. It took a long time to get to sleep. I could hear footsteps all night. Officers kept locking and unlocking doors. Then, early in the morning, when I was falling asleep, I heard a loud, scary knock on the door. It was the teacher telling my mum that I had school.

The school was just one room for primary kids and another for secondary kids. The place was full of people, from pregnant women to teenagers. There were even babies. When we had been told that there would be school we were very happy. But one teacher and all ages in one classroom — it was hopeless. We didn't learn anything and mostly played football.

We heard scary stories about how the immigration authorities were working hard to deport people. One day we heard that if you refused to go back to your country, they sometimes sent your parents separately — or even took you to social welfare homes.

I felt so scared. I imagined my mum being thrown into the plane, alone. I could not sleep and I didn't have the courage to tell my mother. But one day, I told her what some staff were telling us. She was very angry and told me that if anyone started on this again, we should tell them that they didn't have the right to terrorize our weak and bruised minds.

I stopped going to class. I felt I was learning nothing. I was having sleepless nights. I was also watching violent films, which the center put on. My mum tried to make me sleep, but I couldn't.

During the first month, I became stick-like because I couldn't eat. My lips were dry and red, and my mum was scared. She used to force me to go into the dining room to eat, but I couldn't. I felt dead inside. Soon I got bad diarrhea. I tried to get in to see the nurse, but we had to wait two days. I could drink, but couldn't take solid food. When we went to see the nurse, she just looked at me and said I looked OK, but my mum insisted. Then the nurse weighed me, and I had lost some weight. But she still said I was OK.

There was sickness everywhere: chickenpox, urinary tract infections, flu, diarrhea and fever. Health staff didn't seem to care.

Every day we heard terrible stories about how people were being beaten and handcuffed and forced to go back to their countries. Every day we saw people crying and being taken to the airport. Sometimes I felt death would have been better than being sent back to a place where I would end up living on the streets.

The nights are the worst in Yarl's Wood. Doors being banged and sometimes people crying. You always think they may be coming to your door. This fear lives in me, and I don't know how to get rid of it.

The 65 days I was in Yarl's Wood was hell. My plea to this government is please think of us children. We do not deserve this treatment. We deserve a future. Let immigration be hard on real criminals, not people who are seeking refuge.

It is my prayer that the British government shows mercy towards children. Detention for us is hell and detrimental to our fragile minds.

(The Botomani family is appealing against the Home Office's rejection of their asylum claim.)



Undocumented Mexican immigrants are searched, top, and await deportation, middle and above, at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement center on April 28 in Phoenix, Arizona. Last year the US federal agency deported some 81,000 illegal immigrants from the state of Arizona alone.

PHOTOS: AP

## A child's experience of the asylum process

*As the new coalition government in the UK moves to end child detention, schoolboy Wells Botomani, now 14, relives his family's nightmare at the Yarl's Wood immigration removal center in Bedfordshire, central England*

BY WELLS BOTOMANI  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON