

“Why I risked the deadliest of journeys”

She knew thousands drowned trying to flee war-torn Libya. Yet Ivie, 25, took her young son on an overcrowded voyage across the sea. Here, she tells **Julie McCaffrey** her harrowing story

When the boat lurched violently and threatened to capsize, I was too scared and exhausted to scream. In my mind, one word repeated: please. Please

do not let me die like this. Please, after coming so far and risking so much, let me reach safety. I am so close – please, God, help me. I had been on board for 15 hours on a journey they said would take five. The single-deck wooden boat had no roof, which gave no protection from the sea and left me open to the elements. My skin had a film of water spray, my hair dripped, my lips stung with salt and the relentless icy wind cut to my bones.

In front of me, all I could see were the backs of other passengers’ drenched heads. The boat was so overcrowded, we were crammed together, sitting on benches between each other’s legs. But my thoughts troubled me more than any physical discomfort. Would my four-year-old son, Chisom, and I drown in this sea, like so many others before us? After five years of trying and failing

to find peace for my family, would it all end here – right now, under the waves? To keep my mind still, I tried counting the people on board. Before I got halfway, I had counted 500, yet the boat was strangely quiet. I didn’t speak much, even to the man and woman squashed up beside me. My fears clogged my mind and left no room to hear anyone else’s.

Chisom sat on my lap the whole way and I tried to reassure him. “Everything will be OK, my boy. Soon we will be safe. Soon.” Giving him the chance of a better life was the reason I was on that boat. But during the journey he was the one comforting me. Each time he squeezed my hand, he silently reminded me why we were being thrown around on this merciless sea.

His little sister inside my belly kicked so much I knew she was scared, too. I was nine months pregnant and, that morning, as I ran along the shore in my frantic attempt to board the boat I saw leaving, I fell straight onto my swollen front. I worried that trying to escape the land of violence had harmed the baby I was trying to protect. But I got up and kept running, because no doctor would ever treat me in Libya. I didn’t know where the boat was going, but had to have ▶

“Sailing far away was my baby’s only chance of medical care, of life”



Pictured here with her daughter, Ivie finally has hope for the future



A boat carrying hundreds of migrants is rescued by the Italian navy

◀ faith it was somewhere safe. Sailing far away was my baby's only chance of medical care, of life.

The journey was dangerous, but it was hopeless in Libya. Had we stayed, we would have been killed. At least there was a speck of hope with the voyage. Hope is a strong driving force when it's all you have.

When I first fled Nigeria to Libya, five years ago, I had nothing but hope that my husband, Joseph, and I would have a chance of living and working safely. On arrival, we thought it was the land of promise. We'd survived life in Nigeria, and survived leaving it. Both were deadly – but we had no choice.

My father was a politician, which made my family a target for armed opposition thugs. Before the election in December 2010, six men came to the house and kidnapped Papa. Seeing him roughed up and dragged away left me more distressed than I'd ever felt. Then the men came back and tried to pin me to the ground to rape me. I struggled free and screamed for my life.

Before the men ran off, they tried to burn down our house and threw liquid on my body. I saw the skin melting on my arm and realised it was acid. Three women rushed towards my cries for help and took me to hospital. Left with no family and no safe home in Nigeria, Joseph planned our escape to Libya.

It's not hard to find out who the people smugglers are, but it was extremely difficult to find their 6,000 Naira (£20) fee, more than a month's wages. We worked in a supermarket, which is where we'd met two years before, so saved what little money we had.

Then, in February 2011, we fled in the night, concealed in the back of a dark, hot, fume-filled truck, which took a month to get from Lagos to Tripoli. I hid our money in my

socks. There were 15 of us in the back of the truck; only 13 arrived in Libya. Two teenage boys died on the journey because they didn't have enough food or water. It was heartbreaking to see them fail, then fade, then taken by fatigue and dehydration.

At first, Joseph and I worked as house helps for a rich family. Life was good: we had food, a bed and managed to save some money. We both had medical care and Chisom was born in a hospital. I felt happy and optimistic for the first time in my adult life.

But in 2013 fighting broke out, and it was so frightening and confusing. You could be grabbed by soldiers just for being in the street and the constant snap of gunfire was terrifying. I didn't know who was on the good or bad side – everyone was violent.

In September last year, the police came to the house and, with no explanation, took Joseph away in a van. Then they drove Chisom and me to a private house fortified with metal doors, shuttered windows and armed guards. No one said what we'd done, or where they were keeping Joseph – I have not seen or heard from him since.

Angry and terrified, I spent three months and one week in that prison. The guards told me I owed them US\$1,500 and, if I didn't pay, they'd say I was carrying cocaine. I begged them to be fair, at least for my son's sake and for my unborn baby.

I was one of 12 women held to ransom in tiny rooms until we handed over money or our families bought us out. It was futile keeping us there – none of us had a penny, and few had family. So, instead, they hurt us in every way possible.

Early on, I saw four guards rape a woman because she didn't have cash. They were so evil. They told me they would sell my baby if I didn't pay. They bound my arms, my legs, they stuffed my mouth with clothes. One even poured gin on my head, then ►

“I was one of 12 women held to ransom. They hurt us in every way possible”

◀ lit it and my scalp seared. I would have paid all I had to stop the attacks, but I had nothing.

The torture continued. One guard said he would kill me because I asked if I could please use the phone to try to call Joseph or friends in Nigeria. He snatched Chisom, and locked him in the boot of a car for five minutes. Hearing my son screaming: "Mama! Help me!" was the purest hell. Hearing his screams quieten then stop was even worse.

The feeling of rage against my captors, against the injustice of life, left me a sobbing heap on the floor begging, "Take me but not my son!" The guard took Chisom out and shoved him back in my cell. But he said if I didn't come up with money soon he'd kill me and sell my boy. I promised I'd get cash as soon as I could. As a daily reminder to pay, he used electric shock rods all over my body.

When that guard fell ill with severe diarrhoea, he never came back. His family came to the prison and wanted money, but when I told them I had none, they let me go. Chisom and I were homeless, penniless and still in grave danger. But women are very strong and mothers will do anything, *anything*, to protect their children. I begged in the streets for money towards the boat fare to Europe. But pleading for money is pointless when everyone else has none too.

Then, at 4am on January 9 this year, I was at the shore begging when I saw a boat leaving – so I ran, as fast as I could, holding Chisom's hand. I waded out with him on my back and the passengers made room for us.

A man next to me on the boat whispered we were bound for Italy. In Libya, people talk about crossing the Mediterranean quietly but often. They speak of Italy as a place we can work and support our families. They said the waves on the crossing are ten-storeys high, but they weren't. Frightening tales are told to put people off getting on the boats, as many have died in the water. But out there on the black water under the night sky, I knew God had a clear view of me, and would decide if I lived or died.

I also knew my second child could be born any moment. My mind willed her to stay inside me. Life would be hard enough for her because I had no money. Nothing. No one had much water or food onboard, but I felt so sick from the constant sway, I was scared to eat or drink anyway. The bottom of

the boat was wet and sticky with vomit. It was not pleasant, but no one complained. No one dared.

When a powerful light beamed into our eyes, passengers panicked, jumped to their feet and started pushing each other. That's why the boat suddenly upturned. This time, though, fate was not cruel. The light belonged to Italian rescuers. Chisom was the first to be carried from the boat.

They gave us water and blankets on their warm boat that sailed smoothly and quickly, and the sight of lights on the shore of Sicily made me weep with relief. Ashore, my legs were weak from the motion of the sea, and from my pregnant belly, which now seemed heavier than ever. It was so wonderful to be on solid ground. Solid, safe ground.

People in bright jackets led us into a big building and doctors checked us before we were taken to rest. Staff asked us to be patient, as there were 1,000 of us. I didn't hear anyone protest – no one had reason to. That night, Chisom and I slept wrapped around each other in our clean bunk bed.

My daughter, Nalani, was born five days later. She was welcomed into the world by doctors and showered with love from the other families here. Chisom is the darling of the centre. He smiles all day, waving at people he passes as he rides his tricycle along the corridors [pictured]. He is free. Kind donations of clothes, toys and shoes, and three meals a day, make him feel the luckiest boy in the world.

The people from Save The Children say I'll stay here until my papers are processed. I don't

know when that will be, but I have more comfort than I've had in years. They give me a phonecard every three days and I desperately call everyone I know to ask if they have news of Joseph and my parents. I have to accept maybe they are dead, and focus on looking after my children.

When I'm allowed to leave, I'll go straight to work in a supermarket and work extremely hard. That's all I've ever wanted to do. I don't want to be a burden. I just want to give my children food, shelter, education and a chance to reach their potential.

Now, whenever I cradle Nalani or hold Chisom's hand, I can say with confidence: "Everything will be OK. We are safe." ☺



"Hearing my son scream, 'Mama! Help me!' was the purest hell"

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