

# Haingo's Story

Haingo was born in a tropical downpour. The rising river level isolated the small Malagasy village, defeating Viviaby's intention to give birth in the nearest town's hospital. She labored long into the night on a mat on the dirt floor of her home. When her fourth child finally arrived, the midwife was deeply shocked.

Even in the dim lantern light, it was clear that Haingo's tiny mouth was slashed by a severe bilateral cleft lip. Viviaby's joy turned to sadness for her precious daughter. Her husband immediately rejected their baby saying, "It's from your family! In our family we don't have babies like this!"

No one in the village had ever seen a baby who looked like this, and they were superstitious about Haingo's disfigurement. Viviaby did not know why this had happened. "Is it because of something that I did?" she wondered. "But I am a Christian. We have nothing taboo (cursed). I thought, 'If God gave her to me like she is, He knows how to take care of her.'"



The heartbreaking situation became more dire as the days dragged by. Haingo was unable to successfully breastfeed, and she began to lose weight. Unknown to Viviaby, the visible deformity was just part of Haingo's problems.

The baby girl had also been born with a large cleft in her palate. This hole in the roof of her mouth prevented Haingo from sucking. The newborn was constantly hungry and cried incessantly – all day and throughout the night. "My husband said, 'It's not going to survive, so you'd better kill it anyway!' I said, 'Let her live! I'm going to take care of her!'"

Viviaby initially kept her infant daughter alive with diluted canned milk fed from a spoon, but each can cost most of a day's wages. So, she began to cook rice, grind it with sugar and feed it to her baby ... but Haingo simply failed to thrive.

Viviaby recalls, "Because she didn't have enough food, she was losing weight. I did not have money to buy something good for her, and she was getting more and more skinny. I was afraid. I was always praying."

To make things even worse, Viviaby encountered suspicion and cruel comments. The only person who showed any compassion for Haingo was Flavien, her husband's brother.

Then one day, two ladies walked by the secluded village. They had been healed from their obstetric fistulas onboard the Mercy Ship on the coast. They were telling their good news to everyone they met. The ladies heard about Haingo and found Viviaby. "There is free treatment in Tamatave," they exclaimed. "You should bring your baby there. They can do it!"

So Flavien took a photo of Haingo on his phone and showed it to the nearest town's doctor, who confirmed the condition was correctable. They heard on the radio about a Mercy Ships screening coming to their region, and the doctor promised to tell Viviaby when to bring the baby. Viviaby's prayers were being answered!

The Mercy Ships patient screening in Manakara was announced, and Viviaby left her village to travel there. For two whole days, the tiny, courageous, determined woman carried her baby as she walked through the rugged countryside.

The urgency of Haingo's case was immediately identified by the Mercy Ships nurses. Screening coordinator Mirjam Plomp (NLD) says, "Haingo was seven months old, but I saw a baby that looked like she was only two months old. I was surprised she was still alive. When I realized how malnourished she was, I realized we couldn't do surgery straight away. She would have to be in our Infant Feeding Program for quite a while to see if she could gain weight. With the severity, I thought it would be best if she could come with us right away."

The next day, Viviaby carried Haingo onto the Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) plane to go to the *Africa Mercy*, docked on the coast.

When Haingo was admitted to the Mercy Ships ward, she was seven months old and weighed only 2.2 kilograms (4.8 pounds) – smaller than an average newborn.

Stay tuned for the rest of the story ...

Part Two: Preparing to land, the Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) plane dipped its wings over the Mercy Ship, but Viviaby was oblivious. She focused on comforting her tiny daughter. At almost seven months old, Haingo weighed only 2.2 kilograms (4.8 pounds). She was severely malnourished because of her cleft palate.

Crammed full of courageous love, Viviaby had walked for two days to get help. She took her first ride in a car and her first ride in a mini-bus to reach the screening team in her region, and now she was in her first airplane. The tiny woman hugged her daughter close as they flew.

“I was a bit afraid,” Viviaby confesses, “but the interpreter reassured me.”

Mother and daughter were rushed onboard the hospital ship, and pediatric nurses began a 24-hour program of emergency nutrition.

Shelby Olufson (USA) was charge nurse when Haingo was admitted. “I was heartbroken in a way I’d never been before. It was mind-blowing. She was so small! If you didn’t know her age, you would think she was new-born. I didn’t want to believe she was almost seven months old.”

Dedicated nursing care enabled Viviaby to sleep well for the first time since Haingo’s birth. “They were feeding her with an oral feeding syringe because she couldn’t suck a bottle,” she explains. “Later they used a nursing bottle; they used milk from my breast.”

The medical team explained to Viviaby she had managed against all odds to save her daughter’s life. Pneumonia as well as malnutrition had been a very real threat.

Haingo no longer cried between feeds. She began to gain weight and became more responsive. Viviaby talked with other mothers whose babies had the same condition. She watched the other cleft lip babies coming back restored from surgery, and she was comforted. Viviaby desperately needed to talk and share with others who knew just what she was going through. She was no longer alone.

In just 10 days Haingo was stable enough to be discharged to the Mercy Ships HOPE (Hospital Out Patient Extension) Centre.

Viviaby brought her daughter to the ship to be checked by Jillian Davis (USA), the Infant Feeding Program (IFP) dietitian, each week for four months. Haingo’s weight was tracked, and they discussed her development and care. Viviaby learned about her baby’s condition and how to prevent milk being lost through the hole in her palate as she fed.

“The most impacting aspect of IFP is the parents’ gaining hope,” shares Jillian. “They learn to properly feed their baby and see their malnourished child start to thrive. I love building a relationship with the mothers and encouraging them through their journey from the time the baby is started on IFP through to surgery. I love seeing the transformation as the infants gain weight, get stronger and reach developmental milestones.”

Jillian empowered Viviaby and helped nurture Haingo toward her growth goals. When the baby passed the 3.5 kilogram (7.7 pounds) mark, it would be safe to operate on her cleft lip. Haingo needed to be 10 months old before it would be possible to operate on her cleft palate. In consultation with her medical team, Viviaby decided to wait for the surgeries to be performed together.

“Before, she was crying a lot because she did not eat enough” explains Viviaby. “But now she is happy! She has enough food!”

As Haingo finally grew, she began to do all the heartwarming things that babies her age are supposed to do. She tracked movement with eyes that were previously glazed, and she waved “*veloma*” (goodbye) with chubby arms that had been so frail. She began to suck her thumb. And she reached the vital “average weight for height” benchmark.



*“Thank you for everything you’ve done. My baby is strong now!” said Viviaby.*

Five months after their arrival, Haingo was finally scheduled for surgery to repair her cleft lip and part of her palate.

Viviaby rushed to gather Haingo in her arms as the infant came out of recovery after her operations. “She’s beautiful!” was all the overwhelmed mother could manage to say.

Two weeks later, Viviaby and Haingo returned to their remote village. “They won’t believe it’s the same baby!” anticipated Viviaby. She gratefully clutched a handful of photos documenting Haingo’s healing journey to show her family.

Mother and daughter will return in a few months’ time for Haingo’s final palate surgery. Then we will hear about the villagers’ responses to this baby they were sure would die – the baby who was transformed by mercy.

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