

# The Old Man in the Bag

And Other True Stories of Good Intentions



TED WELLS

**This collection of true short stories** (tied together with 80 old photographs and 12 original letters) is set in a very remote almost inaccessible part of Ethiopia back in the 1960s when Haile Selassie was still alive and in power. Partly for the adventure, but also just to escape being drafted into the Vietnam War, a young American couple volunteer to spend two years in a tiny village of grass huts helping several dozen very poor farmers establish a new town in the lowland jungle of the Rift Valley, on land recently given to them by the sometimes loved, sometimes loathed Emperor.

The stories are not just about the couple's struggle to survive fire, disease and death in a totally unfamiliar environment, culture and language, however. They are also gentle stories about how life choices are never black and white and even selfless good intentions can sometime have a serious downside to them.

This book is a "prequel" to Ted Wells' book: "Power, Chaos & Consensus".



# The Old Man in the Bag

And Other True Stores of Good Intentions

BY

TED WELLS



© November 2012

Published by:  
Ted Wells  
1 Newton Street  
New Plymouth 4312  
New Zealand  
Phone (646) 758 9589  
Email: [wellsnz@xtra.co.nz](mailto:wellsnz@xtra.co.nz)  
Website: [www.consocracy.com](http://www.consocracy.com)

Home printed, bound and signed paperback  
copies available from the above address

Photographs by Helen and Ted Wells

All rights reserved. Exceptions are allowed in respect of any fair dealing  
for the purpose of research or non-profit private study, or criticism or  
review.

ISBN: 978-0-473-22867-5  
ISBN-13: 978-1481118101  
ISBN-10: 1481118102

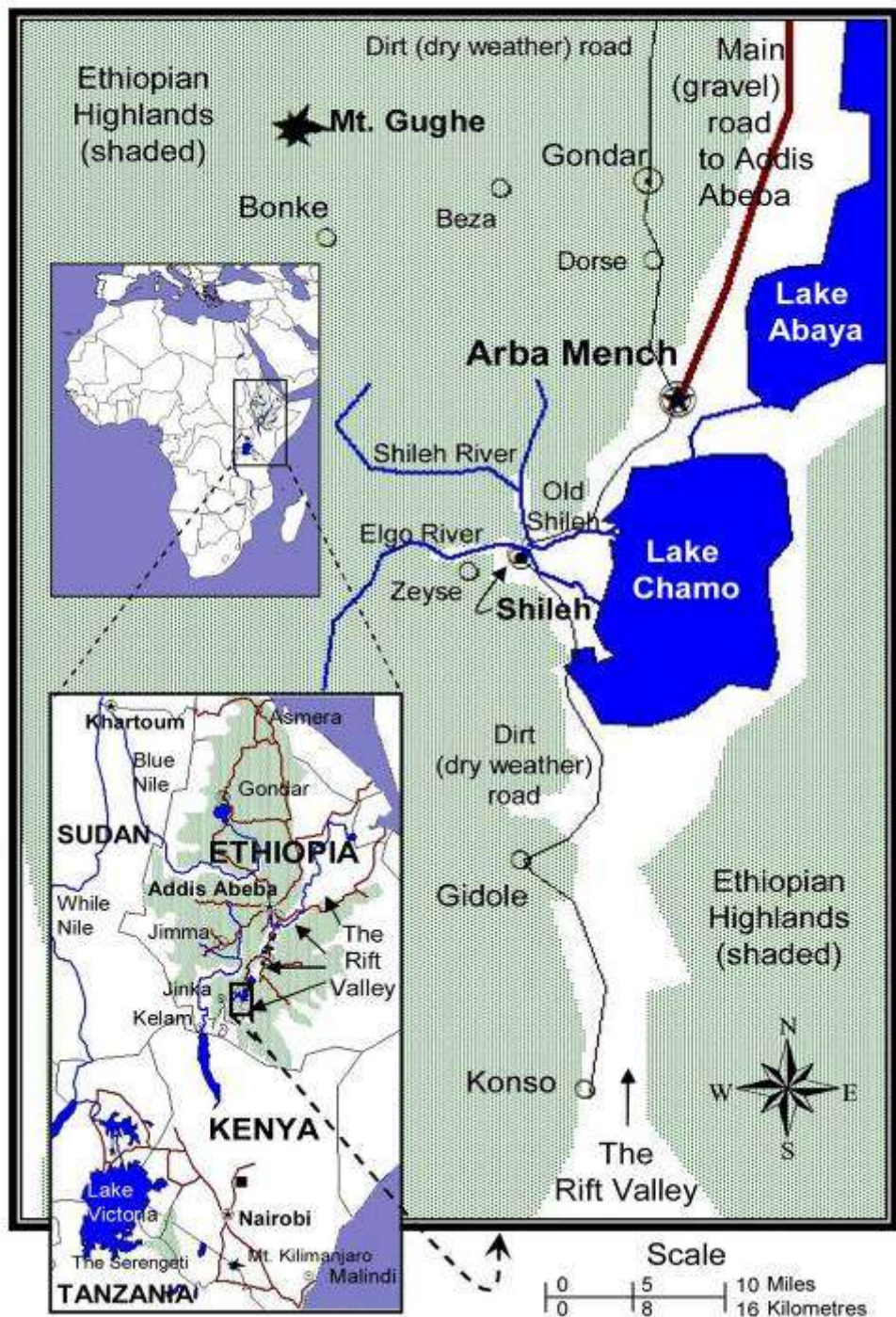
TO HELEN,

MY BEST FRIEND

WITH LOVE AND THANKS

FOR SHARING THIS PATH WITH ME

# The Rift Valley near Shileh



# **Table of Contents**

## **Prologue:**

In which Helen and I are exposed to the limitations of good intentions by an old woman.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **THE BEGGAR & THE STUDENT**

In which the differences between us are explained to me by a street kid in Addis Abeba

## **Chapter 2:**

### **OUT OF THE COCOON:**

In which a village chief politely declines our offer of help

## **Chapter 3**

### **EATEN BY A LION**

In which the rains come, a search is organised and I discover the power of love.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **WASI**

In which there is a fire in our latrine and I begin to realize that everyone looks the same

## **Chapter 5:**

### **THE OLD MAN IN THE BAG:**

In which I kill a chicken and discover my power over matters of life and death

## **Chapter 6:**

### **AT THE END OF THE ROAD:**

In which Helen and I visit the remote kingdom Konso and find nothing is as it seems

## **Chapter 7:**

### **THE POISON:**

In which a journey is made to a mission and I see the connection between baboons and spacemen

**Chapter 8:**

**THE HIGHWAY ROBBER:**

In which I am shot at while riding along a dirt track and then lose my mind.

**Chapter 9:**

**THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO:**

In which Helen shares her thoughts on my good intentions and then climbs a mountain.

**Chapter 10:**

**THE EXPEDITION:**

In which I join in the search for a new town site and learn the point of law

**Chapter 11:**

**A MONUMENT TO GOD**

In which an arch is built for Haile Selassie's visit and we all find out what true power is.

**Chapter 12:**

**THE ETHIOPIAN ENIGMA**

In which Helen and I go beyond the end of the road past the cost of good intentions.

**INTERESTED IN A SEQUEL?**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

## Prologue:

*In which Helen and I are exposed to the limitations of good intentions by an old woman.*

I was not always a believer in grey. Life was black and white when I was fresh out of university. I knew more than God. I had already figured out how to avoid my father's death, my mother's expectations and the Vietnam War.

However, I can remember precisely when I first began to question my mind and the absolute truths it knew.

It was late Tuesday afternoon, July 30<sup>th</sup> , 1968 on the Caribbean Island of St. Croix just as the sky was beginning to turn pink in the sunset.

Helen was in pain and I was methodically searching for what it was that was stinging her.

"It's really just simple chemistry."  
I had said reassuringly. "God knows there's always an answer if you look hard enough."

Helen had just lowered her head so I couldn't see the anger on her face. "At least you always have one!" she had snapped back as she fought to hold back her tears.

Helen's uncharacteristic, pain induced sarcasm didn't suddenly make me see the limitations of my mind right then of course. That would take several more years; the point of this whole book, really. I was already certain she was the reason for my existence, but I didn't know even back then that she already believed in grey.

What indelibly etched the first day of revelation into my own brain,



though, was right after that a hermit crab bounced down the side of the headland we were climbing over, ricocheted off a tree and shot straight between Helen's legs. I watched it disappear into the undergrowth below her and then screamed, "Ten points! Ten points!" loud enough for anyone within half a mile to hear, had there been anyone within half a mile. It was supposed to make Helen smile, at least briefly, as well as earn me an extra ten points.

But it didn't do either.

"For you, or the crab?" asked Helen, as she blew her dripping nose into an already saturated Kleenex.

"I'm really sorry, love," I said. "It couldn't be much further, see?" I held out the tiny map of St. Croix I'd torn out of a tourist brochure that morning. "We must be right about here, right where the water skier is. Davis Beach must be practically down below us."

Helen didn't look up. Instead, she pulled out the knot that held the bedroll around her waist and collapsed into the leaves.

"Are you sure you can't see anything on my arms? Anything at all?" She asked as she flicked her long thick single braid of curly brown hair off her back and bent forward so I could take a good look at her sleeveless shoulders.

I dropped to the ground beside her and touched her arm sympathetically. Her light skin was sweaty in the heavy heat, and slightly sunburned, but there was nothing obvious to see, no welts, no cuts, no swelling.

She shuddered and then looked up at me, first at my hand and then into my eyes. The look wasn't exactly hate, but it wasn't warm and friendly either. It reminded me of the way Akin had looked at me just before we started our hike.

I pulled back and leaned against my pack. For several minutes we stared separately out at the blue ocean now also turning pink from the glow of the sky.

"This place may be strange," I sighed eventually, breaking the silence, "but at this point, I don't think going back would be any easier. Once we get to Davis Beach there should be a road we can walk along."

I twisted around and pulled out two Oreos from my pack and handed one to Helen. "We could stop here for the night, if you'd like. This notch is level enough to sleep on, and there's a great view."

"Here?" she asked, ignoring the offering. "With all these crabs?"

I popped one of the cookies into my mouth and turned to look at the hoard of hermit crabs that surrounded us. They were everywhere, gently rustling the leaves as they struggled up the side of the promontory in their borrowed bright red shells.

The crabs were all headed in one direction; up, over logs, over rocks, over each other. But occasionally, for some unknown reason, one would let go and roll back down the hill, bouncing off the trees like a pinball as it went down. If one of the ricochets was just right, even more occasionally one would find a spectacular exit off the side of the cliff beside us, ending with either a crunch on the rocks below, or a silent blip into the Caribbean.

As we stared at the crabs, one just above my head let go and tumbled back into me. I picked it up, its claws flailing, and threw it as hard as I could out beyond the cliff. The shell and its contents arced separately upward and then slowly spiralled into the sea.

Helen gave me a contemptuous glance.

Maybe they want to roll into the sea, I thought to myself. I was sure there was some global symbolism in the crab's behaviour, like the meaning of life, but nothing came quickly to mind so I just stood up.

Helen took my hand and grabbed her roll of blankets as she rose beside me. In silence, single file, we moved back away from the sound of the waves.

During the break Helen's stinging had subsided, but within minutes it was back even worse. She crumpled to the forest floor in agony.

"You stay here for a sec." I said, with renewed frustration. "I'll just go on a bit and see if I can get a better idea of where we are," Without waiting for a response, I quickly moved off around the ridge alone.

I knew there had to be an answer to Helen's intense pain, but so far I'd not found anything despite rubbing my bare arms against every plant in the woods. Helen kept saying it felt like really bad nettles, but the hillside contained nothing that even resembled them. There was no poison ivy or poison oak that I could find either, and the ants and other bugs crawling through the leaves seemed harmless enough.

The forest was a bit overgrown, like the woods in New England where I grew up; not very large second growth trees with a few vines and scrubby plants underneath. But it didn't contain any particularly unusual looking vegetation and it wasn't impenetrable. Helen and I had often hiked through much more rugged countryside in the foothills of the Colorado Rockies where we met.

As I scrambled over a small fallen tree that blocked the way, I caught my foot on a protruding branch. It tossed me down the far side of the headland like one of the hermit crabs. Eventually another tree interrupted my bouncing free fall, but not before I was well down the hillside.

"God!" I yelled at the spinning sky overhead as I stood up shaking my fist. "What did I do to deserve this?" I pulled a leaf out of my moustache and checked my arms for any red badge of courage I could show Helen, but there was nothing worth her sympathy.

There was something else much better, though, not far away. About 200 feet below, through the woods, I could see the roof of a small beach house. Adjacent was a large gravel car park ringed with stones, and beyond that a long curve of palms separating green from white and warm blue. It was Davis Beach.

The sun was below the horizon when we reached the sea and stripped to our bathing suits. If there had been anyone else on the beach earlier that off season day in July, there was no lingering sign of it, only a barking dog that soon decided we weren't worth getting hoarse over. The building was dark and the car park empty. Helen and I had the place to ourselves, and in the remaining glow of the sunset I was sure we had found our own private paradise.

In our exhaustion, however, we didn't dare try the water. Instead, as a bright moon rose behind us, we giggled away the day's pain and frustration by building and rebuilding a suggestive looking fort in the coarse white sand.

Jointly christened "Fort Dick", its conical tower stood firmly erect for nearly an hour while we struggled to save it from the sea. It eventually succumbed, but not before it had enticed us to lie down together in a nearby beach hammock under the palm trees.

"You're very quiet," said Helen some time later as we listened to the



waves smoothing the sand in the moonlight. "What are you thinking about so hard?"

"Akin," I said after a moment.

"What about him?" she asked.

Up until that morning, Akin had been a counsellor at our training camp, and leader of my encounter group. It had been Akin who had suggest we hike around the island as a "cross cultural training experience". His blond, close-cropped hair and thin muscular build reminded us both of a returned Vietnam Vet, but Akin was no soldier. He had the warm fuzzy temperament of Winnie the Pooh.

"Did you see the look in his eyes?"

Helen looked up. "You mean when he was leaving for the airport this morning with the psychiatrist?"

I nodded.

"Like some helpless soul."

I nodded again. "But angry too . . . I can't help feel like he thinks he's being screwed somehow . . . by the rest of the group . . . by me."

I didn't like my choice of words but I couldn't think of another way to say it. "I just keep thinking about our group discussion last night when he yelled at me. Tears were pouring down his face. He kept saying over and over that he just couldn't tell us about it."

I hesitated, trying to think of a better way to explain myself. "All I did was ask how he could be the leader of our encounter group if he didn't open up like the rest of us. . . . Only, then he just fell apart . . . I guess I shouldn't have pushed him . . ."

"You pushed him?"

"No . . . No, I just touched his shoulder trying to be sympathetic, like I did you this afternoon . . . but his reaction was just the same as yours."

Helen took a deep breath and let it out. "I'm sorry, I just hurt so much . . . and you really had no idea what I was feeling!"

"But I wanted to know! I wanted to help! At least know your pain."

Helen looked at me curiously. "But you couldn't," she said quietly. "You're not me."

There was a long pause. Then Helen picked up the conversation again. "What did you want Akin to tell you about anyway?"

"About Ethiopia, that's all!" I said, feeling frustrated about her reaction to my sympathy. "I just asked him what it was like to live there. What the people are like and what he was doing there to help them. That's all. It didn't seem like such a hard question."

I stopped for a moment to think about it. "It's not as if we all don't wonder about it sometimes. I thought that's why we are here in training."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He was just adamant that he couldn't tell us; that Ethiopia was not like anywhere else on earth, and that if he did try, he would only end up distorting the truth."

Helen sighed. "Poor Akin. I don't know why they thought he had to go back to Washington, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it now" she said as she raised herself up to look out of the hammock. "Nice beach you found. Free beds and everything. You hungry?"

The stinging was gone. I was relieved. "Uh huh. But I don't think I could stand another Oreo."

"I was thinking more about one of the "C" rations," said Helen, reaching over me into the pack hanging off the side of the hammock. A bit of rustling and tickling produced a brown cardboard box. "How about Dinner B, Type II?"

"Mmm-mmm good." I sighed, mocking the Campbell's soup song.

Inside were three olive green cans. Helen opened two of them. One contained ham and lima beans, the other, a rubbery roll. I opened the third can saved for desert.

"What? Peanut butter?" laughed Helen, trying to poke her finger into the oil on top before I had the lid off.

"Beggars can't be choosers," I laughed, pulling the can away and holding it behind me. "Just think where I could have been eating this stuff," I added, and then immediately wished I hadn't.

Helen stiffened involuntarily. Her reaction to the thought of me in Vietnam, or of us both exiled to Canada was predictable.

"I mean, we really are lucky," I added quickly. "This is more like a second honeymoon than job training."

It was light and almost cool when we awoke. The moon was gone, and so was the whole north coast of St. Croix, smothered in heavy grey drizzle. We got up feeling clammy, and rolled up the blankets. Behind the beach house in among some Ginger Thomas flowers we found the dirt road that my map had predicted, leading eastward along the coast. We followed it out to pavement and eventually to a one-room general store just past the derelict remains of an old weatherboard hall.

Despite the fact that the sign on the door said the store wouldn't open for another hour, we climbed up on the porch and peered in

through the front window. The clock on the wall said it was 7:35 AM. We had already walked several miles and were out of cookies.

Helen looked at me and combed her hair with her fingers. "It must look like I'm trying to grow dreadlocks," she said, self-consciously.

"On the contrary, you look positively stunning."

Helen's infectious twinkle was back. She blushed.

Anyway," I added, "I don't think anyone would mind if we sat here for a while in the warmth." The sun had finally found us. We leaned back on the wide porch steps and quickly lost track of time.

"Hello," came a voice out of the sunshine.

For a good five minutes Helen and I had watched an old woman wearing a long, elegant blue dress and nearly matching blue hat, walk unhurriedly down the road past the abandoned hall we had just passed and up onto the steps we were sitting on. The sound of her voice, however, still took us by surprise. We struggled to regain consciousness.

"Hello," she said again. "What are you two doing here?" She was dark skinned like most of the other islanders we had seen over the last few weeks, but her voice didn't sound local. It sounded more like someone from Brooklyn.

"Uh . . . Hello," Helen and I both finally answered in unison.

"We're just waiting for the store to open," continued Helen, returning the old woman's smile.

"Well, so am I," she said, casually setting herself down in the small space on the step between us. Despite the cleanliness of the woman's clothes and their well cared for look, there was a slight musty smell to them "Where are you two going?" she added.

"Just around the island," said Helen casually.

"What happened to your car?" she asked.

"We don't have one. We're walking."

The smile on the woman's face instantly changed. She looked at Helen briefly and then turned to me. "Really? How could you?" she asked in a very hushed solemn voice.

"It's such a beautiful island." I said, wondering what was upsetting the woman. "The beaches are beautiful and it's not been too hot to hike, has it, Love?."

Helen started to respond, but the woman interrupted her. "Don't you love your wife?" She asked me bluntly.

"Who says she's my wife?" I joked, trying to defuse her stare.

But the old woman didn't see the humour at all. Neither did Helen. She turned to stare at me too.

"I mean, sure I do." I added quickly.

With her long bony finger the lady in blue pointed to my wedding band. "It may be okay for you, but what about her? What about her babies?"

I was lost for words. "I . . . I'm sorry. I don't understand. Helen isn't sick and we're . . . she's not pregnant or anything."

"You just don't care, do you?" mumbled the islander.

Helen put her hand gently on the woman's arm. "Thank you for thinking of me. But we don't have any babies yet," she said, "We've only been married ten months. And I really do like to go on hikes like this."

The old woman looked up at Helen with a puzzled expression, before turning back to me, "Where are you going to stay tonight?"

I hesitated, wondering if it might not be easier to hide the truth, but I have always had difficulty thinking up plausible white lies on the spur of the moment. "Oh probably . . . um . . . on the beach again." I said, adding, in case she was upset with that idea too, "You should have seen the moon last night. It was absolutely beautiful."

"No," she said, without hesitation. "You cannot sleep on the beach again. Tonight you must come stay with me."

She's crazy, I thought to myself. I looked at Helen and lifted my eyebrows slightly. Helen nodded back imperceptibly. "Ma'am," I said finally, "we really do appreciate your concern, but we're all right. Really! There is no need to worry."

"What do you mean?" asked the woman. "You shouldn't sleep outside, ever!"

"But, we actually like it, honestly," I said.

"But it's not good for your wife. And I have my own house. It's okay for you to come home with me." Her words tumbled out. I looked at Helen for help as the old woman went on, "Even my father would never let my mother sleep outside," she concluded, her eyes still riveted on me.

Helen deftly changed the subject. "Have you always lived on St. Croix?" she asked.

The woman hesitated for a moment, then replied with a resigned smile, "I was born just down the road."

"Then you must know what makes you sting when you walk through the woods," Helen said as she went straight into the story of our

walk along the coast the day before. By the time Helen had finished, the lady's face was all wrinkles of laughter.

"You children, you children," she chuckled affectionately. "That's just the poison tree. Don't you know not to walk under the poison tree?"

"Poison tree?" I asked as Helen and I stared at each other. "But nothing bothered me, and we both walked in the same places,"

"That's because it only stings those who get wet."

"But it wasn't raining," I said.

"Rain or sweat. The poison is on the leaves. Comes off with water. Why'd you come that way anyway?" she added. "There's no road along there."

There was a long silence while the woman's explanation sank in. Then, eventually I answered her question. "The training camp where we are staying is up that way, and Davis Beach didn't look that far on the map I had."

"You're both crazy," she said. "You know Davis Beach is private, don't you? That whole part belongs to Rockefeller." She waved her finger at us disapprovingly. "No beaches tonight! You must come stay with me."

Helen and I glanced at each other. The dark skinned woman hadn't been distracted at all.

"Do you know anything about those shells with the crabs inside them?" I asked in a second, less subtle attempt to divert the old woman.

She stared at me silently for some time before answering. "What about them?" she asked eventually.

"We saw hundreds of them climbing up one of the ridges along the coast yesterday. When they got near the top they just let go and rolled back to the bottom again. It was really strange."

"Yes, I've seen them do that," she said slowly, "but I don't know why." She stopped for a moment. "I remember doing something like that myself when I was a kid. Climbing up stairs and running back down. Couldn't see nothing at the top because the doors were always locked. Mostly in the big department stores like Macy's but we even climbed part way up the Empire State Building once."

"You've been to New York?" I asked, very surprised.

"I lived there nearly 30 years," she said, her voice with a mixture of pride and pain. "But this is my real home. After my husband died I just didn't want to stay in that dirty place no more."

Then like a backed up pipe suddenly unclogged, the woman's story poured out onto the shop steps and engulfed us. By the end of the hour we had learned all about her childhood on a nearby, now long abandoned sugar plantation, about her mother, one of the owner's mistresses, about her boat trip to the U.S. when she was only twelve and about the years she had supported her alcoholic husband.

We also learned her name. It was Ruth.

Ruth patted my leg. "And now that you know all about me," she said just as the owner of the store climbed around the three of us with the key to the door, "you must come stay at my house. At least come and have some fish with me."

I looked up at Helen. There seemed no way to refuse her. "All right," I said finally, "That would be really nice." We all stood up and followed the shopkeeper inside.

The store smelled of ripe melons and bananas. I found a package of rolls, some jam for our peanut butter and a new box of Oreos, then took Helen's carefully chosen fruit up to the white shopkeeper, now behind the counter. Ruth had already found what she wanted and was there ahead of me having an argument with the man, though they both stopped when I approached.

The shopkeeper waved me around Ruth and started to ring up my things.

Discrimination even in paradise, I thought to myself. "Here, I'll get those, Ruth," I said, fixing my stare on the man behind the counter while gathering her two things in with mine.

The owner hesitated, but without saying anything, rang it all up together. Ruth thanked me profusely and then went outside with Helen. I stayed at the counter for a moment to stuff the food into my pack. It was only then that I discovered the yellow bottle Ruth had bought with her fresh fish wasn't cooking oil, but Cruzan rum.

"I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have done that," I said apologetically to the man still standing there silently watching me.

"You don't need to apologize to me," he said quietly. "It's not me it's going to kill".

Mercifully, the phone rang and the shopkeeper turned to answer it. I stepped back out into the warm sunlight and re-joined the two women standing on the porch waiting for me. The three of us walked back down the road we had come in on, past the remains of the old hall and then turned inland onto a muddy path that meandered aimlessly across a

field of brown grass. On the far side was what looked like a cluster of old empty slave quarters, two rows of two room huts that stepped down the side of a low hill a quarter mile off the road.

Although all of the huts were still standing, they were each missing various bits and pieces; a window, a door, part of a roof. They looked deserted from the road, but on coming closer it was clear they weren't.

The dogs met us first, sniffing our muddy shoes. Heads briefly poked out of empty windows. A raggedly dressed young woman shouted to Ruth in something that didn't sound English. Ruth's reply seemed curt. At the second hut up the hill on the right Ruth stepped up onto a large smooth stone and pushed open a rotten wooden door, beckoning us to follow.

Inside we found ourselves standing on broken concrete in a room eight feet square entirely wallpapered floor to ceiling in old newspapers. The table filling the centre of the room was neatly stacked with piles of other old newspapers along with a small assortment of dishes carefully laid out. Finding no other available space, I put the things I'd bought Ruth on a small crate by the door.

"My home's your home," she said simply. "Please sit yourselves down and I'll make something to eat." Ruth picked up one of several battered pans and wiped it carefully with a clean grey dishtowel. Then she put it on the blackened kerosene stove that was jammed between the table and one corner of the tiny room.

"Oh, that's okay," said Helen quickly. "We can wait until lunch time." It was not yet ten.

Helen lifted some things off one of the two chairs in the room and sat down with her bedroll still tied to her waist. Ruth stepped into the door-less second room and came back with a large wooden crate. I tried to switch it with the second seat I'd cleared of newspapers.

"No," she said. "No you keep it, and tell me about yourselves."

I hesitated, not really knowing where to start. I suddenly felt very uneasy thinking about my comfortable middle class life after seeing how Ruth lived. I had always thought our family was poor, particularly after my dad had died. Mom was always reminding us we had no money, but it was no money for movies or eating out, not for a place to sleep. Dad's death had not forced us to leave our house or leave the country, though his death had happened when I was the same age Ruth had been when her father died.

"We're from Colorado," said Helen breaking the awkward silence. "At least that's where we met."

"Denver?" asked Ruth.

"Yes. How do you know about Denver?"

"I know all the state capitols," said Ruth with pride. "I went to school until I was 12, when the big house was sold and we all had to leave here. My school's just down the hill." We followed Ruth's eyes out the glassless window but only saw the blank wall of the adjacent hut five feet away. "Didn't you see it on the way in?" she asked.

"Momma?"

The three of us turned back around toward the front door in unison. A young solidly built Cruzan boy stood braced in the frame of the opening, looking in at us. It was hard to tell his age by his baggy op-shop clothes

"George?" said Ruth.

"Momma, what are they doing here?" The boy's voice was tense and angry.

"George, this is Ted and Helen. They've come to stay with us tonight."

By her expression I could see Helen had picked up on her words too, as the woman turned to us to explain.

"This is my son, George," she said.

"Hello George," we each said almost at the same time.

"Why Momma?" he asked, not making a move or even acknowledging our presence.

"They're friends, George. Come inside and say hello." She turned back to us again. "George is the only son I have now. The others have all gone. He's a good boy, though. He's just shy." She reached around me to touch her son, but George stepped back off the sill onto the muddy rock in the street.

Ruth stood up. "What's the matter son? There's nothing to be afraid of?"

"But why'd you bring them here, Momma?"

"Because they needed a place to stay." she said, standing up straighter. "They slept outside last night, so I asked them to come. You wouldn't want them to be outside at night without any place to sleep, would you?"

"But Momma, I don't know them!"

"Now don't be silly," she scolded. "You're almost white too. Come inside and say hello like a big boy."

"No Momma, I don't want to!" he said, backing away from the house.

"But they're our friends, George. You must learn to meet people."

"But Momma, I don't know them!" he repeated. Then suddenly he turned and ran across the alley into another hut.

Ruth turned back to us as she wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

Neither of us said anything for a moment. "Don't be," I said, in a whisper. "We didn't mean to cause you any trouble with your son."

Helen continued, "It's not really fair to George. Maybe we should go."

Her words triggered me to stand up.

"Oh!" Ruth almost shouted, throwing her arms out at us. "Please don't! He always has trouble meeting people. It's not you. Please don't go!" she pleaded.

I remained on my feet but stopped moving toward the door. "We really don't want to make your son angry with you . . . or with us," I said.

"He'll be all right." said Ruth, still keeping her hands outstretched. "He'll be all right," she repeated. "He'll be all right," She struggled for other words. "Would you two like to see my old school house now?" She blurted out when something finally came to her. "It's just a little way from here."

Her suggestion was a relief. Helen answered quickly. "Sure, we'd love to," she said.

Ruth led Helen off the doorstep. I collected my pack and then carefully closed the door behind us. Walking back down the hill past the empty windows I felt even more out of place. Everyone had obviously heard the argument on Ruth's doorstep. Although the dogs were still there, the place was suddenly as deserted as it had first appeared from the road.

Across the muddy brown field in a cluster of dead trees not far off the main road, stood the ruins of a one-room white weather board schoolhouse, now minus most of its paint and all of its windows. It was what we had both thought was once an old community hall when we first came into the village. We had almost wandered over to take a closer look then, but the shop we could see further down the road had proven a stronger magnet to our stomachs.

Under some corrugated roofing iron collapsed inside I could just make out the rotten remains of an old school desk now minus all four of

its legs. The haunting image of a bright young twelve-year-old Cruzan girl sitting there learning geography in the hope of finding a better place in the world someday, suddenly shuddered across my mind.

Helen followed Ruth around to the other side of the ruins while I silently stared at the depressing reality of the woman's life. After several minutes, I walked over to my wife and touched her gently on the shoulder. Then I turned to Ruth.

"Ruth," I said. "I think it's best if we just go."

The old grey haired woman glanced at me and then turned to look at Helen for a long sad moment. "Wouldn't you stay?" she asked. Her voice was not pleading this time, but it had a sense of helplessness. "I wish we could all just be friends."

"But we are friends," said Helen sincerely, taking hold of both Ruth's hands in hers.

Ruth tried to smile. "I know," she said, barely audibly. "But I have so . . ." Her voice trailed off though her lips continued to move. I leaned closer to hear what she was saying, but she pulled away like a magnet repelled. Slowly her voice came back. ". . . Would you write me, sometime?" she ended, clearly struggling to make herself heard.

"Of course we will." Helen reassured her.

We exchanged addresses and then after long goodbye hugs, walked over to the road and headed east leaving the old woman standing there alone in her elegant blue dress.

"Love? Does Ruth remind you of Akin at all?" I asked when we had finally got past the store and out of sight.

The trembling in my voice caused Helen to look up. "Why do you say that?" she asked quietly, seeing the tears running down my face. "Ruth doesn't need a shrink. She's just had a really hard life."

"I know," I said slowly, struggling to articulate the pain I was feeling. "But the look in her eyes! It was just like Akin's, even though she tried hard to hide it. And now she has the rum.

"Rum?"

"I thought the bottle I bought for her in the shop with the fish was cooking oil, but it wasn't."

Helen stared at me in disbelief. She started to say something but stopped. Tears suddenly welled up in her eyes too. We reached for each other and hugged for several minutes in silence. Then together, more slowly, we started down the road again in the heavy heat.

የኮንቪርት ማሳሰቢያ

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MRS. MELVIN H GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASSACHUSETTS 02067  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

AUGUST 24, 1968

DEAR MOM,

YOU MIGHT SAY WE'RE EXPERIENCING CULTURAL SHOCK. WE'VE BEEN THROUGH A FEW THINGS THIS LAST WEEK THAT HAVE SUDDENLY MADE US TAKE A SECOND LOOK AT THE WORLD, OUR LIVES, AND SPECIFICALLY WHAT WE THOUGHT WE WERE DOING WHEN WE VOLUNTEERED TO COME OVER HERE.

IT STARTED WHEN WE GOT ON THE PLANE WITH 250 OTHER NEW RECRUITS (MOSTLY TEACHERS) AND WERE TOLD WHY ALL OUR LUGGAGE WAS SEARCHED BEFORE BOARDING AND WHY ALL THE POLICE WERE AROUND. SOMEONE HAD PHONED IN A BOMB THREAT! WE ALL TOOK OFF MINDS FOUR NOT QUITE SO TRUSTING VOLUNTEERS, WONDERING JUST HOW MUCH OF A JOKE IT REALLY WAS.

ADDIS ABABA WAS COLD AND WET WHEN WE LANDED WEDNESDAY MORNING. WE CHECKED THROUGH CUSTOMS AND WENT STRAIGHT TO THE HOTEL WHERE WE WERE ASSIGNED, TO SLEEP. THE FOLLOWING DAY WE FINALLY GOT UP TO LOOK AROUND AT WHERE WE WERE.

IT STILL SEEMS LIKE A BAD DREAM, ALTHOUGH AFTER TWO WEEKS NOW, I THINK WE'RE STARTING TO COME OUT OF IT. WHAT WE CAN SEE IS A LITTLE FRIGHTENING. HUNDREDS OF ARMLESS OR LEGLESS OR BLIND BEGGARS,

KIDS RUNNING AROUND IN LESS THAN RAGS, PEOPLE GOING TO THE BATHROOM UP AND DOWN THE STREETS (SUPPOSEDLY MORE THAN A THIRD OF THE HOUSES HERE HAVE NO TOILETS AT ALL), THE CROWDED MUD HOUSES BETWEEN HIGH RISE BUILDINGS, THE OPEN STREET SEWERAGE SYSTEM . . .

AND BEHIND ALL THIS ARE SOME EQUALLY FRIGHTENING THINGS WE CAN'T SEE. (I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHY WE WEREN'T WARNED ABOUT THESE THINGS BEFORE), LIKE OVER 90% OF THE MEAT IS WORMY IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, ALL THE DAIRY PRODUCTS CARRY TTS AND ALL WATER HAS TO BE BOILED BECAUSE IN MANY PLACES THERE IS AN UNTREATABLE PARASITE THAT IN A FEW YEARS WILL BLOAT ALL YOUR INTERNAL ORGANS.

OUR PROGRAM DIRECTOR TOLD US JUST AFTER WE ARRIVED THAT ONE NIGHT LAST YEAR 1500 STRAY DOGS WERE ROUNDED UP AND SHOT HERE IN ADDIS, AND 40% WERE FOUND TO BE RABID . . . AND WE GO TO SLEEP TO THE BARKING DOGS.

FEW BUILDINGS HAVE ANY HEAT IN THEM, BUT SINCE WE'VE BEEN HERE WE'VE ALREADY HAD SEVERAL HAIL STORMS. OUR STUFF FROM ST. CROIX STILL HASN'T ARRIVED EITHER, SO ALL WE'VE GOT TO WEAR AT THE MOMENT IS WHAT WE CARRIED ON THE PLANE IN ONE AIRLINE BAG. EVERYBODY WITH US HAS BEEN SICK OR IS SICK WITH A VIRUS GOING AROUND. WE BOTH HAVE IT NOW.

TO SAY THE LEAST, IT IS A VERY DEPRESSING SITUATION HERE. MANY PEOPLE HAVE GONE HOME ALREADY EVEN THOUGH WE STILL HAVE A MONTH OF TRAINING TO GO, AND I DON'T BLAME THEM. YESTERDAY ONE OF THE FEW ETHIOPIANS WITH A DEGREE TOLD HELEN STRAIGHT TO HER FACE THAT HE DIDN'T LIKE YOUNG INEXPERIENCED AMERICANS IN HIS COUNTRY. YOU CAN GUESS HER REACTION.

HOPE THE NEWS NEXT TIME IS BETTER.

UNTIL THEN, MUCH LOVE,

TED + HELEN

# Chapter 1:

## THE BEGGAR & THE STUDENT:

*In which the differences between us are explained to me by a street kid in Addis Abeba*

A small skinny boy who looked about 10, but was probably more like 16, stepped barefoot out of the smelly rubbish in the muddy alley that led up to the American Embassy Annex in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. "Money mister? Money? Hey mister, you got money?" he said in passable English, tugging at my raincoat.

I turned and stared at the coffee coloured kid hurrying to keep up with us in the cold light rain. He had on torn grey pants and an oversized black jersey with large holes under both armpits. His smile was bright and captivating but his penetrating brown eyes seemed to stare straight through me.

I didn't slow down. "Sorry kid," I said quickly, holding the airline bag over my shoulder slightly away from my body so that it wouldn't bump the change in my pocket and give me away. "I haven't got anything," I lied.

Unfazed, the kid switched to Helen. "Give me money, miss?" he pleaded, pulling on her arm.

Helen broke her stride, but with a glance from me quickly picked it up again.

He switched back to me, "Hey mister! Hey mister! You got money?"

"Sorry kid," I repeated as we approached the three story concrete American refuge. "You've got two eyes, two hands and two feet. You don't need anything from me." And to make the point, I roughly translated what I could into the Amharic I had just learned in my language immersion class. "Min alleh? whoolet alleh." What is it? You've got two, I said, pointing to the boy's legs.

"No father, no mother!" the boy continued, pretending not to hear and stepping around in front of us so that we could get a good look at him. "No money," he said, sucking in his lips and motioning toward his mouth with his hands as he walked backward. "Hungry mister. Give me money!"

Exasperated, I finally shouted at him in Amharic. "Simeh! heed!" Hey! Go away!

A white woman came out of the main door of the Annex and walked down the stairs into the muddy alley just in front of us. Without pausing, the kid switched to her as we went up the steps.

"What did you say that for?" asked Helen rather hostilely once we were inside.

I looked at her feeling a little lost. "What was I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Well, you could have given him something!"

"No, I couldn't." I said in a near whisper. "If I had, I would have just helped convince the kid that he makes a good beggar . . . and I'm not here . . . ." I continued under my breath, ". . . . to make beggars!"

Helen obviously didn't hear the last part, but with a disapproving scowl on her face, walked over to the stairs.

Was I just a cheapskate with a glib excuse, I thought to myself? I too was quiet until we had found David Levine's empty office on the second floor and sat down. "Do you really want to do this?" I asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Yes, . . . yes, I do," she answered unconvincingly. "I just find it hard to ignore what's around me like you can. How do you do it? How can you not care?" she asked with questioning eyes. "That kid wouldn't have been out begging in the rain if he didn't have to. He was freezing."

"But I do care . . ." I began, but was interrupted by our Program Director coming through the door.

Dave Levine was a rare person. He probably would not have struck a casual observer as one for there was nothing uncommon about his appearance. He dressed comfortably, had a slight paunch and was not much taller than Helen. But he never slowed down, and there was something about his unbridled enthusiasm, intelligence and humour that was infectious. Although he wore me out just watching him, I had liked him from the moment we arrived in Addis.

"Hi. You two back here already? Did you have lunch? Did you get your things, or is that all you've got? Any students try to beat you up?" Dave asked in rapid fire. Then, without waiting for a reply he added, "I've got your tickets to Gondar, some cash for a hotel and the bus trip back here. The plane leaves at three. And here's the name of the Community Development Centre," he said, handing me the tickets and a small folded square of notebook paper. "Sorry for the rush, but their summer program ends next

week. Have a good look around, and then come back and tell me if that's what you want to do for the next two years."

Brief flashes of sunlight splashed inside the DC3 as it climbed out of the broken clouds west of Addis. I undid my seat belt and slid along the canvas bench that ran down one side of the plane to sit in one of the small flickering spots of brightness. There were only a half dozen other people on board, plus a goat and a pile of boxes tied to the floor opposite us. The sun instantly warmed me up.

"Helen, look at this," I said, pointing at the glimpses of ground that were beginning to show below.

"There are tiny huts all over the hillsides. And it's green. It's beautiful down there!"

Helen was half asleep from the loud drone of the engines, but at my insistence she twisted around and looked out the window behind her.

Down through the breaks in the clouds were dozens of little round grass roofed huts each densely surrounded by what looked like small palm trees, sometimes scattered randomly among neatly laid out fields, sometimes grouped in rows or clusters. The hillsides were very steep in places and there were not many large trees, but the plane was flying low enough for us to clearly see that the whole countryside was carefully manicured and intensively used.

It looked like something out of prehistoric times. Paths replaced any sign of roads. They went everywhere. We could even see people and animals moving along them. At one point where several trails came together Helen spotted a large gathering.

"Wow," she said excitedly, squinting hard in the glare of the sunlight "That looks like a market or something over there!"

As we flew toward the group of ant sized humans, there was a sudden bright flash next to the gathering. No one below seemed to notice it, but it made both of us peer harder out our windows. "Any idea what that was?" asked Helen.

There was a second flash, and then it dawned on me, "Maybe a tin roof?" I said.



As we stared down into another age over the next quarter of an hour, there were more flashes. Gradually they increased in frequency until the plane crossed over a road and a large village that hung out over the edge of a huge canyon.

"I think we just witnessed the advancement of western civilization," I said, turning to study the map I'd bought at the airport, and then added, "And I think that's the Blue Nile over there."

The River which ends in the delta of Egypt and is almost single-handedly credited with starting western civilization has two beginnings. The better known one, the White Nile, starts in Lake Victoria on the Kenyan border with Uganda. There, elephants and crocodiles lazily watch the river drop through a small constriction hyped up as the Murchison Falls, and then disappear into the vast swamps of northern Sudan.

Eventually it re-emerges downstream toward Khartoum, but by that point there is nothing much to it. Though fat enough, it is weak and listless in the barren landscape, and hard to imagine as the creator of anything.

The less well known beginning of the river is in the highlands of Ethiopia. From a lake named Tana near the border of Sudan, two thousand feet higher than Lake Victoria, the Blue Nile starts off heading east toward the Indian Ocean. Then it drops over a waterfall that rivals



Victoria Falls, circles in a deep canyon around to the south through the

rain saturated central Ethiopian highlands, and eventually bursts out onto the plains of Sudan to join the White Nile at Khartoum.

The clouds that we had been flying through were largely gone. Just a few puffs here and there. But now far below us was a second dense layer of grey snaking to the south. "You remember the army helicopter pilot at the Embassy?" she said excitedly. "He said it's one of the most inaccessible places on earth. He thought his mapping crew were probably the first people to ever travel the whole way down it to the border."

"I thought he was joking," I said, looking out the window in awe. "But maybe he wasn't." As a teenager I had once walked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, but this grey bottomed gash in the earth for some reason left me even more impressed.

The two engines of the ancient DC3 unexpectedly shuddered with a loud roar. Helen and I both turned to look at the rapidly approaching hills on the far rim of the canyon. The plane dragged itself above them, hovered for a few moments as if looking for prey, and then banked sharply down to the left.

A small grass field miraculously appeared just under us and almost immediately, the plane hit the ground with a sharp thud. We both managed to get our seat belts back on just before we hit, but the four legged passenger on board wasn't so lucky. Though tied to the floor by its neck, on the first bounce, it attempted to fly past us spewing pellets.

Adjacent to a tiny one room metal hut, the plane rolled to a stop before the goat could stop gasping and find its feet.

Two Europeans stepped out from behind the cockpit curtain and instantly spotted the only other two white people on board. "Welcome to Debra Marcos," said the taller one to Helen with a strong British accent.

"Debra Marcos?" she asked surprised.

"We had to make a bit of a detour but we'll be here only a few minutes," said the other one with a less identifiable accent.

In a few moments we were all standing on the edge of the grass runway talking to each other like long lost cousins; the pilots as anxious to talk in English as we were.

The Captain, Charles, from Manchester, had been in the country flying for the government airline almost six years. His wife was an Ethiopian stewardess who had talked him into moving back to her home in Addis to work. Max, the co-pilot, was a South African who had only recently arrived in the country. Both seemed excited about what they



were doing, flying old planes around a country few outsiders had ever seen, but both expressed nervousness over their future.

"Why, what's there to worry about?" I asked curiously.

Charles started to say something, hesitated and looked around. "The students are beginning to get very restless," he said eventually in a slightly hushed voice. "I'm not sure His Majesty can keep them under control much longer."

"Are you teachers?" he continued hurriedly, obviously uncomfortable with the subject. "I've met several volunteers from the States recently who have come over here to teach English."

"We are American volunteers," I explained, "but we're not here to teach English. Once we finish the rest of our training we're going to be doing community development work."

"What does that involve?" asked Charles.

It was my turn to hesitate. "We're not really sure," I said slightly embarrassed. "That's why we're on our way to Gondar. There's supposed to be a good Community Development program up there to help us learn more about it."

Charles looked amazed. "You don't even know why you're over here?"

I forced a chuckle, "Well sometimes we do wonder, but it was either here or Vietnam for me," then quickly added when I realised I'd only dug myself deeper into it, "I've got a degree in Architecture though, and

Helen has nearly finished her degree in Nursing so hopefully there'll be something for us somewhere."

"If you're into art and buildings," said Charles, picking up on my discomfort, "you should have a look around Gondar while you're there. The place has an amazing history. While it's mostly just a collection of tin roofs and muddy streets, there's also a very ancient village of Jewish potters there and several large stone castles.

"Castles?" I asked with renewed interest.

"Yes, built back in the 1600's shortly after the Portuguese gave up trying to convert the Coptic Ethiopians to Catholics. For a while one was even the home of King Tewodros."

"Who's he?" asked Helen.

Charles turned his attention to the young woman with long hair.

"Haven't you heard of Tewodros?" he asked, a little surprised.

"He's Ethiopia's biggest hero, a nineteenth century Ethiopian king and martyr, although many think he was also a maniac. Up until a hundred years ago, Ethiopia was just a collection of independent clans spread across the highlands. Tewodros was the first person to try to unite the country, although he ended up committing suicide doing it."

"I thought everyone in Ethiopia was united way back in the Fourth Century through Christianity," said Helen.

Charles appeared impressed, but shook his head. "No, that's only partially true. The ancient kingdom of Axum in the north converted to Christianity back then, and later it spread to Gondar and parts of the central highlands. But most of Ethiopia has remained basically pagan. . . ." he hesitated, "or Muslim, until quite recently."

"Why, what made things change?" she asked

"Missionaries . . . from all over. Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, you name it, they're all here now."

Charles paused. "Have you ever read Moorehead's book on the Blue Nile?" he asked.

"I think it might be in the collection of paperback books they gave us," Helen replied, "but we haven't had much chance to read anything yet. They seem pretty intent on teaching us Amharic at the moment." Helen laughed. "They call it 'immersion', and it really is learning by drowning!"

"Is that where you're put together with people who only speak the language, and you have to learn it from them by osmosis?" Charles chuckled.

Helen nodded. "Something like that."

"What a waste," said the Pilot.

Helen looked up startled.

"I mean," he went on quickly, "there is so much to learn about this Country. I can't imagine why you'd need to know Amharic too. It may be His Majesty's language and taught in all the schools, but most officials here also speak English. You know there are hundreds of languages in Ethiopia, not just Amharic. Literally one on every hilltop."

A large man in a khaki uniform came over and said something to Charles in halting English. Charles nodded and then motioned for his co-pilot, Helen and me to follow him back to the plane. The other passengers were already at the steps ahead of us.

"Look out the left side of the cabin just before we land in Gondar," he said as he climbed up the portable aluminium steps and ducked through the door hole. "You'll see the edge of the escarpment off to the west toward Sudan and why all the Pharaohs of Egypt, the Turks and the Arabs never made it up here."

We followed him in and sat down on the sloping bench. Charles stopped on the steep floor to explain. "It's not so much the change in elevation," he went on as he hung over the isle with his fingers stuck through the holes in the plane's framing. "The five thousand foot drop does look very impressive in places. But it's what the elevation change does that isolates this place from the rest of the world."

Max hesitated and then carried on around us up the sloping isle into the cockpit. The other passengers already buckled in were all staring at Charles, but he didn't move. "The highlands here are green more or less all year. But lower down there is nothing but desert. The elevation makes this whole country one giant oasis in an otherwise waterless corner of Africa." He waved at the lush landscape out the little windows. "Apart from the Blue Nile, few of the other Ethiopian rivers even make it to the sea."

"Actually," he said, focusing his attention on Helen, "the real barrier against invasion is disease. There's tuberculosis up here in the highlands. Ethiopians seem to have learned how to live with it, but those who live down in the desert haven't. They quickly get sick and die when they come up here."

"What about malaria?" asked Helen, embarrassed by the attention, but captivated by the pilot's explanations.

"That too. Only it works in reverse. Malaria thrives in the lowlands but not up here, so when the people living in the mountains go down into the desert it's not the lack of water that kills them. It's the mosquitoes."

The co-pilot leaned out through the curtains and said something to Charles, who then quickly moved toward the cockpit. "That's why this place is so special," he shouted over his shoulder as one of the engines outside suddenly deafened us. "That why this place is like nowhere else on earth."

The pilot disappeared behind the curtain leaving Helen and me looking at each other with intrigue. "That's just what Akin said about Ethiopia," I said quietly.

The goat left a few more pellets on the floor as we took off, but the rest of the flight to Gondar was uneventful. Unfortunately, the clouds rolled back in as soon as the plane got off the ground, and we never saw Lake Tana, the Blue Nile Falls or the edge of the escarpment.

It was dusk when we landed, and it was just as well Dave Levine had forewarned us that Gondar could be even colder and wetter than Addis, because it was. The only saving grace at the airport was the driver of a tiny blue and white Fiat taxi, a giant jolly fat man with a twinkle in his eye like Helen's. He pulled up beside us just outside the airport gate as we walked in the freezing drizzle towards the distant lights of town.

"Hotel?" he called out.

"Yes, please!" I said, as I rushed over to the car's open front window and poked my head inside. "Thank you for stopping. How much is it? Can you take us to a cheap hotel?" I asked hurriedly, anxious to get out of the rain.

In answer, the driver leaned over the back of the front seat and opened the rear door beside me for Helen with a broad smile.

"Thank you, God," I said under my breath.

I dropped our airline bag onto the back seat beside Helen, and then realized there wasn't enough room in the tiny space for me as well. So I pulled open the dented front door with the open window and cautiously sat down in the wet spot beside the driver. I wasn't sure whether the Ethiopian had heard my last comment and I suddenly remembered everyone in this part of the world was very religious.

I smiled at him, and to my relief the big man smiled back.

"Hotel?" I asked.

The man nodded vigorously and accepted the Ethiopian five dollar bill I held out to him. As we started off in the direction of the lights, the driver silently handed me three dollars in change.

Out the right side of the taxi as we drove toward the town I could faintly make out the dark shape of a long wall and several large stone buildings in the rainy blackness.



"Is that one of the castles?" I asked, pointing toward the vague structures we were passing.

"Hotel!" said the Ethiopian, pointing further down the road.

"No, castle," I said. "Is that a castle over there?"

"Hotel!" repeated the driver, pointing ahead a little more insistently.

Helen leaned forward between us. "Wada ya, Tewodros?" Over there, Tewodros?" she asked, motioning with her hand in the same direction that I was pointing.

The driver beamed and nodded vigorously. "Ow," he said. "Ow, Tewodros wada ya Toweledowot." Yes, Tewodros lived over there.

Helen looked at me with a grin of her own. For a second I stared back at her blankly, and then blushed.

Just past the dark shapes the taxi driver pulled up beside a quaint looking building with a small sign out in front identifying it as the Bekele Mula Hotel. There were no cars in the gravel parking lot, but through the arched windows we could see several people inside sitting down at cloth covered tables. It looked nice and homely, but expensive.

"Wagow sint no?" How much is it? asked Helen of the driver, clearly feeling braver than I did to test her new language skills.

"Inja." I don't know, said the driver. "Min albat, selasa bur." Maybe thirty dollars.

His reply took a moment for her to decipher, but it became clear to me too once he flashed both his hands three times.

We both shrank back in dismay, and on seeing our reaction, the driver looked upset himself.

"Izzeeh, lela hotel?" Here, another hotel? I asked, finally getting the courage to use my new Amharic.

"Ow, bezu buna bets," said the driver, continuing his frown.

I caught the first two words 'yes' and 'many' and though I didn't know what a 'buna bet' was, it was enough for me to wave the Ethiopian toward the bright lights we could see just up the road.

The lights turned out to be the town's central market. Despite the rain, it was teeming with people, mostly women. Around the edge were several buildings with the word "hotel" painted in both English and Amharic on the side, but the taxi driver didn't stop as we went past. Instead he took us down one of the side streets to a newly whitewashed building that looked slightly better than the others. It wasn't made of mud, but concrete block and it even had a small restaurant at the front.

We pulled ourselves out of the cab dragging the flight bag, gratefully thanked the taxi driver for his help and waved him good bye.

The price for the room was right, only six burr for a double, the equivalent of a dollar and a half US, but there turned out to be some hidden costs.

We discovered the first shortly after dinner when Helen suddenly got a strong urge to find a toilet. We had gone out front for some injerra and wat, a spicy stew and sour bread eaten with the fingers. It was Ethiopia's equivalent to McDonalds, and though incredibly hot . . . Mexican food multiplied by a factor of ten . . . it was one local food we both really liked. But this time, for some reason, it didn't much like us.

We were hardly back in our room when Helen grabbed my flashlight and ran out the back door into the rain. A few moments later, I followed.

"Is that you?" asked Helen.

"Yes, hurry up!" I encouraged as I danced outside the door of the tiny corrugated iron hut.

"Could you get me some TP?"

"Don't you want to use your left little pinkie?" I asked, passing in the toilet roll I'd brought down with me.

The small finger on the left hand was a unique instrument in Ethiopia, a carefully manicured tool used by most people for ear cleaning, nose picking, bottom wiping and, as we found out a week later, for fighting.

Morning found us both still very tired. Not only had everything we'd eaten the day before found its way into the smelly hole behind the

hotel during the night, but we'd discovered a second reason for the cheap price of the hotel and what all the women were doing hanging around the market at night. Though few of the ladies we'd seen were either young or pretty, by the boisterous giggles and rhythmic thumps that echoed through the hotel until dawn, it was clear grey hair and excess fat didn't much affect local pleasures of the flesh.

"How about the Bekele Mula tonight?" I asked when we eventually pulled ourselves out of our sagging, wire woven bed. "We have a good excuse!"

"I'll say," said Helen with a slightly melancholy smile. "Tomorrow's our first wedding anniversary."

"Could you have ever imagined when we stood together at sunrise on Bald Mountain last year that we'd be here in Ethiopia a year later?" I paused in thought.

" . . . Freezing our bums off hanging over a hole out behind a whorehouse." added Helen.

We both looked at each other and laughed.

In the market we bought some bananas for breakfast and then with our airline bag and directions from the lady behind the hotel desk who spoke remarkably good English, headed for the Community Development Centre.

Nine days later we were back with our bag in Dave Levine's office, after spending three days on a bus with goats and soldiers.

Dave's office was our first stop because it had taken a day longer than expected to get back to Addis. Our bus had broken down in Bar Dar, and along with a whole platoon of young men carrying ancient Italian rifles, we had been forced to spend another night in a 'buna bet' on the edge of Lake Tana.

"So you weren't all that impressed with Gondar, either?" asked Dave, turning to Helen.

"Well, like Ted, I found the town itself fascinating; the castles, and particularly the Falasha potters," she said, struggling with her words. "And it's not that I have anything against prostitutes. Really, I don't, but teaching them how to embroider 'his' and 'hers' on pillow cases? It just



seems so . . . so pointless. When I saw what they were doing I wanted to laugh at first, but after a week it just left me feeling very depressed."

Dave had an unusually sombre expression on his face. "Actually," he said, after a lengthy dramatic pause during which I began to feel even more uncomfortable for expressing reservations about urban community development work, "I was rather hoping you wouldn't like it up there".

"You were?" I asked, as Dave broke into a giant grin. Helen and I were instantly on the edge of our seats.

"You know", Dave went on, "I'm not normally responsible for the urban community development volunteers?"

I nodded. "When we first got here you said this wasn't your program; that you were just looking after us until a new program director could be appointed." No one had ever mentioned names, but I assumed that the one who had left unexpectedly was Akin, my Virgin Island encounter group leader, the one whose reluctance to talk about his Ethiopian experiences had earned him a visit to a Washington psychiatrist.

"Yes . . . ," Dave paused briefly and then went on. "Last time you were here you mentioned that one of the Swedish volunteers in your hotel had asked if you would help them with their plans for a school they were building. Well, after you both left for Gondar I took a look at your files for the first time. I think with your backgrounds you both might be much more useful working in rural community development . . . in my area . . . if you have any interest."

I glanced at Helen, but I knew even before I saw the sudden new sparkle in her eyes what her reaction would be. "Really?" I said, struggling to contain my excitement. "Doing what?"

"Down in Gemu Gofa . . . that's the province right down in the southwest corner of the country next to the Kenyan and Sudan borders . . . the Government is making several new towns in an effort to develop the area. Not many people live there now, at least in the lowlands. It's poor and there's a lot of sickness. They're trying to encourage people from the crowded highlands northwest of here . . . you would have flown over the area on your way to Gondar . . . to move down there."

"Anyway, there's a place called Shileh next to a couple of rivers near Lake Chamo where they could really use your help. The Ethiopian Government wants to build a new town and start farming in the valley using irrigation from the rivers, only it's down in the Rift Valley where the malaria is really bad. . . . Have you been taking your malaria pills?" asked Dave suddenly.

"Yes, of course," said Helen quickly. "... Is that what I'd be doing? Giving out pills?" she added.

"Among other things,"

"Oh," said Helen, her voice suddenly reduced to a whisper, "But I'm not qualified. I haven't finished my degree yet."

"I know," said Dave quickly. "You couldn't because your husband was going to get drafted. But you're a hell of a lot more qualified than anyone else down there. And anyway, you'd be doing a lot more than that. I was thinking we could send you both to the agricultural school in Jima for a while first. You could learn how to set up a demonstration garden and vaccinate cows. Rinderpest and liver fluke are real problems down there too."

Helen brightened up immediately.

Dave turned to me. "And I think we could find someone to teach you how to survey, so you could not only design the town, but help lay it out. Maybe you could even learn how to use a Sinveram brick maker. The local houses down there now all look like Eeyore's"

Two hours later, with our future in rural community development confirmed, Helen and I walked out of the American Embassy Annex excitedly. I hardly noticed the handful of students in their grey pants and black jerseys under the veranda in front of the butcher shop at the end of the alley. We were in deep conversation with each other.

"Go home, Yankee!" yelled one of the students when we were several paces past them.

Lost in thought, I looked up wondering what I'd heard. Helen grabbed my sleeve.

"Fascist Pig!" yelled another student.

I caught the second word "pig" and turned around, thinking someone from the butcher shop was trying to catch our attention.

Staring straight into my face not ten inches away was one of the students. Though much smaller than I was, the absolute hatred in the boy's eyes instantly sent a shiver up my back. He looked familiar, like the beggar we had seen in the same alley the week before.

"What is it?" I asked in English, and then repeated the question in Amharic, being one of the few things I knew how to say. "Mindeno?"

The Ethiopian didn't say anything. Instead, he just bent his head back and spat straight into my face. At the same time he made a lunge for the bag over my shoulder.

I instinctively yanked it back and with my free hand took a defensive swing at the young thief, but the boy was way ahead of me. As I twisted around, the little finger on the student/beggar's left hand

punched upward and caught me just above my right eye. The fingernail, at least half an inch long, hit bone. Blood instantly poured into my eye and down my face, momentarily blinding me.

Helen screamed at the kid and almost immediately an Indian shopkeeper came running out of the butcher shop. The student looked first at Helen and then at the Indian and dropped his grip on the bag. Empty handed but not unsuccessful, he disappeared around the far side of the building as the other students scattered across the road in the opposite direction.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," said the shopkeeper. "They're getting very bad," he said, as we both profusely thanked the man.

Helen handed me a used tissue from her pocket to hold against my eye, and then in silence we turned and walked back up the alley for some bandages.

የኮንቦ: መልካ ዘፋ:

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MRS M H GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE RD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OCTOBER 10, 1968

HI MOM AND ALL,

WRITING IMPLEMENTS ARE VERY SCARCE - PARDON  
THE AIRSAS (PENCIL), OR IF YOU REALLY WANT TO GET  
OFFICIAL እርሻ (THAT'S THE ONLY WORD I CAN WRITE.)  
I GUESS IT'S TIME TO EXPLAIN WHAT'S BEEN  
HAPPENING.

IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE HERE IN SPIRIT TOO (THOUGH  
OUR CLOTHES STILL AREN'T). WE HEARD FROM MERRITT  
THAT OUR LETTERS GET SPREAD OUT AMONG YOU ALL -  
DO YOU THINK THIS MIGHT CONTINUE? BY THE LOOKS OF  
THINGS WE'LL SOON HAVE A LEGITIMATE EXCUSE WHY YOU  
ONLY GET LETTERS FROM US ONCE EVERY COUPLE  
MONTHS.

WE'VE BEEN SWITCHED TO RURAL COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT, AND DO WE MEAN RURAL. WAY DOWN IN  
THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE COUNTRY THE  
GOVERNMENT IS TRYING TO SETTLE THE AREA BY  
OFFERING FREE LAND (ABOUT 25 ACRES PER FAMILY) TO  
ANYONE WILLING TO FARM IT. THREE TOWNS HAVE  
BEEN STARTED, TWO ON THE ALL WEATHER ROAD TO  
ADDIS, ABOUT 30 MILES NORTH OF ARBA MENCH (THE  
NEW CAPITAL OF THE PROVINCE, WHERE WE ARE NOW),  
AND ONE ABOUT 15 MILES SOUTH OF IT ON A ROAD  
THAT IS ONLY OPEN DURING THE DRY SEASON.

IN THE TWO TOWNS TO THE NORTH, THE LAND HAS BEEN SURVEYED AND 75 TO 100 PEOPLE HAVE COME DOWN TO WORK THE LAND DESPITE THE MALARIA AND OTHER PROBLEMS. IN THE TOWN TO THE SOUTH, CALLED SHILEH, LITTLE IF ANYTHING HAS BEEN DONE, AND IT'S GOING TO BE OUR JOB TO HOPEFULLY START SOMETHING.

FIRST THEY WANT US TO SURVEY ABOUT 4000 ACRES OF SEMI-JUNGLE AND AFTER THAT I'LL TRY TO MAKE A PLAN FOR A TOWN OF ABOUT 400 FAMILIES.

AFTER THE SURVEYING, I'D LIKE TO SEE IF I CAN FIGURE OUT A WAY TO MAKE THEIR MUD HUTS MORE RESISTANT TO TERMITES. HELEN HOPES TO SET UP A SMALL CLINIC, START A DEMONSTRATION GARDEN AND VACCINATE THE LOCAL CATTLE.

LANGUAGE COULD BE A PROBLEM THOUGH BECAUSE APPARENTLY NO ONE IN THE WHOLE VALLEY SPEAKS ENGLISH. BUT WE THINK MOST OF THE PEOPLE THERE SPEAK AMHARIC, THE LANGUAGE WE'VE BEEN LEARNING.

THE EXTRA MONTH WE SPENT IN TRAINING WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE LEARNING ABOUT SURVEYING, CATTLE VACCINATION AND OTHER THINGS, BUT IT WASN'T MUCH HELP TO EITHER OF US. THE GUY WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO TEACH ME HOW TO SURVEY NEVER ARRIVED SO I ENDED UP TRYING TO LEARN EVERYTHING FROM A BOOK. HELEN RAN INTO THE SAME PROBLEM LEARNING ABOUT CHICKENS AND GARDENING, THOUGH SHE DID GET SHOWN HOW TO VACCINATE A COW.

WE FINALLY GOT SO FED UP WITH OUR "TRAINING" THOUGH THAT WE EVENTUALLY JUST PACKED OUR THINGS AND LEFT. THAT WAS LAST WEEK. NOW WE'RE DOWN IN ARBA MENCH WAITING FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR TO TAKE US INTO SHILEH.

WELL, THAT'S MORE OR LESS THE NEWS. DRINK LOTS OF COLD MILK AND MAYBE HAVE A PIECE OF RAÏRE MEAT FOR US.

LOVE AND PEACE,

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 2:

### OUT OF THE COCOON:

*In which a village chief politely declines  
our offer of help.*

You're kidding!"

"No, I do not kid. They do!" said Durk, with a strong German accent.

I instinctively reached for my crotch. "Nowadays?" I asked, in disbelief. "I thought that went out with the dark ages."

Helen glanced at me from the back seat with eyes wide, looking slightly sick.

"No. Gugis do it . . . here . . . now," said the surveyor with conviction. "The Gugi live south of Lake Chamo mostly, but they come in this part too."

I stared out at the expanse of thorn forest that surrounded the Land Rover a little nervously.

"One of my men is Gugi," Durk continued, looking into his mirror to watch Helen's reaction. "His wife let me see the one he gave to her. She keeps it inside a little box."

"A penis?"

"Ya, and the scrotum."

There was a loud silence over the whine inside the vehicle. Durk spun the front wheels hard right, then hard left, and dropped the Rover into a deep muddy hole that filled the space between two large acacia trees. The well-travelled green wonder ducked its bumper under the water and lurched sideways, then found a large root on the side of the hole and pulled itself back up onto hard ground.

"Why do they do it? Why would they want to castrate someone?" I asked once the track in front of us had smoothed out again.

"It's a present to their girlfriend . . . so they can marry."

"Does the man die?"

Durk laughed. "I think so!"

It didn't seem like a laughing matter to me. "Don't you ever worry about what they might do to you while you're out here?"

Durk smiled again and shook his head, "No, I'm a 'farengi', like you," he said. "They might like a white one, but they know the Police would shoot them if they try."

The Land Rover came around a corner in the muddy dirt road and slid to a stop in front of a large boggy area that had six deeply rutted alternative routes across it. Durk studied the ground briefly and then picked a seventh.

"Anyway," added the German almost as an afterthought, "they killed only eight people this year so far. Last year there were at least forty. The missions are making them mostly use goats now."

"Not much of a substitute," whispered Helen to herself, loud enough for me to hear. I turned around and smiled at her. She went red.

Outside was a brown forest of scattered prickly trees with patchy brown, equally prickly undergrowth, but rather suddenly the landscape on the left side of the road changed from brown to green.



"That's the first river over there," said Durk. "We cross it soon." He gestured ahead with his hand.

It was 16 miles and two rivers from Arba Mench, the provincial capital of Gemu Gofa, to Shileh, the new town where Helen and I were going to live for the next two years. A month earlier, when the road was so dry there were three inches of dust in the ruts, we had driven in with

Dave Levine, our Project Director, for a quick peek at the area and the whole trip both ways had taken less than two and a half hours.

We had not stopped anywhere except to turn around just beyond the village because it was threatening to rain. But this time we had already been on the road just going in, for nearly that long. The difference was the mud. The day before our latest trip, there had been a short but heavy rain.

Signs of the river meant we were getting near our destination. "Thanks for doing this, Durk," I said. "I'm sorry it's been such a hard trip."

"No problem, I go over this road when it's much worse. Anyway I need my transit I leave at the police house in Shileh."

Several tracks turned left into the jungle as the road we were on slowly disappeared before our eyes. Durk chose one and we immediately found ourselves on the banks of a fast flowing river nearly 100 feet wide. When Helen and I had come through with our project director, the same river had been only a series of shallow sandy channels we could have jumped across.

"You walk over there," asked Durk, "and see how deep?"

"Sure," I said as I hopped out of the Land Rover, rolled up my pants and stepped into the water. The river was not much deeper than my ankles, but it was moving so fast it soaked me to my crotch. The wetness between my legs reminded me of the Gugi and I glanced into the forest.

Something in the water made my feet feel funny, like fish nibbling at them. As I moved into the middle of the stream, struggling to stand against the current, a large stone whacked me on the shin and I realized the sensation wasn't from fish but from small rocks being carried downstream by the force of the water. "It's moving pretty fast," I shouted over the roar.

Durk waved me back. "Not so deep really," he said as I unrolled my saturated pant legs and climbed back inside. The German shifted down into low range and the car jumped into the water with a loud whine.

Water immediately brushed against the bottom of the doors on the upstream side of the Land Rover. Durk didn't seem concerned but Helen and I glanced at each other nervously. Helen lifted our airline bag onto the seat beside her and peered around to see if our borrowed tent and sleeping bags in the back were all right.

"Sometimes when I come here," Durk said casually as he fought the wheel to keep the vehicle heading straight, "water come right over the engine."

I nodded and then turned away to hide an involuntary smirk. I didn't want to seem ungrateful for all the advice the German had been giving us over the last two hours. But some of the things he'd said seemed pretty unreal, if not outright fiction.

It wasn't just the Gugi story either. The driver had also told us about a man-eating lion that he'd shot along the road just a few weeks earlier and about a 30 foot python he'd twice run over but still not managed to kill. But this one had to take the cake. I knew no engine could ever work underwater. They needed air to run. I didn't say anything, though. I just smiled to myself, feeling my nuts relax a little in this now slightly less forbidding corner of the world.

When we reached the spot in the middle of the river where I had turned around, the water was foaming around the doors and starting to seep inside. We watched Durk struggle to stay on course and then suddenly the whole front end of the Land Rover dropped out of sight.

Durk stepped down hard on the accelerator and the back end followed us into the sink. Water boiled against the upstream windows. It completely covered the engine. Around the door gaskets the river found a thousand gaps and spurted miniature fountains all over us.

I looked at Durk trying not to panic. Helen moved away from her door and grabbed our sleeping bags out of the back to try to keep them from getting wet. I lifted my already wet sneakers above the rapidly rising water on the floor.

Durk initially had a huge smile on his face but there was a slight change of expression when the back end started to swing around in the current. "Shisa," he sputtered under his breath. He twisted the wheel hard in the direction of the spin. The front left tire caught on something firm and like a submarine from the depths, the Land Rover rose up out of the depression shedding water. In two shakes we were back on dry land.

It all happened so fast that no one had any time to say anything until it was over. "Wow," said Helen when we stopped and opened the doors to let out the water. "I didn't think we were going to make it."

Durk looked a little embarrassed. "Thank God I lock the wheels. But I should have looked at all the river first," he said, pointing to a wider calmer spot just up river. "I think it is better over there."

My crotch suddenly felt very vulnerable again. "How'd you do that?" I said in utter amazement.

"When I lock the wheels, all four must turn together," explained Durk.

"But the engine! How did it keep going?"

"This is diesel," said the German. "If the air pipes don't get water in them, it's okay," he said, pointing to the vertical pipe that I hadn't noticed before going all the way up the back of the Land Rover.

No one said anything further until we reached the police post a mile down the road. A half dozen kids peered out curiously from the banana plants as we pulled up beside a tiny partially white washed mud hut with a grass roof and a small sign in Amharic letters on the door.



"My survey equipment is here," said Durk, as the kids slowly approached the car egging each other on in a language Helen and I didn't understand. "I'll be only a short minute."

He stepped out of the still dripping Rover and walked over to the police hut with several of the kids behind him stepping along precisely in his footsteps.

According to our project director, this was the "old" original town of Shileh. Four or five years ago, the provincial police chief had started a small farm near the river we had just crossed, and on the pretext of

keeping peace in the valley, had set up a small three man police station to manage it.

The farm used Gamunians from up in the mountains nearby for labour. Initially the workers went back to their homes high on the ridges above the valley every evening. It was the only way they knew how to keep from getting malaria, which they thought came from eating lowland bananas. But eventually most got tired of the daily trek despite the risks. Now around the small grassy open space in front of the police hut were perhaps another 20 stick huts hidden among the incet and banana plants.

Where Helen and I were headed, however, was the “new” town of Shileh, about a half-mile further down the road across a second river.

“I got it,” said Durk, after crossing the clearing with the kids still in tow. He carefully laid down the ancient looking brass instrument next to our wet tent in the rear of the car and then climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“You see up there?” he said, pointing to a low ridge behind the village to the west. “That’s where my road is going. All the way to Bonke.”

The ridge that Durk was pointing at separated two large rivers, the Elgo and the Shileh. It was the Shileh River that we had just crossed, and the Elgo we were about to. Although each drained very large areas of the highlands, they were less than a mile apart where they entered the Rift Valley.

“And that mountain in the back,” said Durk pointing to a cone shaped peak in the distance almost directly behind his ridge, “is Mt Gughe. It’s over 4000 meters high . . . nearly 14,000 feet. Bonke is over on the left the side of it.”

I marvelled at the very idea of building a road up into the mountains. The land on both sides of the valley we had been driving down was quite rugged. It rose abruptly at least 3000 feet off the valley floor, and then stepped back away in waves of ridges that rose even higher. Durk’s ridge rose more gradually out of the valley than anywhere else, but it still looked like an improbable location for a new road.

“How are you going to get a road up there?” I asked.

“With some difficulty,” was Durk’s quick response. “I have already changed the route once. But I shall do it.”

The kids followed us to the edge of the village, but stopped at the second river. The Elgo was not flowing as fast as the Shileh and there was less water in it, but it looked menacing enough. Durk got out and checked the wheel locks before he drove across.

Not far beyond the river crossing was the second village.



The two communities were not visible from each other, but from the ford, it was possible to see one or two huts on the outskirts of both. "New" Shileh was known to the local Gamunians as "Menze Seffer"; "seffer" meaning "village", and "Menze" being the name of the group of people from the highlands north of Addis Abeba who had recently moved there. They were from Haile Selasie's own tribe, part of a group of 5000 Amharas who had successfully petitioned the Ethiopian ruler for land to farm in the sparsely inhabited southern part of the country.

Another collection of kids greeted the Land Rover as Durk pulled up beside the largest of the two dozen stick and grass huts that haphazardly lined the muddy road. "I don't know anything about this place," he said turning around to us. "Are you sure you want to be here and not back there with the police?"

"Well," said Helen with a heavy sigh, "this is where our boss said we should be, and anyway, they're expecting us here."

I felt a sudden flutter of apprehension. Helen looked a little pale. "I guess it's time," I said, looking around at her. "Thanks again Durk", I said, shaking the driver's hand.

Durk didn't drag out the goodbyes. He said that he didn't have any worries about going back across the Elgo or Shileh Rivers by himself, but it was obvious he did. There were growing clouds to the west and though it didn't look like they were about to move out over the valley, they were already making a contribution upstream to both of them.

We stepped out into the early afternoon heat and returned Durk's wave as he turned around. Then we turned to the small crowd that now encircled us. In a little pile at our feet was our airline bag, a borrowed tent and two sleeping bags now slightly wet, a few dishes, bags of flour, sugar and spaghetti, cans of milk powder and margarine, and a water filter.

"Tenystaling," said a little girl of perhaps four or five almost under Helen's feet. She was dressed in nothing but a tattered blue short sleeved shirt that stopped not much below her belly button. "Simish mano?" What's your name? she asked with an infectious smile and then looked away.

The words brought instant relief. It was Amharic, the same language we'd been learning during training.

Helen leaned down to the little girl and extended her hand to her. "Tenystaling, Simey Helen no." Hello, my name is Helen, she said back to her.

She was just starting to ask the little girl what her name was when a wiry grey haired man with a silver chain hanging from one ear lobe stepped from the large grass hut we had stopped beside. As the circle broke to let the man through, Helen straightened up.



Helen was closest to the opening, but the old man turned toward me instead, extending both his hands to me and bowing at the same time. "Tenystaling," hello, he said very solemnly.

I bowed back with a wide smile. "Tenystaling," hello, I said, taking both the old man's hands in mine and shaking them.

"Tenystaling," said the man again, not quite so solemnly, but bowing even lower and returning my double handshake.

"Tenystaling," I said back, matching his movements and continuing my smile.

"Tenystaling," the old man repeated for a third time, with a momentary flicker of a smile.

I repeated the greeting again, and then added "Indeminalu?" How are you?

"Dehina, exabier erstaling." Fine, thank the good Lord. "Indeminalu?" How are you?

I repeated the same words.

The old man bowed low again. "Amen, tenystaling," Amen. Hello.

"Tenystaling," I said for a fourth time.

The repetitive greeting was not unexpected. We had been taught that Amharic greetings could be quite lengthy. It was the only part of an Amharic conversation I felt comfortable with, for we'd both learned many of the basic words and gestures of the traditional greeting during our three weeks of intensive language training. I kept up the exchange for over a minute and by the end of that time the old man had a broad smile across his face too. Then the Ethiopian added something I didn't quite catch.

"Tenystaling . . . Meche y'Arba Mench mekina yemalial?"

I tried to find some of the words on one of the vocabulary lists in my brain . . . "Mekina" means car, I thought. Arba Mench is where we have just come from. The inflection in his voice means he asked a question . . . But eventually I turned to Helen, still holding the old man's hands. "Did you understand that?" I asked her in English.

Everyone in the group looked around at Helen who had been standing patiently by our pile of things, but she shook her head. "No, not really. Just something about going to Arba Mench I think."

I turned back to the old man. "Simey Ted no, 'na yenay ballabat, Helen no," My name is Ted and this is my wife Helen, I said in the hope that this might help explain things. I stepped back out of the way so Helen could shake the man's hands.

"Tenystaling," said the man, smiling at the woman with long braided hair. "Simey Grasmatch Ayella no." My name is Grasmatch Ayella.

Helen smiled back and bowed. "Tenystaling," hello, she said shaking both his hands in both of hers. "Indeminalu?" How are you?

The greetings were repeated again in full, and then Grasmatch Ayella repeated his earlier question. "Meche y'Arba Mench mekina yemalisal?"

Helen and I stared blankly at him. "Algabanyum." I don't understand, I said eventually.

The man's smile turned slightly puzzled. "Mekina . . . wadet yehedal?" he said slowly, gesturing with a cupped right hand back down the road we had just come in on.

Helen turned to me. "I think he's asking, 'where is the car going?'" she said in English and then turned to the old man, "Wada Arba Mench," To Arba Mench. "Mekina wada Arba Mench yehedal." The car is going to Arba Mench, she said in Amharic.

Amharic is an unusual language. While Helen and I had only a few weeks of training in it, even at the best of times it can be difficult to understand. Not only is the verb usually the last word in a sentence, sometimes it is the only word. In Amharic, the verb alone can describe both when and under what condition an action or thought takes place, as in English, as well as describe who is doing what, who is being affected by it and whether the action is positive or negative.

Things are made slightly easier by the fact that there is no future tense in the language, but this is offset by the need to use a whole separate conjugation when talking to important people. It's sort of like the way the French use the familiar 'tu', only in reverse, just for people you need to show respect.

The old man beamed with Helen's response. "Meche yemalisal?" When is it coming back? he asked carefully, this time slow enough for us both to understand.

I conjugated the verb 'to return' in my head as though I was addressing someone of importance and eventually responded, "Aymelisoom." It's not coming back.

"Min alu?" What did you say? asked the old man. "Aymelisoom?" It's not coming back?

I noticed the man was also addressing me as though I was important too. "Ow," yes, I said.

"Lela mekina yemetal?" Is another car coming?

"Yelem. Izzi inacoyalin." No. We are staying here.

"Ounet? Lemin?" Really? Why?

"Izzi towaledalin." We are going to live here.

Each question was a struggle for us to decipher and then find the right words to reply. As Helen and I stood there working out what was being said and how to respond to the old man, the remainder of the crowd turned on and off in a buzz. With the last sentence, the smile on the Ethiopian's face dropped suddenly, however, and the chatter around us stopped.

"Algabanyum." I don't understand you, said the old man in the solemn tone he had originally greeted us with.

"Inya hisbawi noro idget seretenia negn." We are community development workers, I said in explanation, and then went on in Amharic with the speech that I had practiced over and over in my head while we were waiting for a ride into our new home. "We are volunteers from overseas. Your Government wants us to live here and help you make your new town. We can help you survey your new house sites and your new fields. We can help you treat your malaria and your sick animals. We want to help you help yourselves."

Although my speech was all in crude Amharic, it was clear neither the old man nor anyone else around us had understood a single word, or if they had, they gave us absolutely no hint of it. The old man just stood there silently staring at us, with an increasingly perplexed expression on his face. All the villagers stood there silently staring too.

Helen tried some words of her own, but like my attempt, no one seemed to understand her either.

"I don't understand," I said to Helen in English. "They don't seem to know who we are."

"I don't think anyone told them we were coming," she said after a long pause. "We should have got out of the car and talked with someone when Dave brought us in for a quick look."

The little girl that had first spoken to Helen tugged on her pant leg. "Zare, lela mekina yellum." There is not another car today, she said.

Helen nodded, "Owkalo," I know, she said, trying to smile.

Grasmach Ayella understood Helen's response. "Minalbat, negay." Maybe tomorrow, he said to us. He held his hand over his eyes to shade out the setting sunlight and motioned for us to follow him inside his hut. "Megib yefelegalachu?" Would you like something to eat?

We didn't understand his words but his actions were clear enough. We followed him inside.

It was three days before another vehicle came through the village. We missed it the first time it passed because we had gone into the jungle behind the village to get some water. It was two government vaccinators from Gidole, a small town in the mountains 20 miles further south beyond Shileh. They had come down to the Police Chief's farm to inoculate some of his cattle and had been told by the police that there were two foreigners in Menze Seffer. So they were on the lookout for Helen and me when they came back through the village in the late afternoon.

Helen brushed a tear from her eyes when the Land Rover stopped outside Grasmach Ayella's hut. We were in a nearby hut the old man had given us to sleep in, cutting up some meat to dry, when the kids surrounded the car and pointed us out to the Government workers. Much to my relief, the two Ethiopians spoke English considerably better than we spoke Amharic.

As with our arrival, it didn't take more than two minutes for the entire community, including Grasmach Ayella, to gather around us. After lengthy greetings between the two vaccinators and Grasmach there was a pause and then Tesfay, the older of the two Government workers, turned to us and asked, "The Grasmach asks why you are here."

I looked at Helen, still fighting with her tears, and then said, "We have come to help the people make a new town."

Tesfay turned to the old man and translated my words. After a brief discussion he turned back to us. "Why?" he asked simply.

"The Provincial Minister of Community Development, Ato Alaling, asked us to come here. We are community development workers."

Tesfay's eyes widened. He turned back to the old man, who listened intently to his explanation. Rather than make him happy, however, it seemed to make him a little angry.

Tesfay turned back to me, "Do you have a letter from him?"

"No," I said. "He was in Addis Abeba when we got to Arba Mench. We thought the villagers knew we were coming, so we decided to come here without him, before the road became impassable."

The vaccinator paused for a moment and then asked, "What does 'impassable' mean?"

I stumbled for some new words, embarrassed, and spoke more slowly. "I mean . . . when the road becomes too wet in the rainy season . . . too muddy for cars to go on. We thought the rain would not let us come here for many months if we waited for the Minister."

"Oh, I see," said Tesfay, nodding, and then turned back to Grasmach Ayella.

There was a heated conversation between the vaccinator and the old man and then the Government worker turned back to me. "Can you get a letter?" he asked.

It was a question I had not anticipated. How could I get a letter, I thought to myself? Walk 16 miles through Gugi and lion country . . . without a gun? I suddenly felt slightly defensive.

"How can I get a letter now?" I asked the Ethiopian. "Can't we just meet the villagers as friends? Make a house for ourselves? See what is here?" When Tesfa just stood there I added, "We won't do any official work. Then when the roads are better, the Minister, Ato Alaling, will be able to come here himself to introduce us."

Tesfay looked hesitant, but eventually nodded and turned back to the old man. A second heated argument began, but this time it soon involved the entire group of villagers that surrounded us.

Helen and I watched in utter confusion. We had no idea what everyone was saying, but it was suddenly clear to us that our arrival had caused considerably more problems in the village than either of us had realized. Fortunately, after a while the tension in the villager's voices began to dissipate and the group settled back down. Further discussions eventually ended with the man with the silver ear chain smiling. Tesfay turned back to me.

"I think it is okay now," he said. "Only the chief is not happy. All the other villagers agree with you. They want you to stay."

Given the old man's smile, I was perplexed. "Why is Grasmach Ayella not happy?" I asked.

"Oh, the Grasmach is happy, but Ato Telehoon is not happy."

"Who is Ato Telehoon?" I asked in bewilderment.

"He was the man who just go away."

Standing slightly aloof from the group that had first greeted us, and then again this time until only a few moments earlier, there had been a gaunt faced middle aged man who had said very little during either encounter. I hadn't paid much attention to him other than notice that the few times he had spoken, the other villagers had not interrupted him.

"The Grasmatch is a war hero," said Tesfay, "from when the Italians were here. Also he is a little rich. But Ato Telehoon is the chief of this village. He wrote to His Majesty and asked him if he would give everyone land here."

Helen looked at me and then at Tesfay. "What can we do to make him happy?" she asked.

Tesfay shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing," he said.

Everyone came forward and shook our hands after the Land Rover had disappeared south into the thorn forest. The villagers all had big smiles. So did we. But there was a niggle inside me. We didn't talk about it right then, however, and it was very late by the time we staggered into our sleeping bags after a feast of injerra and wat with the Grasmatch, drowned with pints of the potent, foul smelling but very effective locally brewed beer.

When we woke up long after sunrise the next morning a ring of kids surrounded Grasmatch Ayella's temporarily sequestered cow barn staring in at us through the spaces between the wall posts, giggling excitedly each time we moved. We were the new village Sesame Street Show.

"I think I am going to have to walk back out to Arba Mench, love," I whispered to my wife. "We'll never be able to do anything here if the head of the village is against us."

Helen looked up at me and then turned to the kids. "Tenystaling Zelalem 'na Abebich," she said to two of the little girls closest to her.

"Tenystaling wesero Helen," they giggled back.

She paused. "I know," she said eventually. "Will you be angry if I don't come with you?"

"You want to stay here by yourself? I asked, surprised. "I don't think I'll make it back here by tonight."

"I'll be okay. There has to be a first time sometime in our lives, and it won't be more than one night, will it?" she reached under the sleeping bag and lightly touched my arm. "I just don't think I can face the Germans again so soon. They already think American volunteers are unorganized and inexperienced, and I don't want to help confirm their view."

No lions, pythons or Gugi showed themselves on my long walk back to Arba Mench. I think it was my five hours of continuous singing that kept them away. I was hoarse when I walked into the Community Development Office in Arba Mench in the heat of the late afternoon.



Arba Mench itself was another new town, less than ten years old. It had been planned on a grand scale by some overseas company to straddle a bluff on the isthmus between Lake Abaye and Lake Chamo, two of Ethiopia's largest Rift Valley lakes. But the town was still largely undeveloped. Most of its sparsely scattered buildings were whitewashed mud huts with corrugated iron roofs. The better ones had concrete floors. Only a handful of buildings were made of concrete blocks and had glass windows. The motel shaped Government offices was one of these.

Ato Tadella, The Community Development Minister's secretary, looked up a little surprised when I entered. "I thought you are going to Shileh last Monday?" he said.

"We did," I said, "but we ran into a problem. The village chief, Ato Telehoon, would like us to give him a letter of introduction from the Minister."

I didn't have to explain myself twice. "Oh," said Tadella, quickly rising out of his chair with no hint of curiosity. "The Minister is back, let me talk to him," he said as he disappeared into the next room.

Ato Alaling stepped out of his office almost immediately. "Hello Mr Ted," he said with a cheerful smile as he limply shook my hand. "How are you?"

"Fine," I said, returning his smile. "How was your trip to Addis?"

"Oh, very good, thank you. But I was delayed a very long time. Where is your wife?"

"She . . .," I hesitated, ". . . I left Helen in Shileh."

The Minister looked surprised, but went on. "Tadella says that you would like a letter from me for Ato Telehoon?"

"Yes, if that is possible," I said.

"Of course, of course. There is a letter already prepared, but you left Arba Mench before I could give it to you."

I looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was just worried about the rain. Everyone kept saying the rainy season was going to start, and when the German volunteer said he was going to Shileh to get his equipment, it just seemed like an opportunity not to waste."

The Minister nodded. "That is okay. No harm done." He put his hand on my shoulder. "How did you come here?"

"I walked."

The Minister stepped back away from me. "By yourself?"

"Yes."

"That was not a good idea," he said with more than a hint of disapproval. "There are many Gugis in the jungle; Black mambas, spitting cobras and lions too." He stopped and thought a moment, then turned to Tadella. "I think you will take Mr Ted back to Shileh tomorrow, okay?" said the Minister.

"Okay," said Tadella, glancing at me with an enthusiastic grin.

"And I shall have the Governor himself write a new letter for you to take to Ato Telehoon," said Ato Alaling.

The next day I was back in Shileh before noon. It had still not rained again. The rivers were down even lower and the road was almost dry. Tadella, who had never been south of Arba Mench before, had no difficulty following Durk's tracks, since they were still the most recent ones.

Helen gave Ato Alaling's driver a large hug in front of the village before he got back into his Land Rover, very red faced, and headed back toward Arba Mench. Then with Helen beside me, I took the letter straight over to Ato Telehoon's hut.

The head of the village showed no surprise at seeing us standing at his door. He waited to be addressed.

"Tenystaling, Indeminalu," Hello, How are you? I asked using the greeting reserved for important people.

“Tenystaling. Dehina, exabier erstaling”. Hello. I’m fine, praise the Lord, replied Telehoon with little emotion other than the permanently sullen expression on his face.

We exchanged greetings several more times, and then as the pace of the exchange started to slow down, I produced the letter from the Governor and handed it to the village chief.

I hadn’t a clue what it said. It was in an envelope sealed with wax. It also had several additional very official looking stamps on it, and was addressed in finely lettered Amharic, a script which looked something like a cross between Arabic and Greek. The Minister hadn’t offered an explanation when he handed it to me, and I had been too chicken to ask.

Telehoon studied the envelope for some time. Then he carefully broke the seal and took out the letter, also covered in stamps and fancy writing. As he slowly read the lettering on the thick embossed paper, he formed each word with his mouth. When he had finished, he looked up quietly. There was an unexpected twinkle in his eyes, but he didn’t say anything. Instead he looked back down at the letter with all the seals on it and read it again even more slowly. When he had finished it a second time he looked up at me, then at Helen and then at me again. There was a broad beam across his face.

Slowly, like a butterfly unfolding from its cocoon, Ato Telehoon extended both his hands toward us. “Tenystaling,” he said with a sincerity that transformed his whole face, “inquan dehina gebu.” Welcome, I am so glad you have come.



BED, SHELVES FOR OUR BOOKS, RADIO AND TAPES, A DESK FOR MY DRAWING BOARD, A KITCHEN COUNTER FOR OUR BOTTLED GAS BURNER AND WATER FILTER, AND A KITCHEN TABLE MADE OUT OF HAND HELD PIECES OF WOOD WE BOUGHT IN OUR LOCAL MARKET . . . . IT LOOKS A LITTLE LIKE OUR OLD FLAT IN DENVER, ACTUALLY; COMPACT, MULTILEVELED!

A NEIGHBOUR ALSO MADE US TWO CHAIRS AND A COUCH OUT OF WOVEN COWSKIN STRIPS AND JUST OUTSIDE WE'VE BUILT A SMALL RING OF SEATS SO WE CAN HOLD CLASSES. THE BEST THING, THOUGH, IS WE JUST HAD AN EARLY CHRISTMAS. ALL OUR STUFF FROM AMERICA ARRIVED VIA JEEP WITH OUR PROJECT DIRECTOR, NOT THAT WE KNOW WHAT WE'LL DO WITH A DOUBLE DOWN SLEEPING BAG OR A TEN SPEED BIKE, BUT IT WAS GOOD TO GET A NEW CHANGE OF CLOTHES.

HELEN IS ABOUT TO START A KINDERGARTEN, AND OUR CHIEF IS TALKING ABOUT GETTING A SMALL COOPERATIVE STORE GOING. WHICH IF IT EVER GOT OFF THE GROUND WOULD REQUIRE THE VILLAGERS LEARNING SOME MATH FIRST. SHE HAS ALREADY MANAGED TO GET SOME MEDICINES DOWN HERE AND IS TEACHING A LADY HOW TO USE THEM AND I'VE FINISHED THE PLAN FOR THE TOWN. SOME SURVEYORS FROM ARBA MENCH ARE HERE NOW LAYING OUT ALL THE PLOTS. THINGS ARE ACTUALLY STARTING TO HAPPEN!

GUESS WHAT HAS BEGUN WHILE I'VE BEEN WRITING THIS LETTER? YOU GUESSED IT, THE RAINY SEASON (IT WAS SUPPOSED TO COME NEARLY TWO MONTHS AGO!) AND OUR ROOF DOESN'T SEEM TO BE DOING TOO WELL ON ITS FIRST TEST. I'D BEST SIGN THIS LETTER OFF BEFORE IT GETS WET.

MUCH LOVE TO YOU ALL.

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 3:

### EATEN BY A LION

*In which the rains come, a search is organised and I discover the power of love.*

I may have too much testosterone, but God, you've got one helluva Protestant Ethics Complex!" I chided, as Helen walked out of our grass hut into the damp morning still buttoning up her shirt. A machete was precariously tucked up under her left arm.

She didn't have to verbalize the glance she gave me back over her shoulder. It was clearly not a 'come hither' look.

"Even the villagers don't work on Sunday, for Christ sake," I yelled after her, already resigned to my loss. "And it's still dripping wet out there!"

Helen skirted the thorn bushes hiding the hut high termite mound next to our front door. With each step she rose slightly higher as the soles of her sandals caked with mud. Then she disappeared into the undergrowth, leaving only a line of shallow holes slowly filling with water.

It had rained the night before for the first time since our arrival in Shileh. The rainy season that everyone had been warning us about and had been expecting ever since the day we got out of the Land Rover, had finally come.

Now we were truly on our own in a strange new land. The roar of the swollen river down in the jungle made that clear. If the villager's warnings were true, there would be no one crossing it now, no access to the outside world for the next two or three months.

I reached down to the desk below the bed and turned on the radio. The welcome hiss and crackle of the BBC came on, but the announcer was just reading out the latest body count from Vietnam, so I quickly switched to the cassette recorder and the solace of Judy Collins.

"Whatever I did to change you, I didn't mean it," I sighed out loud as I lay back on the bed and with the comfort of the music, escaped from Shileh and my slightly less than perfect love life.

Sometime later, I awoke suddenly, startled to consciousness by a loud commotion down in the jungle behind the hut. The tape, long ended, and my watch much longer dead, I re-established the time via

our short-wave radio. It was still Sunday, still overcast and the war was still on. But now it was early afternoon and much, much hotter.

One glance around our one room hut confirmed that Helen was not there, and staring outside through the hut's sticks and loosely woven grass mat walls, it was quickly obvious she hadn't been back since my parting shot that morning. The ground was dryer now, but there were no new footprints around.

I got up and put my shorts and T shirt on hurriedly.

This isn't like Helen, I thought to myself. She should have come back for lunch. She's got a stomach like a clock. Ten minutes past noon without food and she goes mental.

"Helen," I said quietly, not wanting to sound too silly in case she was just around behind the bushes in the garden. "Love, are you out there?"

No one answered.

I walked out of the hut barefoot, forgetting about the chiggers ever ready to burrow into my feet. I stared off in the direction of Helen's last footprints, toward the clinic site where she had said she was going to clear brush. "Helen" I called out, this time much louder. "Are you still up at the clinic?"

There was still no response.

The thought of food and the calls reminded me of the whistle I had only recently taught her; a lilting few notes my mother had used to call us home for dinner when I was growing up. It had already kept me from losing Helen in the crowded markato in Addis while looking for batteries the day before we left for our new village.

I whistled the call quietly, knowing the sound would travel much farther through the woods than my voice. Then I paused to listen for her response. When it didn't come, I whistled it again, louder.

This time some baboons answered with chatter from a tall tree in the opposite direction down by the roaring river, but nothing came back in the direction of the footprints.

Helen must be really mad at me, I thought to myself. Damned clinic. We've still no materials to build it with. No medicines to give out to people. I really wonder what drives her sometimes.

I hesitated a second, thinking about her probable reaction when I found her whacking away at the brush on the clinic site, whacking away at me in her mind, but then thought, what if something is wrong? This is no place to get into trouble; not now with the river impassable.

Grabbing some dried fish off the line over the desk and a freshly squeezed plastic jug of sweetened lemon juice, I swung the bottom half of the door closed behind me to keep out the neighbour's chickens. Maybe she'd accept a peace offering, I thought.

Although it wasn't very far to the site, the direct way there was not on a trail but straight through the woods. The plan I had drawn up for the new town had not been able to take into account very much of the existing village pattern or any of the paths that held it together, much to the chagrin of the villagers. Only the main rutted dry weather road and the outdoor market place in the clearing next to the central cluster of huts had managed to keep their places on paper. Having had to design everything to a grid pattern to make surveying easier, almost everything else, like the new clinic, had ended up in the middle of nowhere.

Walking with a slight sense of urgency, I wound through the relatively open but thorny undergrowth and arrived at the clinic site before I'd finished humming 'Who Knows Where the Time Goes'.

Helen was not there.

She had been though. She had managed to clear a ten-foot square and stack the thorny undergrowth in a neat pile just outside two survey pegs. Quite a considerable effort with a dull blade I thought to myself as I wiped my eyes with my shirt. I had meant to sharpen the machete the last time I used it, but hadn't.

Which must mean she really is truly mad at me. I sighed at the thought, then stopped to pluck a small thorn out of my foot while I looked over my wife's efforts for other clues of her whereabouts.

Casually leaning up against one of the trees outside the square was our machete.

Funny, I thought. Why would Helen have left that here? . . . Unless she's gone somewhere else and didn't want to bring it back to the hut first. I felt immediate depression, followed quickly by relief.

Which is actually a good sign. At least she's okay, I thought to myself. She's probably just gone over to one of the villagers' huts.

After two months in the village I still felt like an outsider, but Helen could always make friends without even trying. Somebody must have come by, I thought enviously. She can start up a conversation with anyone, anywhere.

With the jug of sweetened lemon juice, dried fish and Helen's machete, I started off through the woods opposite the way I'd come. Not far away I knew there was a trail that led directly into the main market clearing.

The trail didn't take long to find, but just before stepping into the well-worn groove, a second much larger thorn stopped me in my tracks.

"Jeesis, this is really dumb," I said out loud. "Barefoot . . . in a forest of thorn trees!" Then added, "Not to mention pythons, black mambas and lions."

I shivered involuntarily at the thought of lions. Helen and I had heard them down in the jungle only the previous night during the rain storm. It had scared us both to death.

It was the first time we had ever heard lions in Shileh. We'd heard them before during our brief stop in Wajifo, another new town further north up the Rift Valley beyond Arba Mench. But somehow it had been different then. We had been with our project director and another experienced community development worker in a large village of solidly built, mud walled, iron roofed houses next to the main road to Addis Abeba. The roar off in the woods had sounded pretty scary, but we hadn't felt threatened by it.

Last night, however, with the river in full flood, the road to the outside world closed and only grass mats and thatch between us and the lions, the sound had made us both feel suddenly very isolated and vulnerable.

I left the splinter where it was, the pain suddenly gone, and started to walk hurriedly toward the village. "My God, she wouldn't have been attacked by a lion, would she?" I cried under my breath. I knew the idea was far-fetched. "You're crazy. Lions don't eat people. Cows maybe, but not people," I reassured myself out loud.

It was Paul Jankura, the community development worker in Wajifo who had told us how harmless lions were to people. Just little kids guarded the cows in his town. Whenever the lions got too close, the kids just yelled and threw stones to get them to go away.

I was sweating when I reached the clearing at the edge of the village even though I hadn't gone that far. The village looked deserted



Helen won't be here, it dawned on me suddenly. It's after lunch already. It's rest time. No one will be up at this hour of the day, particularly on a Sunday.

Just in case, though, I quickly walked down the rutted road which separated the two haphazard rows of huts and quietly whistled my call to her.

At the far end, not seeing any sign of life except for some smoke filtering up through several thatched roofs, I turned around and walked back through the village. Once past the market clearing I broke into a run toward our hut, just a short way back up the road.

It was still empty. Still barefoot and still carrying the dried fish, lemon juice and machete, I circled around behind Helen's garden and found the main path that led toward the jungle. Maybe she's gone to get water, I thought.

Right along the line between the thorn forest and the jungle parallel to the river was a small irrigation ditch the villagers had dug before we arrived in the village. Used to water everything from cows and crops, to people, it was the community's "raison d'être".

"Helen", I called out when I got there, "Are you down here?"

Only the distant roar of the river answered me. Without slowing down, I turned and followed the ditch upstream into one of the fields on the jungle side of the channel, gingerly climbing over the thorn fence that surrounded it.

Maybe she's come down here to get out of the heat, I thought. My sweat suddenly chilled my skin as I ran between the stalks of corn under the towering trees that shaded the field. It always amazed me how abruptly the vegetation and temperature changed just because of the river nearby. It's the only place I haven't yet been that she would dare come by herself, I thought confidently. She must be here.

On the run I climbed over the thorn fence on the far side of the field into another opening in the jungle, this one recently cleared and not yet planted closer to the sound of the rushing water. "Helen, Helen. Can you hear me? Are you down here?" I called out as I ran

At the thorn fence around the third recently cleared field, I stopped, sweating heavily despite the shade. I whistled as loud as I could and then waited for a response. All I could hear was the roar of the river.

"God, I don't really like this," I said out loud, panting. "But don't panic. There's got to be a explanation. People don't just . . ."

The sudden sharp screeches of several baboons interrupted me. Down river through the jungle, almost in the direction I had just come, I could see the high canopy of trees beyond the fields shaking violently.

Something is really bothering the baboons again. I remembered the commotion down in the jungle that had earlier woken me up. Surely, it wouldn't be anything to do with Helen, I thought.

"Helen," I shouted, beginning to feel very anxious and turning to run in the direction of the screeching. "Helen are you okay?"

Away from the empty fields cleared by the villagers, the jungle was not easy to walk through. There were no trails to speak of, just dense vines and undergrowth interrupted only by an occasional sunny pocket of grass left by the fall of a giant tree.

Retracing my route through the fields I headed for a long grassy opening into the jungle undergrowth I knew was near the irrigation ditch just opposite where we got our water. I remembered it because it was where I had seen my first python only the week before while on my nightly round to fill up the water bucket. Easily twenty feet long and ten inches across, the snake had shaken the trees as it slid away through the grass and undergrowth in the dim evening twilight.



My heart was in my throat as I ran at full speed into the opening, my gut not believing my mind about it being the wrong time of day for such snakes to be out.

For the first hundred feet into the opening, the vines hanging from the trees above kept their distance. My struggle was just in keeping up speed as I ran a steeplechase through the waist high grass and rotten logs. Quickly, however, I reached the end of the grassy area and immediately found myself enclosed in a dense tangle of vegetation.

I could hear the baboon's chatter much closer. I was sure Helen was right nearby. The jungle isn't going to stop me now, I thought.

Whacking wildly with the machete, I ploughed through a gap between two giant trees, ducked under some low branches and ran

straight into another long narrow grassy area lying almost parallel with the first.

I had only just time enough to think to myself, I don't see Helen, as I started to pick up speed, when I tripped on something and spun head first into the deep grass. The baboons screeched directly overhead as I went down.

My hands, out in front of my face to break my fall, came down on something soft, warm and covered in blood. For one brief moment I couldn't move! I couldn't even scream, paralyzed with the fear that I had just landed on Helen.

The bloody mess hidden in the grass under me started to quiver violently. At the same time, I caught sight of bits of fur in the blood and an overwhelming sense of relief flooded through me.

"Thank you God!" I cried out involuntarily. Tears welled into my eyes. "Thank you it isn't Helen!"

As I scrambled off the carcass, I could see it was only a mule with little life left in him except for the gut wrenching look of fear in its eyes. Large chunks of flesh were missing from its back legs. From the holes oozed a copious quantity of coagulating blood. Teeth marks down its neck and across its shoulder led to a gaping opening where its intestines, now scattered in the grass, had been.

As quickly as my relief arrived, however, it vanished. "Oh my God there *ARE* lions down here!" I screamed. The sharp horrendous image of Helen being attacked by a lion as she tried to protect the dying mule flooded into my brain. Self-sacrificing Helen. It would be just like her, I thought.

"I've got to get help," I said in a whisper, now close to absolute panic. "I've got to find the chief."

Grabbing my things, I took off on the run again as fast as I could go, back through the vines and long grass of the jungle, past the water hole and into the silent village.

I ran straight to chief Telehoon's hut and called out through his closed door, dispensing with all the formal greetings I knew I was supposed to use.

"Ato Telehoon, Ato Telehoon. Wisha, wishette... Ambassa..... Ambassa!" I struggled to think of the Amharic word for lion.

There was a brief commotion inside, and then Telehoon opened the door, sleepy eyed and puzzled.

"Ambassa..., watat..., Helen, be ye medhanit bet no." Lion..., blood..., Helen is at clinic, I blurted out, groping for the right words in Amharic to explain myself and wishing to God somebody in the village spoke English.

“Coy, Coy.... Cas be cas” Wait, wait, slow down, calmed Telehoon, placing both his hands on my shoulders. “Mind de no?” What is it?

Telehoon tried to gently sit me down on the carved wooden bench next to his front door, the bench he used to talk with all the villagers when they sought his advice. But I couldn’t sit. I was struggling to hold back my tears.

I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes. “Mule in jungle,” I translated into the Amharic of a two year old. “All bloody. Helen is gone. Lions are here.” I pointed down into the jungle where I had just been.

Telehoon stared at me for a brief second in disbelief, but then seeing the blood on my hands and T-shirt, pulled out a shiny silver whistle from his shirt pocket and blew several shrill notes. Almost instantaneously, there was commotion inside the other huts and people started to pour out of their doors into the heat and bright sunlight of the afternoon.

Telehoon waited briefly until most of the villagers were on the street and then quickly told everyone what he had deduced from my incoherence. There was a short discussion, and then while the women and children stood staring sympathetically at my distress, the men disappeared back into their huts, reappearing momentarily with long knives, machetes and spears in their hands.

In unison, we all headed for the jungle on the run, splitting up into groups as we crossed the irrigation ditch. I led the chief and a couple of others toward the bloody mule.

As we noisily approached, the mule lifted its head, shuddered and then collapsed back into the grass. It was the last straw. I burst into tears.

The chief looked at the mule and then at me. He was about to say something when someone down in one of the newly cleared fields started yelling “agentowal . . . agentowal” It’s found, It’s found.



What's found? Have they found Helen? Is it Helen? Is she okay? I cursed again my knowledge of Amharic.

"Helen?" I questioned Telehoon.

"Ow," answered the chief. Yes.

I turned toward the sound of the voices and started to run, machete in one hand, the fish and jug in the other. Over the logs, through the grass, into the fields, straight through the thorn fences, totally unaware of the pain. Tears were pouring down my face.

There she was on the far side of the last empty field I had reached earlier but had not crossed. She was standing on the bank of the swollen river next to a giant tree with a book in one hand and a half-eaten banana in the other. She stood perfectly still with an incredulous look on her face, staring at the mad man racing at her. Around her stood a dozen men with spears and machetes in their hands jumping up and down with excitement.

If I could have stood aside for a moment and looked at myself, it would have been obvious to me that something was clearly wrong with my brain. But at that point, in that totally alien inescapable place, apart from the overwhelming sense of relief I felt, I had lost all sense of reality.

Time and space had simply vanished. I knew I needed to get to where she stood, to touch her and see that she was real and alive, but I just couldn't. It was like a dream. Although I could see my legs moving, it felt as if the field was infinite and the villagers' shouting would go on forever.

Then suddenly I was there, falling to the ground, hugging Helen's legs and crying uncontrollably.

"What's wrong?" asked Helen, trying to pick me up, and looking particularly embarrassed by my strange behaviour in front of everyone. "Did you have to tell everybody about our fight?" She asked, jokingly.

I missed the humour. "I thought you were dead," I sobbed. "I called and called and you didn't answer. Why didn't you answer? I thought you had been eaten by a lion."

The villagers stared from Helen to me and back to Helen again. As we were talking in English, no one knew a word of what we were saying to each other, but everyone clearly understood both my grief and Helen's bewilderment.

"I'm sorry," said Helen. "I didn't hear you," she added hesitantly, not sure whether to continue to hate me for what I'd said that morning or not. "Really, I'm sorry," she repeated more definite. "I didn't hear you. It must have been the river. The roar must have drowned out your calls," she concluded, trying to calm me down.

I couldn't stop shaking as I huddled around her legs. She pulled again harder at me to stand up and finally I rose into her arms in the hush of the gathering crowd.

As she held me, Telehoon gave Helen a gentle lecture on some of the basics of life. He spoke to her like a priest addressing his parish. I didn't understand what he was saying and I suspect Helen didn't either as he spoke in very elegant, formal Amharic, but his intent was clear just the same. His words weren't just aimed at her, either. Villagers standing within earshot nodded and quietly repeated them to each other.

When the chief finished, Helen smiled sheepishly and briefly took his hand saying, "Exabier erstaling," God bless you. Then we both followed him back to the village where we treated everyone to a glass of tella at our neighbour Cinki's buna bet to say thanks.

It was there after several glasses that Telehoon, with simple hand gestures and words he knew we'd understand, told us that it was all just the fault of the local dogs. The mangled mule that I had found had not actually been attacked by a lion at all. As quiet chuckles spread across the room, the village chief explained that really old or sick animals were sometimes mauled to death by local dogs before they could be slaughtered and eaten by the villagers.

Taking a large gulp of tella, I surprised Telehoon with a hug and then started to chuckle with him and the others. It felt better than crying.

My culturally inappropriate behaviour caused a brief moment of shocked silence and then, spontaneously, the little hut burst into laughter.

As it did Helen looked over at me and smiled.

የአየር ጭነት

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MR + MRS M GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE RD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
U.S.A.

FEBRUARY 1, 1969

DEAR YOU ALL,

THE WORLD SEEMS SO FAR AWAY. IT IS GROWING HARDER TO PICTURE A GROCERY STORE, A DRIVE-IN THEATRE, ICE CUBES, A GROUP OF PEOPLE NOT ALL SPEAKING SIX DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AT ONCE.

IF NOTHING ELSE, LIFE HERE IS TEACHING ME TO APPRECIATE ONE THING AT LEAST; AMERICA. DESPITE ITS OVERLY OBVIOUS PROBLEMS POLITICALLY, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ONE IN AMERICA TO REALIZE ALL HE HAS UNTIL HE LIVES WITH THE MILLIONS WHO DON'T HAVE IT.

LITTLE DID I KNOW THE VALUE OF JUST SPEAKING IN ENGLISH, HOW LITTLE AMERICAN WOMEN APPRECIATE THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE PROSTITUTES TO SURVIVE. WHAT A 5% LITERACY RATE REALLY MEANS, HOW EASY DEATH IS. I'D HEARD IT ALL BEFORE, BUT IT IS JUST NOT THE SAME THING AS LIVING IT THIS CLOSE. IT IS OVERWHELMING. HELEN HAS BEEN MAKING A HOUSE TO HOUSE SURVEY. SO FAR EVERY PERSON SHE'S SEEN HAS MALARIA.

SORT OF DEPRESSING. AT LEAST WE HAVE JOBS, THOUGH. ONE HUNDRED VOLUNTEER TEACHERS ARE OUT OF WORK UP IN ADDIS BECAUSE THE UNIVERSITY AND ALL THE HIGH SCHOOLS UP THERE ARE ON STRIKE, AND EVERYONE EXPECTS IT TO GO ON FOR A LONG TIME. THERE IS DOUBT THE 250 VOLUNTEERS EXPECTED TO

START TRAINING THIS SUMMER WILL EVER EVEN COME OVER. SOME SCHOOLS IN THE PROVINCES ARE CLOSED TOO, AND IN FACT, WE HEARD ONE HAS KICKED OUT ITS VOLUNTEER TEACHERS FOR SUPPORTING THE STUDENTS, THOUGH THEY APPARENTLY DID NOTHING EXCEPT TELL THEIR STUDENTS ABOUT THE STRIKES UP IN ADDIS. (ALL GOVERNMENT NEWS IS CENSORED)

ON A BRIGHTER NOTE, HELEN JUST MADE SOME FANTASTIC RAISED DOUGHNUTS. THEY VERY POSSIBLY COULD BE WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE BREAD WE STILL HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO MAKE HERE. (PRIMARILY BECAUSE I STILL HAVEN'T MADE AN OVEN YET.) LORDY DO I HAVE AN AMAZING WIFE.

A TWO MONTH FAST BEGINS NEXT WEEK. OUR MEAT SOURCE WILL END, BUT I THINK WE WILL STILL BE ABLE TO GET FISH TO DRY. AS FAR AS OTHER SUPPLIES GO, WE'RE IN PRETTY GOOD SHAPE. OVER CHRISTMAS WE MANAGED TO GET TWO MORE CASES OF WHOLE POWDERED MILK, SOME CANS OF BEANS, TEN POUNDS OF RICE AND 15 GALLONS OF KEROSENE DOWN HERE ON THE BACK OF A TRUCK.

I DON'T KNOW IF WE EVER TOLD YOU ABOUT THE COOPERATIVE CLINIC THE PEOPLE WANT US TO START HERE. FOR SOME TIME WE (MOSTLY HELEN) HAVE BEEN GIVING OUT MALARIA PILLS AND OTHER SIMPLE MEDICINES. BUT THE VILLAGERS NOW WANT HELEN TO DO MORE. IT SOUNDS A LITTLE SCARY BECAUSE SHE WOULD BE GIVING OUT TWO TYPES OF INJECTIONS (CHLOROQUIN FOR REALLY BAD MALARIA, AND PENICILLIN FOR REALLY BAD INFECTIONS), BUT CONSIDERING THE URGENCY OF THE HEALTH PROBLEM AND THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT PROMISING TO STAFF IT IN A FEW MONTHS, THIS SEEMS LIKE THE NEXT BEST ALTERNATIVE. ALREADY THE PEOPLE HAVE GATHERED MOST OF THE MATERIALS TO BUILD IT. THE PROVINCIAL POLICE CHIEF HAS AGREED TO DONATE THE CORRUGATED IRON FOR THE ROOF. HE HAS A FARM NEARBY, IT WILL BE THE FIRST IN THE VILLAGE.

THE MARKET IS FILLING UP. IT'S THURSDAY TODAY. GOT TO GO BUY SOME BANANAS. ANYWAY, I'M OUT OF SPACE.

MUCH LOVE TO YOU ALL IN THAT FAR AWAY PLACE.

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 4:

### WASI

*In which there is a fire in our latrine and I begin to realize that everyone looks the same*

Shit comes in an amazing variety of colours I marvelled to myself as I sat on the crossbar over our shallow latrine.

For the last hour I had watched mine go from bright yellow soup to lumpy black briquettes and back again while Helen periodically excused herself from her women's class to top me up with sweetened lemon juice and pills.



It had started in the usual way from the usual culprit; hot spicy injerra and wat eaten the night before in a neighbour's hut. It was a hazard of village life we were both developing some immunity to, though we clearly still had some way to go. Helen had already gone through the same exercise earlier that morning in the dark.

As I sat there, smoke drifted up through the bush thankfully hiding most of the smell coming from under me. The smoke didn't worry me because I knew some villagers were burning off a newly cleared field

nearby. It wasn't until the smoky smell was joined by the close crackling sound of a fire that I suddenly jerked upright.

I looked around into the dense shrubbery surrounding the latrine and sniffed the air. Our toilet was a marvel of camouflage, carved out of the heart of a giant thorn bush on the far side of Helen's garden. Every other villager just squatted behind any bush they could find. But ours was built to Boy Scout standards, complete with toilet roll on a post inside an upside down milk can to keep the precious paper dry in the rain.

At first, the location of the fire wasn't obvious. All I could see was a slight wisp of smoke rising up through the foliage just behind me. There was a reason for this though. The fire I could not see was hot, all flame and little else. And it was fast.

"Ouch!" I yelled as I felt a sudden burst of heat on my backside. Jumping off the log seat I grabbed for my pants down around my ankles, but there was no time to pull them up. I tripped out into Helen's garden, just as the entire bush around the latrine burst into flames.

"Holy Moses!" I said. It was the making of a disaster. Fire could level the entire grass village of Shileh in minutes.

Several women from Helen's health class almost immediately came running around the chicken hut into the garden screaming. "Isat!, Isat!" Fire! Fire!

Helen was not far behind. She looked at me struggling to cover myself and couldn't suppress a smile despite the gravity of the situation. "That hot?" she asked, grabbing the shovel that was protruding from her compost pit.

At the same time, four stark naked men appeared on the jungle side of the latrine beating the base of the flaming bush with their water drenched gabis. The fire in the field nearby had obviously got out of hand.

Normally, the damp green foliage in the jungle by the river kept any burn off confined to the dry brush stacked in the centre of each clearing. But this new field was not far behind Helen's garden, half in and half out of the jungle. Somehow, the fire had got into the grass along the dry side of the field near our recently cut path to the water hole, and had followed it from there back to our latrine.

The women grabbed anything that looked swingable and joined the men. My jeans finally raised, I grabbed the full bucket of drinking water still cooling from the previous night's boiling and threw it on the remains of the bush around the latrine, then raced down the smoking path to the water hole for more.

I was back within a minute, but by the time I had returned it was all over. The four men from the field and the half dozen women from Helen's health class had already beaten the flames to death. They and Helen's garden, its weed-less freshly turned soil providing the ideal fire break, had saved Shileh from certain incineration.

Everyone joined in joyous handshakes and relieved laughter by the blackened toilet roll can, now visible from all directions, and then the men returned to their field. Helen and her women students went back to the circle of benches all excited and sweating. I grabbed the roll of toilet paper, scorched but still dry despite my bucket of water, and found a new bush to squat behind.

That evening while Helen and I were boiling another bucket of drinking water and were discussing whether we should replace our latrine or just put up some grass mats around the present remains, Tesfa, one of the four men from the burning field, poked his head around the side of our hut.



Tesfa was a Menze Amhara from the highlands like the other villagers, but he didn't bother with the usual lengthy introductions. "Sila isat ke sehat bewhala, betam azinalo." About the fire this afternoon, he said, I'm very sorry.

I got up and shook both his outstretched hands. "Minnum yellum." It was nothing, I said, trying to sound as unconcerned as possible.

Tesfa looked like he wanted to say something.



"Escomet" Have a seat. "I said. Min alleh?" What is it?

The small skinny Ethiopian glanced back into the darkness behind him. "Sila bet no." It's about a house, he said, turning back toward the fire light. He hesitated and then went on. "Addis bet meserat efelegalo." I want to make a new house.

I looked past him into the dark. The other three men from the burning field were standing in the road chuckling to themselves. I waved them over, but they didn't seem to want to come any closer.

Tesfa was somewhat of an outsider in his own village, always asking questions, always making new things. The day the other villagers had built us our hut, he had gone off on his own and made us two chairs and a couch out of doweled tree branches held together with woven untanned leather.

Once, when he saw me using a hand drill he asked if he could borrow it and the next day brought over his oxen to show me the new yoke he had made out of vines, short pegs and a log with a series of holes drilled through it.

Another time he built a sleigh. Neither Helen nor I had ever seen one in the country before. Ethiopians tended to carry everything on their backs if they didn't own a mule. But in Shileh where mules were scarce, all work just stopped when it rained because it was impossible for anyone to carry anything through the deep boggy mud on foot. After a particularly heavy storm, however, Tesfa showed up with his oxen pulling a crude cart with runners instead of wheels. On Shileh's rain slickened ground it worked surprisingly well.

This time Tesfa had heard from Telehoon that I was anxious to show someone how to build a house that might not get eaten by termites so

quickly. The village chief had been very sceptical about my idea and had said so to me in his typically straight forward way. But Telehoon had then told Tesfa about it anyway, knowing that if anyone in the village might be interested in it, it would be him.



Termites were a curse in the valley. The wood loving, light hating white ants were everywhere. One of their giant mounds was less than 20 feet from our front door, another not more than 50 feet away in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately, traditional houses were built in a way that made them particularly vulnerable to the pests. Local huts were built by digging a circle of holes for wall posts at a fixed radius around a large centre post. Between the centre post and the shorter outer posts, rafters were then lashed like spokes on a wheel and with the support of many concentric rings of vines, topped with 6 inches of grass thatch.

In other parts of the country the outer walls were usually finished with mud plaster or even sometimes made of stones rather than posts. But in Shileh, where large stones were fairly rare and termites were particularly numerous, most villagers didn't bother with the mud, since it only helped the termites eat their homes faster. They just lined the inside of the circular wall with woven grass mats to keep out prying eyes.

It was a simple design. A hut could be built by only one person and it used local materials very efficiently. But it had one serious defect. It

wasn't very sound structurally once termites got into it, which was more or less immediately because all its posts were buried deep in the ground.

In Shileh, a house was lucky to last two years before it fell over.

The villagers had found one rare tree the termites didn't much like, and usually used it for their centre posts. But it was so scarce it was impractical to use for all the outer wall posts as well. In any event even though the termites didn't like this wood they still had no problem building their mud tunnels up the outside of it looking for something more edible at the top, like rafters. Kicking down these mud tubes was a regular pastime for local kids.

What was particularly interesting to me though, was the termites didn't like building their mud tunnels up bare rock. This white ant idiosyncrasy was common knowledge among the villagers who already used it to protect their grain. They stored their harvests of maize, sorghum, barley and teff in various sized woven sapling baskets balanced precariously on small clusters of stones.

It was Telehoon who had told me about the reason for the rocks under the giant baskets, and my immediate reaction was to ask the chief if the villagers had ever thought of using the same idea to protect their houses. Telehoon had just smiled politely.

"Ichillem." It wouldn't work, he said. He made a gesture with his hands like something falling over.

I tried to explain the concept of triangulation, but eventually gave up, frustrated with my language skills

When Tesfa showed up on our doorstep with his three friends after the fire, I still hadn't figured out how to explain how triangulation worked, but I could hardly contain my excitement over Tesfa's interest. I literally dragged the villager inside our hut and over to my desk to sketch out a picture of my proposed termite resistant house in the bright light of our pressure lamp.

Meanwhile, realizing the significance of Tesfa's visit, Helen found one of our half melted Toblerone chocolate bars in the storage space under our bed and enticed Tesfa's friends to come inside and join him.

As they stood in the background chuckling, I finished my sketch by drawing a line of large rocks under the bottom of the walls. "be dingayoch lie," on rocks, I added. "Be dingayoch lie no," It's on rocks,

I repeated, tapping the place on the drawing where it showed the walls sitting on the rocks.

"Negurgin, Indeyet yetowledu?" But, how does it stand up? asked Tesfa.



I hesitated and then turned to my Amharic dictionary. "Sost." three, I said, "Sost alleh." It's got three. I couldn't find any Amharic word for 'triangle' or 'angle'. "Sost gun alleh." Its got three sides. "Betam tenkarra." Very strong, I added, as I traced and retraced a triangle in the corner of the building I had drawn.

"Sost mindeno?" Three what? asked Tesfa.

"Gon." Side, I said, pronouncing it unintentionally like the Amharic word 'gun', a contraction of the word 'but.'

"Mindeno 'gun'?" But what?

"Gon." Side, I repeated, trying to get the pronunciation right.

"Gun, indeyet yetowledu?" But how does it stand up? asked Tesfa.

With each question, the chuckling in the background grew louder. Suddenly, Tesfa jumped up, snatched the drawing from my desk and held it under the faces of his three friends. It showed a small two room hut not unlike Ruth's hut on St. Croix, though bigger, perhaps ten feet wide and twenty feet long. Apart from its thatched roof, it almost looked like one of the mud houses in Addis.

The three stared at it for a moment, and then one of them said in a hushed voice, "Addis bet, ke ma-izen gar no. Zemanawe bet!" It's a new house, with corners! A modern house. Tesfa then dramatically placed the drawing back down on my desk, and said "Ishi. Min alleh?" Okay. What's next?



An hour later, Tesfa and his three friends left, all sounding very excited about the idea of making a house without curved walls or a centre post, despite looking sick from all the chocolate they had eaten.

Even then, it was clear to me none of them had understood how it would stand up, but I was fairly certain that Tesfa and the others had all understood at least what materials they would have to gather to build it.

Normally, just cutting and bundling the grass would have taken Tesfa a week, so I was more than a little surprised when he showed up three days later early Saturday morning, anxious for me to follow him up into the thorn forest on the far side of the market place clearing.

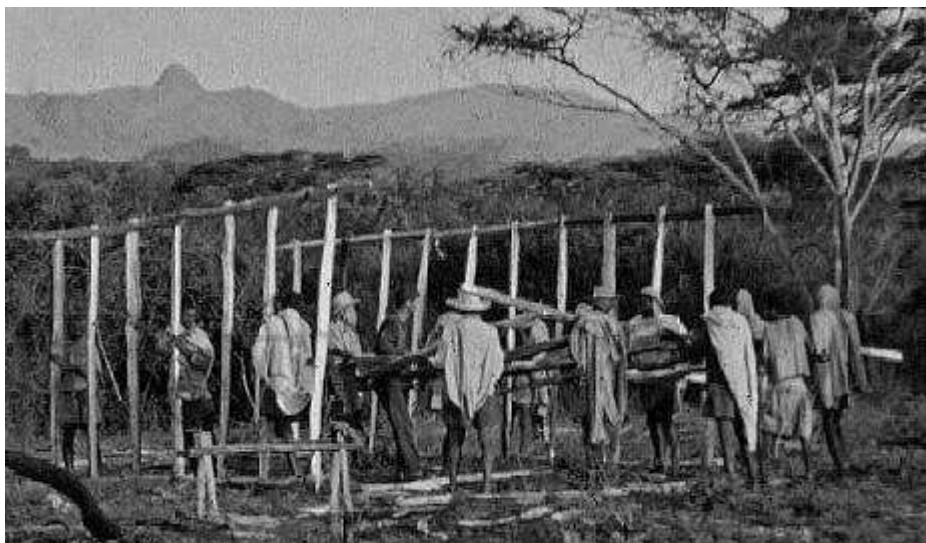
Tesfa's house site, allocated to him by lottery two months earlier according to my plan, was not only cleared, but was piled high around its edges with split logs, rocks and thatch. Every man in the village must have helped him, for they were all there, including Telehoon, watching the two of us come toward the house site. I suddenly wanted to run and hide.

It wasn't that I was scared my house design wouldn't work. The plan was simple. I would just explain how to lash and brace the four wall panels while they were on the ground, and then get everyone to help lift them upright.

Once lashed together in a box, the structure would be rigid enough to lever up onto rocks and strong enough to hold up the rafters and thatched roof.

But as we approached, I suddenly had an anxiety attack over how I was going to tell the villagers what had to be done. I had already tried and failed twice to explain even the basic concepts of the design to Telehoon and Tesfa.

My whiter than normal face, however, went unnoticed. The villagers jumped into the construction project with enthusiasm, standing one pole and then another on end, and then puzzling out loud over how they were supposed to make them stay upright.



The nightmare would have gone on for some time if it hadn't been for an unexpected young stranger who wandered across the empty market place from the road in the midst of all the confusion. I was on my fourth attempt at trying to explain why it was okay for all the poles to be lashed together while they were still lying on the ground, and why one pole had to be lashed diagonally across the others, when a teenage boy said in English with an impish grin. "Can I help explain them what you are to do?"

I looked up through my sweat at a grinning round face with one front tooth missing. Good fortune certainly comes in an amazing variety of smiles, I mused to myself, thinking suddenly about Telehoon's gaunt twinkle and the broad beam of the taxi driver in Gondar.

I stood up and returned the boy's smile. "Yes, I'd love your help," I said. "What's your name?"

"Wasi," said the boy continuing to grin.

"Hello. I'm Ted," I said, shaking his hand. "Can you explain to them that this will become one of the walls once we finish tying it

together? We're just making it on the ground first because it is easier to work on it while it is lying down."

From that point Tesfa's house went up without a hitch. With the help of a dozen willing workers and Wasi's words, by the end of the afternoon not only were all the walls standing upright but almost half of the roof thatch was tied into place as well. Even I was surprised at how quickly it went together. And I couldn't help smiling every time someone walked up to the new house and gave it a hard shove. The villagers still could not believe that anything could stand so rigidly just sitting on top of rocks.

When darkness finally made it too difficult to see what we were doing, everyone went back to their huts feeling exhausted but pleased with themselves. I invited Wasi back to our hut for something to eat and to meet Helen.

"How do you know English so well?" I asked as we walked back across the market place clearing toward the only hut in the village that radiated light after dark.

"I am going sometimes to a Mission school in the mountains." said the teenager.

"Are you still going to school?" I asked.

"No, not now, because I want to work."

My heart skipped a beat. "Really? Would you like to work for us?" I asked.

Wasi's ever present impish grin spread across his face into a broad smile. "Yes! Yes! That is why I am coming here."

I was a little puzzled. "You knew we were here?"

"Oh yes. Durk told me."

"Durk, the German Surveyor making the road to Bonke?"

"Yes. I work for him before. But he is now too far away."

I was getting excited. I knew an interpreter would be a godsend for both myself and Helen. "We could pay you a dollar a day," I said, knowing this was an extravagant wage, but also intent on making him an offer that he could not refuse. The workers on the Police farm in Old Shileh only earned 25 cents a day. "Only I don't know where you could stay," I added.

"That's okay. My cousin's house is near to the police," said Wasi, pointing down the road in the direction of Old Shileh. "He works on General Getacho's farm sometimes, but he is not there now. I stay there."

I was relieved, for it was one of the main problems that had blocked our previous efforts to find someone.

When we arrived at the hut, I introduced Wasi to Helen, and then explained all that had happened that afternoon. Helen seemed excited at

how well the house construction had gone, but was very cool toward the grinning visitor and my idea of his working for us. It wasn't until after Wasi had headed back to Old Shileh that I found out why.

"I don't trust him," she said without attempting to explain herself. "And anyway, why didn't you ask me first?"

"I'm sorry, I should have but we've talked about getting someone to help us with our language problem for months and they haven't exactly jumped out of the woodwork," I said, feeling exasperated by Helen's attitude. "I thought you'd be happy. You've been telling me for weeks how hard it is to teach your women's group."

"Yes, but there is something about him . . ." she said, pausing to rub the back of her neck.

"Anyway," I said, not waiting for her to finish, "I certainly need him. I don't think I could have ever managed to get Tesfa's house up today without his help, and I think he'd be a big help to you too."

"Maybe," said Helen, dubiously.

I sighed. "Well, he's coming back on Monday. If you still feel the same way then, just tell me and I'll sort it out so he isn't too disappointed."

It was not that simple, however. Two days later Helen hadn't changed her mind, but Shoatruss, one of Telehoon's closest friends, showed up wanting me to help him build a house like Tesfa's. Wasi arrived at the same time, and before I knew it, we were up on Shoatruss's house site surrounded by another group of enthusiastic villagers wanting to know how they could help.

Things got further complicated the following day when Wasi arrived at the circle of benches in front of our hut while Helen was trying to teach her women's health group about why they should boil their drinking water. She had been showing them enlarged pictures of the microscopic bugs that could be found in most local water to try to show them what boiling the water would kill. But when Helen agreed to let Wasi translate her words, the women's eyes suddenly lit up as if they were looking at the pictures for the first time. Up to that point, they had thought the pictures were of some really ugly fish in Lake Chamo that they were supposed to cook by boiling before they could be eaten safely.

Wasi also told Helen why her class had suddenly dropped from fourteen women to only six just a week before the fire. Through a few not so subtle questions, Wasi found out that Cinki, one of the village prostitutes, had become a threat to the Chief's wife. Apparently Cinki picked up what Helen was teaching much faster than Zenebitch, Telehoon's wife, and she just couldn't take the humiliation of being

outdone by a whore. Then once Zenebitch left, most of the other women had to stop coming to class too out of respect for the chief's wife.

So Wasi stayed on in Shileh despite Helen's misgivings and for a while everything seemed to go okay. Through Wasi, Helen managed to entice Telehoon's wife to come back to the women's class. She gave Zenebitch private lessons with the teenager's help, and then let her act as the class teacher. With the return of the chief's wife, came all her followers.

Thanks also to Wasi, my houses continued to spring up like mushrooms. The first two were finished before the end of the week, and two more went up the following week. At the same time, Telehoon started to talk to me through Wasi about starting a cooperative store in Shileh and getting rid of the baboons that had devastated the villagers' crops the previous growing season.



Within a week of Wasi's arrival, however, the impish grin on the teenager's face started to fade. His explanations of what people were saying to us became shorter and shorter and his translations back into Amharic sounded almost curt.

One afternoon after a session with Telehoon's wife, Helen found Wasi out behind the chicken hut in tears. With gentle coaxing she finally got him to tell her what was wrong.

"Zenebitch is thinking I am like Cinki," he sobbed. "They all do. They think I am slave!"

"What do you mean?" asked Helen, surprised. "You don't have to do anything for them."

"I do!"

"They can't make you do anything. You work for us."

"But I am Gamunian like Cinki! Amharas think all Gamunians are slaves! They always come here and make us slaves. Their fathers did. Their grandfathers did. They still are thinking this."

Helen and I both knew Gamunians and Amharas spoke different languages, but to us, everything else about the two Ethiopian groups seemed more or less the same. They both had the same colour skin, the same general body size and shape. . . , they both lived in round grass huts deep in the mountains, raised a few scrawny goats and cows, ate corn and bananas, drank coffee and tella and wore equally ragged clothes. At least as far as we had noticed, Telehoon and the other Amhara villagers seemed to get along well enough with the Gamunians that came down from the mountains to our weekly market, or passed through Shileh on the road.

But there was a lot I hadn't noticed until I began to look more carefully. Although Amharic was a language that paid particular attention to polite etiquette, once Wasi had pointed out the problem, I saw for the first time that no one else in the village except us bothered to use the Amharic equivalent of 'please' and 'thank you' when talking to him or other Gamunians. I also noticed that despite all that the teenager, the Police in Old Shileh and other locals continued to do to help the village, no Amhara villagers ever invited a Gamunian into their hut.

What seemed particularly hard on Wasi, was that the Amhara's never bothered to smile when they talked to him. It wasn't long before the twinkle in his eye was gone.

On Saturday morning, three weeks to the day after Wasi's arrival, Telehoon knocked on our door to tell us that Wasi had gone. The chief had just come back from Old Shileh where the Police told him the boy had decided to go home. Telehoon didn't offer any explanation why. He just flicked the back of his hand and said with no hint of disappointment, "Hedowal." He's gone.

Neither Helen nor I were entirely surprised with his departure, but we were surprised that he had left without asking for any of the money he'd earned, and then even more surprised when we discovered that he had actually helped himself to it sometime the previous day, at least to most of it. From the box of coins we used to buy things in the local market, which we kept hidden under our mattress, he had taken virtually every cent, nearly 14 dollars in change.

Helen gave me a knowing look. "See," she said, "I told you he couldn't be trusted."

I was momentarily lost for words. "I guess you were right." I said eventually, in a rare admission of fallibility. "But," I added after another pause, "at least he didn't take more than we owed him. Our stack of one dollar bills is still here."

"Yes," said Helen, sarcastically, "only because they were locked in the book box!"

I wanted to point out that if Wasi had found the coin box under our mattress he probably had also found the key under the mattress that unlocked the book box, but then decided to let it go.

"Have you any interest in hiking up to Zeyse?" I asked, changing the subject. Zeyse was an old Gamunian town Telehoon had told us about, a four hour walk into the mountains behind Shileh. Few of the Amharas in Shileh had ever been there, but it was where most of the people who sold chickens, spinach, sorghum, coffee, milk gourds and grass mats at Shileh's Thursday market came from.

The question caught Helen by surprise. "Why? What do you want to go up there for?"

"I'm tired of trying to find a new bush to squat behind every morning, aren't you?" I asked. For the last three weeks all the grass mats in the market had been bought by the local villagers for their new houses, and without one, our burned out toilet continued to be unusable except after dark. "We could buy some mats for our latrine."

Helen hesitated a moment, but the idea clearly intrigued her. "Do you think we could find the way up?"

"I don't see why not. We know where the trail starts, and it looks pretty well worn. We shouldn't get lost."

We didn't hesitate once we'd committed ourselves for the sun was already heating up the day. I dug out our compass, pocket knife, canteen, first aid kit, a few Ethiopian one dollar bills and a small pack while Helen made some lemon juice and grabbed some dried meat, a bunch of bananas and a couple of warm sweaters in case the mountains proved much cooler than Shileh.

"You haven't seen my bra, have you?" asked Helen as she fumbled through the metal trunk in the storage space under our bed.

I chuckled. She only had one bra, and she hadn't worn it in months. "Uh oh, you caught me," I said, grabbing my chest.

"No, I'm serious!"

"You don't think you need to wear one up there, do you?"

"No. It's just I thought it was here with the sweaters."

"Sorry, no idea," I said after a pause while I checked through the first aid kit for the anti-venom serum and syringe. "Maybe it's in with your bathing suit in the airline bag?" But by then Helen had stopped searching and had started to fill up the pack.

By early afternoon we were high above the valley, looking out over Lake Chamo and the dots far inland that were the huts of Shileh. The trail was easy to follow, but a bit frustrating at times because it often seemed to wander in no particular direction. Sometimes it went straight up without any attempt to maintain a constant grade, and at other times it wound down into small depressions or over hills that could have been avoided.

It was all new and beautiful though, so it didn't really matter to me. I was glad to be away from Shileh for the first time since Christmas.

As we slowly climbed out of the valley, the thorn bushes and brown earth gradually turned to green grass, banana plants and an occasional, incongruous eucalyptus tree. At first, only in isolated dips on the hillside, and then in more and more dense pockets, we came across cultivated areas and clusters of huts surrounded by thorn bush fences.

Then unexpectedly, as we approached one small field, the large trail we were following suddenly split in two and passed on either side of the clearing. Not much further on, at another field, it split again, and then again, until there was no single trail at all, just a winding network of small openings between fields and around grass roofed houses perched precariously along a sharp ridge.

As we walked past the door of one hut, a toothless old woman looked up briefly from her low doorway and smiled at us. She was pounding some bright red chilli peppers with a small wooden mortar and pestle. Then she suddenly looked up again.

"Sero" Hello, I said smiling back at her. It was the only word I knew in Gamunian.

"Sero." she answered eventually. There was no road anywhere near the remote mountain village, and the old woman was clearly shocked at seeing two white people, possibly for the first time ever, outside her hut.

"Amarinya yowkalu?" Do you know Amharic? I asked.

The woman continued to stare at me, without replying.

"Zeyse?" I asked, concluding she didn't, and pointing up the ridge.

The woman nodded her head smiling again and repeated the word "Zeyse!"

"I hope a nod really means 'yes' here," said Helen, as we both smiled again at the woman and moved around the hut into another opening.

The next few huts we passed were empty, but eventually we came across a farmer weeding a tiny plot of maize. He stood up as we approached.

"Sero," Hello, I said again in Gamunian, and then in Amharic added "Amarinya yowkalu?" Do you know Amharic?

"Ow." Yes, he said without expression.

I was relieved. "Exabier erstaling. Tenystaling. Indeminalu?" Thank the good Lord. Hello. How are you?

The man looked at me, puzzled. He obviously had no interest in Amharic protocol. "Wadet tehedalachu?" Where are you both going?" he asked.

"Wada Zeyse inhedalin. Menged lick no?" We're going to Zeyse, I answered. Is this the right way?

"Ow, achir menged no, wada ya." Yes, it's only a little way. That way, he said, pointing directly up the ridge.

"Exabier erstaling," Thank you, I repeated.

Helen had already started to move on, having heard the sound of music nearby. I followed her through a thick clump of banana plants and almost immediately found myself in a narrow dark alley smelling of urine between two windowless mud plastered buildings, one of which was whitewashed and had a shiny new corrugated iron roof.

It was Zeyse.

At the end of the alley we emerged into a small irregular shaped stony clearing lined with thatched roofed mud huts, some with whitewash, some open at the front, that stepped down the sharp edge of the ridge.

Except for the music and the dirty white cotton gabi blankets that the few people in the area were wearing, it felt like it could have been somewhere in Tibet, for the small village centre seemed to hang in space. The view out between the banana plants was spectacular.

To the east we could see down into the Rift Valley, three thousand feet below. To the west was a series of giant basins that drained north into the Elgo River. And in the distance to the north, was the isthmus between Lake Chamo and Lake Abaye where a scattering of shiny tiny roofs in the hot hazy afternoon sun gave away the presence of Arba Mench.

"Okay," said Helen, standing there staring at the view. "Now what?"

"I give up!" I answered, looking around me slowly. "Maybe we can find someone who speaks Amharic where the music is."

We followed it through the door of the only iron roofed hut in the village, the one we had just walked past, and found ourselves in a

comparatively large room with several tables and chairs made of hand hewn timber. On a shelf in the back corner was a small portable radio along with several dozen bottles, including two small distinctive bottles of Coke with rusty caps. Furthest away from the radio next to the glassless front window opening out onto the village square, a group of elderly men sat chatting quietly.

Helen instantly recognized one of them as someone who had come to our hut a few weeks earlier with a high fever asking for malaria pills. The man looked up at her at the same time, and after a momentary look of surprise, smiled and came over to us.

"Tenystaling. Indeminalu?" Hello, how are you, he asked warmly, shaking both my hands and then both Helen's in his.

"Dehina, Indeminalu?" Fine, how are you, answered Helen, smiling back widely.

"Dehina, exabier erstaling. Indeminalu?" Fine thank you, How are you? he repeated, continuing on through the rest of the traditional Amharic greeting, then adding with a wave toward his table, "Isty, escometalachu." Please, come and sit down with us.

His warmth and friendliness was both flattering and a relief. We followed him over to his friends.

"Lemin, izzi, Yemetalu?" Why have you come up here? asked the old man as we sat down. "Le nante, ruke no." It's very far for you.

Most of what the old man said took us some time to decipher, but slowly we pieced together his questions and answered him as best we could. He laughed when he finally figured out that the bush around our toilet had burned down and that we had come up for some new mats for it.

He turned momentarily to the other men at the table and said something in Gamunian. They laughed too as he turned back to us. One of the other men got up and left the room. In a moment he was back with three finely woven grass mats.

"Izzi, woosed abaka. Sitota no." Here please take these, as a present, he said with a broad grin.

We both looked at him, slightly bewildered.

"Betam exabier erstaling! Gun ichillum." Thank you very much, said Helen graciously, but we couldn't. "Mikiffil infelligallen. Wago sint no?" We would like to buy them, she added. How much are they?

The old man patted Helen on the hand. "Medhanit Aykiffillyalleign, 'na izzi Ballabat negn. Bezu allegn." You didn't charge me for your pills, and anyway I'm the Ballabat here. I can get as many as I want.

Helen and I looked at the man with renewed surprise. A Ballabat was a very important person, according to Wasi. When I had told Wasi

that all the villagers in Shileh would own their house sites once they had built houses on them, he had been very surprised, for apparently few other people did.

Wasi had said that pretty much everyone in Gemu Gofa was just a tenant, allowed to use the land they lived on only in exchange for some of the food they produced. Like the lords of large old English estates, it was only the Ballabats who actually owned the land.

I felt suddenly anxious sitting with such unpretentious royalty. I marvelled to myself at the variety of personalities we had met in this remote land, from friendly Lords and impish kids to prideful bigots and intelligent paupers. They're just like us, I thought to myself, and then smiled at the revelation.

"Yinya araki tetu?" Have you ever tried our araki? asked the Ballabat.

Neither of us knew what 'araki' was. "Mindeno?" What is it? asked Helen.

The Ballabat turned toward the open window beside the table and said something to a young woman who had been standing outside with her back to us talking to several other people just out of sight around the corner of the building. She came into the room reluctantly, took one of the bottles and two tiny glasses off the back shelf next to the radio and brought them over to the old man.

"Betolo, yenay lich nesh, Konjo nesh?" Soon, this is my daughter. Isn't she beautiful? he said, looking at me.

I blushed, as did the teenager, but then politely nodded in agreement as she stared at the floor. She wore a shiny green nylon dress, but what stood out was the small plain white bra she wore outside it, just like Helen's. It was not an unusual way for a local woman to wear one as the very rare attire was worn with pride, but the woman's ample breasts bulged out heavily above and below it under her dress.

I stifled a smile, and picked up one of the full jiggers of clear liquid the old man had poured us. The Ballabat watched me with an impish grin not unlike the one Wasi had indelibly etched on my brain.

It wasn't long in coming. The alcohol exploded in my mouth almost before the smoky tasting liquid touched my lips.

"Holy hell!" I said, unintentionally slamming the empty glass down on the table.

The other men at the table laughed out loud, and then turned to Helen. She hesitated only for a moment. In one swift movement she lifted the jigger and swallowed its contents in a single gulp, then gasped as everyone around the table whooped and clapped.

From that point until late the next morning when we awoke in our own bed in Shileh with horrendous hangovers, neither Helen nor I could ever remember much of anything.

For months afterward, there were fleeting images of blaring music and crowds of happy people in my head, of singing and dancing and laughter in Zeyse's sloping square, and of stumbling in the full moonlight down the ridge with our grass mats and pack.

I even had, for a time, the disconcerting feeling that two people had actually helped us get down off the mountain, a pretty young woman wearing a bra that looked a lot like Helen's and a young man who looked a lot like Wasi.

But it was all a blur, and it only got more so as time passed.

AIR LETTER  
AÉROGRAMME



MRS MARIANNE GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE RD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

APRIL 11, 1969

DEAR MOM AND EVERYONE

GUESS AS ALWAYS, WE SHOULD HAVE WRITTEN SOONER. JUST AFTER WE GOT YOUR LAST LETTER WE WERE OFFERED A CHANCE TO GO THROUGH LANGUAGE TRAINING AGAIN. AND KNOWING THAT LANGUAGE IS OUR ONE GREATEST PROBLEM HERE, WE TOOK UP THE OFFER. WE'RE NOW IN AWASA, SIDAMO PROVINCE IN A LAKESIDE TOURIST HOTEL WITH ABOUT FIFTY NEW RURAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINEES, STUDYING AMHARIC FROM 7 AM TO 9 PM DAILY. WE'VE BEEN HERE FOR A WEEK AND EXPECT TO STAY FOR MOST OF ANOTHER BEFORE GOING BACK TO SHILEH. SO FAR THE EXTRA TRAINING HAS BEEN EXTREMELY WORTH WHILE.

WE LEFT ONE OF THE LOCAL MEN TO WATCH OVER OUR HOUSE WHILE WE WERE GONE, BUT RUMOURS ARE FILTERING BACK THAT ARBA MENCH AND THE VICINITY HAD SOME GREAT RAIN AND WIND STORMS JUST AFTER WE LEFT THAT DESTROYED A GOOD MANY HOUSES, INCLUDING BLOWING THE ROOF OFF THE GOVERNMENT OFFICES, AND WE ARE NOW WORRYING ABOUT WHETHER OUR HOUSE IS STILL OKAY, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE ROOF LEAKS A LITTLE AND THOUGH A LITTLE WATER WON'T HURT ANYTHING, A LOT COULD.

APART FROM OUR LANGUAGE PROBLEM, OUR WORK IN SHILEH SEEMS TO BE GOING OK MOSTLY,

BUT THERE HAVE BEEN SOME PRETTY DEPRESSING THINGS HAPPEN. JUST BEFORE WE LEFT OUR VILLAGE LAST WEEK, ABERRA'S WIFE (OUR NEIGHBOUR) DIED IN CHILDBIRTH. I WAS OUT WITH THE CHIEF AT THE TIME, BUT HELEN WAS AT HOME. SEVERAL OF THE VILLAGE WOMEN CAME OVER AND GOT HER WHEN IT WAS BEYOND ANY CHANCE OF HER HELPING. HIS WIFE JUST COULDN'T STOP BLEEDING. HELEN TRIED TO DO MOUTH TO MOUTH RESUSCITATION WHICH FREAKED OUT EVERYONE, BUT SHE WAS PRETTY MUCH DEAD ALREADY, AND HELEN REALLY HAD NO MEDICINES THAT COULD HAVE HELPED. IT NOW HAUNTS HER, WONDERING WHAT ELSE SHE COULD HAVE DONE.

POOR ABERRA, TOO. NOT ONLY DID HE LOOSE HIS WIFE, BUT JUST TWO WEEKS EARLIER HE HAD HIS PAINFULLY CLEARED LAND TAKEN AWAY FROM HIM BECAUSE SOMEONE MORE INFLUENTIAL WANTED IT. THERE WASN'T ANYTHING HE COULD DO. I TRIED TO HELP, BUT I JUST COULDN'T FIND OUT WHO HAD THE POWER TO DECIDE THE MATTER.

AT LEAST THE PEOPLE SEEM TO LIKE OUR ATTEMPT AT REDESIGNING THEIR HUTS. I SHOWED THEM HOW TO PROTECT THEIR HUTS FROM TERMITES BY TRIANGULATING THEM. IT MAKES THE HOUSES QUITE A BIT STRONGER. WE BUILT OUR FIRST TWO STORY HUT JUST BEFORE WE CAME OUT TO INCREASE THE FLOOR SPACE AND CUT DOWN ON THE GRASS ROOF NEEDED. IT'S THE FIRST TWO STOREY BUILDING IN THE PROVINCE.

UNFORTUNATELY, THOUGH, AT THE MOMENT FEW PEOPLE HAVE MUCH TIME TO SPEND BUILDING HOUSES FOR IT IS NOW THE PLOWING SEASON, AND ALL DAY LONG YOU CAN HEAR THE SHOUTS OF MEN DRIVING THEIR OXEN THROUGH THE JUNGLE GOUGING THE GROUND CRISSCROSS WITH METAL TIPPED DIGGERS THEY CALL PLOWS. AND THE OTHER PEOPLE WHO ALREADY HAVE THEIR CROPS IN HAVE TO SPEND THEIR DAYS ON SMALL PLATFORMS IN THE TREES KEEPING WATCH OVER THEIR CORN FOR THE BABOONS ARE CONSTANTLY SNEAKING IN THE BRUSH FENCES TO EAT IT. BUT THEIR CROPS ARE DOING PRETTY WELL DESPITE THE PROBLEMS SO FEW PEOPLE ARE SAD.

SO GOES THE NEWS FROM THIS END. IT'S WONDERFUL TO GET ALL YOUR LETTERS. LOVE AND PEACE

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 5:

### THE OLD MAN IN THE BAG:

*In which I kill a chicken and discover my power over matters of life and death.*

The haunting wail of a woman's voice broke the stillness of the starless night; "Exaaaaaaaaa beeeeeee aaaarrrrrr zellaaaaa lleeemmeee."

Inside our grass hut I couldn't see my own hand as I wiped the night's greasy sweat out of my eyes. Though it had cooled a little with the light rain, it was still black outside, overcast and humid. The musty smell of wet thatch filled the air.

Sssssaaaaa llaaaaaa lleeemmeeee sssssoooo ooooooch."

A second woman joined in unsympathetically with the first, wailing something completely different.

The two voices mingled together in cacophonic harmony for several minutes, then abruptly stopped.

In the oppressive silence that fell back into the darkness, I instinctively reached over and touched Helen, "You awake?" I whispered.

"What?" she said, startled by my unexpected probe on her bare stomach.

"I wonder who's died?" I asked.

There was a long pause. "I was wondering that too," she sighed eventually, clearly struggling with the same overwhelming sense of death the wailing always left in me. "I think, though," she added quietly, "one of the women, the second one, was Cinki."

"Could've been. It was close . . ."

"Aaahhhhhh eeeee aaaah zzzzzaaaa llaaaaa lleeemmeeee." The first voice suddenly started up again, interrupting me. Only this time a half dozen other voices joined in the disjointed chorus.

"Aaaaaa beeeee raaaaa . . ." "eeeeex aaaaa beeeee . . ."

One was clearly our neighbour.

My wife and I listened in silence, not that either of us could understand much of what the women were crying about. Every once in a while I could pick out the word 'exabier' among the bursts of emotion, which we both knew was a reference to God, but that was about it.

There was no obvious tune to any of their eerie strains, not even a common rhythm. Each woman just seemed to be making up her own

part as she went along, crying, at times almost yelling her pain like it was some macabre competition to see who could sound the most grieved.

After about ten minutes, several of the voices faltered and then dropped away. Not long afterward, two of the remaining did the same. Soon, Cinki and the woman who had started things off were the only ones still going.

"It wouldn't be Aberra's baby, would it?" cried Helen suddenly, grabbing at my still outstretched arm.

Three weeks earlier, Helen had struggled unsuccessfully to save Aberra's wife from bleeding to death after giving birth to a little baby girl. The thought sent a shudder through me, for Abebitch's death had left Helen depressed for days.

Fortunately, the baby had made it through the ordeal without too much trouble. At least it had seemed healthy enough in the beginning. Helen had given the father several large cans of powdered formula to feed it with after carefully explaining how to use it. But everyone in the village had said it was only a matter of time before the baby too, died. They'd all told her very matter of fact that no baby could survive in Shileh without a mother.

Though Helen would never have admitted the possibility, it was hard for me not to agree with them. Shileh was no health centre. Shileh was only one step up from no town at all.

"No, love, I don't think it's Aberra's baby," I reassured her over the wailing, as I gently tried to pull her against me.

"But yesterday she looked so weak and sickly," countered Helen, struggling with both her tears and my comfort. "And they still haven't given her a name."

"But you know that's not unusual for babies here," I said, feeling rather than seeing Helen's pain. "Anyway their cries don't seem anywhere near as intense as for Aberra's wife, or last month for Zenebich's kid," I continued in earnest. "Remember? Both times the wailing went on for over an hour."

I stopped so that Helen could listen to Cinki and the other woman. "See, it sounds like they're almost ready to stop," I added, trying hard not to sound callous in my assurance.

There had been three deaths in the village since our arrival; Aberra's wife and Zenebich's two year old boy during the recent rains, and an old man just after we arrived.

Not that there had been much rain this time. The first rainy season of the year, which normally started in April, was usually the big one, but so far it had only rained a few times, less than even the "little rains" of



the previous December. Nevertheless, the dampness had still closed the road and bred the usual batch of mosquitoes and malaria.

Though all three villagers had died from seemingly unrelated causes, it was really malaria that had killed them all. The other complications had just provided the coup de grace.

Consequently, for me, the wailing was now more an irritation than depressing, not just because three out of a total of only fifty people in the village had died in less than a year, but because all of their deaths could probably have been avoided.

Malaria was a treatable disease.

Helen and I, through Telehoon, had got the villagers to finish the new clinic before the end of the recent dry season, too. We had wrangled some used corrugated iron out of General Getacho for the valley's first metal roof, and with some difficulty, had also managed to get out of Shileh on the back of a truck and find several drug companies up in Addis Abeba willing to donate medicines for it.

But despite assurances before we started the project that the Government would provide someone to man the clinic part time, the health centre up in Arba Mench now didn't want to know us. They weren't willing to part with even one staff member one day a week when the Gamunian highlanders and the Gugi nomads came to our local market. Even in the dry season they said it was too difficult to get a Land Rover into the valley just to treat a handful of people.



It was almost as if the animal knew how to calculate maximum impact for it never killed more than two at one time, and never ate any of them. It just left the carcasses on the cage floor, untouched, like a hunter who kills just for the fun of it.

After each intrusion, I had tried to strengthen the cage with additional strips of bamboo. But with each death the joke among the villagers had only grown bigger.

Why shouldn't chickens be free to roam around the village, they'd all asked? How else were they supposed to find food? And why shouldn't they be able to roost inside a villager's hut at night? At least the mongoose wouldn't get them there.

Unfortunately, there was no obvious answer to the villagers' chuckles. It was like the rational for boiling our drinking water or using mosquito nets at night. With our limited language skills, it was not easy for us to explain the logic behind our actions. We both thought if we could only get our demonstration projects to work, the results would speak for themselves.

"If you want to kill the rooster," said Helen softly, "go ahead. I'll cook it tonight for dinner."

"Oh Helen, may I? Do I really mean that much to you?" I said in jest as I slid over on top of her.

"No, not that much," she said, poking and tickling me. Before I could get away from her fingers, however, there was a loud crack directly under us and we both suddenly dropped a foot.

"Well hell," I muttered under my breath. "I think one of the poles under the bed just broke." Very delicately I picked myself up off Helen, who was now bent in a 'U', like she was lying in a very saggy hammock.

Our bed was pie shaped, an elevated quarter wedge of our round hut, lined with grass mats and filled with a layer of foam rubber we had brought down from Addis on the back of a truck. Underneath was an enclosed storage space for our food, tools and firewood.



Opening up the mosquito netting enclosing us and scrambling down the ladder to the dirt floor, I groped around on the desk for a flashlight. It was hard to lose anything in a hut that was only 13 feet across, but it still took me several minutes in the dim dawn light. I finally found the light not on the desk by the short wave radio where it was supposed to be, or on the bookshelves above it, but down behind the water filter on the counter by the washbowl. It had fallen there after my last trek to the water hole the night before.

"Hey, there's a large heffalump in bed with you!" I joked after I'd climbed into the storage space with the light. I whacked the large bulge that hung down over the large metal drums of flour and sugar, but Helen didn't move.

"My husband, I'm about to be born again any minute," she said with a hint of desperation in her voice. "Would you mind pushing me out of here?"

"Yes ma'am."

I stood up and gave the protrusion overhead a heave. Helen rolled onto the still intact part of the platform by the ladder. There was a sigh of relief, and then the expected question.

"Yep, termites," I confirmed. Giant white ants scurried nervously into the holes at the broken end of the beam, trying to escape my light. "I only checked this last week too. I had no idea they could work so fast," I marvelled out loud, as I followed the beam over to the wall where a thick layer of mud coated one of the upright posts. My slingshot, unluckily hanging from a nail in line with the tunnel, was virtually entombed.

Finding a short stick of firewood, I knocked off the mud from the post and listened to the termites rustle the sticks and leaves on the mud floor as they sought new darkness.

"My theory that our stack of firewood would act as a natural sacrificial anode for the hut, is full of crap," I said, half to myself and half to Helen. "But thank God, at least my slingshot is okay. They went right over it."

I jammed the piece of firewood I was holding crosswise into the new opening under the mattress, then added several others. "There, that should hold us till sun up, anyway," I called up to Helen.

I closed the door to the storage area and climbed back into bed. Helen gratefully reached out to meet me.

"So och yellum?" Anybody home? came a frail sounding voice from the twilight outside.

"Already?" I whispered.

"Who is it?" whispered Helen.

"I can't really tell in this light", I said, peering up over the edge of the low railing that enclosed our bed and through the large cracks on either side of the door. "But it looks a lot like the old man in the bag."

"What?" asked Helen startled.

"No, just joking."

"So och yellum?" repeated the voice outside, sounding perceptibly frailer from the thirty second interval. Several forced rattily coughs followed, just to ensure the point had been made.

"Sounds like him too," I added.

"Oh Ted," scowled Helen under her breath, then after a long sigh; "Metow," she said loud enough for the man outside to hear, I'm coming.

The old man's temperature was 104. He hadn't been faking it. His gabi, the standard local attire made from a single piece of hand woven plain white cotton cloth, was soaked with sweat. He could hardly stand from his malarial fever.

Helen sat him down on one of the hand hewn school benches that stood in a circle by our front door.

"Murphy alebign," I must have a shot, he said in Amharic not much better than Helen's, pointing to his arm and wobbling back and forth on the bench as he spoke. He had obviously been to a clinic before.

We don't have any shots. We only have pills, Helen translated into Amharic.

"Murphy alebign," he repeated louder, convinced like most of those who came to our door that no cure could come without pain, and sure the louder he said it, the more likely we would understand him.

It took considerable negotiation, but eventually Helen managed to fill him full of aspirin and chloroquine phosphate. She sold him on the idea with fresh sugar laced lemon juice. With spare pills and instruction on how to take them, the old man finally hobbled off toward the village, just as an equally distressed younger couple walked up the path to the door.

Market day had started.



Though the clinic was not officially open, everyone in the valley now knew that two white people had come to live in Shileh for some strange reason. It was obvious by the way we lived that we weren't missionaries, but it didn't seem to matter. We still gave out medicines.

So we had become the side show of Shileh's weekly market, the reason to come even if it rarely had anything to offer except bananas, spinach, coffee beans, mats and an occasional egg or chicken.

This morning was not unlike other market days. The stream of people kept Helen more or less constantly occupied all morning, while I kept myself busy rebuilding our bed and weaving a few more strips of bamboo into the chicken cage.

It wasn't until after mid day, an hour after the rest of those at the market had packed up their things and gone home, that we found ourselves alone again.

"To the river?" I asked.

"Sure," said Helen. "I think even the Gugi were beginning to smell my armpits."

She was joking of course. Absolutely nothing could match the potent stench of the rancid butter that most Gugi used for both hair and body oil.

Our weekly bath after the market had become a ritual for us, a cleansing of both body and soul. Right where the Elgo river emerged from the highlands into the Rift Valley we had discovered a wonderful hidden swimming hole on one of our hikes only 20 minutes walk from our hut. Had the chief known about our discovery and our secret trips he would certainly have given us a lecture on the risks we were taking. None of the villagers bathed in the river, though sometimes closer to the village they washed their clothes in it. But Helen and I couldn't resist the

temptation once we had discovered the natural spa at the bottom of a low waterfall.

From what other volunteers in Addis Abeba had told us, we were fairly sure that bilharzias wasn't found as far south as the Shileh valley. And we were equally sure that our pool was far enough away from Lake Chamo to be safe from crocodiles. The only complication was that to get to our swimming hole we had to go part of the way through the jungle on a narrow winding animal trail, and we were not sure where the poisonous snakes were supposed to be. We hadn't seen any near the village yet, but we knew there were supposed to be



spitting cobras and black mambas somewhere out in the woods. The villagers had talked about seeing them.

"Don't forget your slingshot," said Helen, as she grabbed the soap and towels.

Before our move to Africa, Helen had never known about my morbid fascination with slingshots. Back when I was only 14, my best friend and I had once killed 22 frogs in one day with ones we'd made using giant rubber bands. Up until Shileh, however she had always thought of me as a pacifist. Then one afternoon shortly after our discovery of the swimming hole she found me huddled over the medical supplies making the weapon out of donated surgical tubing. She seemed almost glad.

On our walk to the river we saw no snakes, and our afternoon bath was deliciously refreshing, like swimming in a clear Rocky Mountain stream, except for the brown colour of the water, still foamy from the previous night's rain.

For some reason I felt uncertain that our luck would hold in both directions, so I collected some extra river stones for my slingshot when we got ready to head back. I'm usually not very good about guessing the future, but this time I was right, our luck didn't hold. It wasn't a snake that brought us disaster though, it was our own rooster.



As we came out of the jungle, still some distance from the village, I noticed our neighbour Cinki's three hens inside the fence of Helen's demonstration garden, with our own recently bought rooster in the lead.

With all the other low thorny growth surrounding the garden, at first it didn't look like anything was wrong. But as we came closer, the veil of distance faded. Helen first noticed that her corn was no longer standing vertical and her beanpoles, though still upright, had no plants on them. Then I noticed the lettuce and melon plants had been scratched into little piles, and her hybrid tomato plants had been pecked full of holes. The spices were gone altogether.

The more we both stared, the more we wished we were still swimming somewhere far away in the Colorado mountains, but it was undeniably clear. In just a few hours, four chickens had totally obliterated four months of hard labour.

Helen sucked in her breath in a muffled shriek. I just stared dumbfounded for a second, thinking of all the buckets of water that I had carried from the water hole all those evenings. Then rage welled up inside me.

"You fucking bastard," I yelled at the rooster, still pecking away at bits of tomato, oblivious to the danger it was in.

I felt around in my pocket for the largest, roundest, heaviest river stone I could find and then put it in the pouch of my slingshot. Though still 200 feet from the chickens, I lifted up my weapon to eye level, pulled it back as far as I could, and fired.

The stone arced up over the garden toward the rooster, but it flew right past, missing the bird by several inches. One of Cinki's hens

standing behind the intended target, however, wasn't so lucky. The smooth round stone struck it hard on its left leg, spinning the chicken like a top onto its back.

Acting as if nothing had happened, the unfortunate bird immediately flipped itself back upright and tried to stand up, but it toppled sideways as it discovered its left leg bent in half.

With loud squawks and a flurry of feathers, it hop-stepped out of Helen's garden and back over into the bare patch behind our neighbour's hut. Our rooster and Cinki's other two hens quickly followed it.

"Hey, nice shot," said Helen sarcastically.

"Oh God, now what have I done," I said. "Cinki will kill me."

Laying hens were like gold in the village. An egg was worth ten cents, nearly half a day's wage. And I knew from the few eggs we'd bought from Cinki, that my inevitably fatal shot had hit our neighbour's only layer.

Helen and I sat down on the bench outside our hut and stared first at Helen's devastated garden and then at our last Rhode Island Red. I knew we really had no choice.

Cinki was not at home, thankfully, when I brought the big bird over, so I tied a string to its foot and left it secured to her door. I was glad not to have to explain myself. I was sure she'd be able to figure out what had happened easily enough when she got back.

It was almost dark when the expected cry came from Cinki's hut. I was just hanging up our rooster for its execution when I heard her; first a muffled scream, like the one Helen had made when she discovered her garden in shreds, and then a series of long sobs, followed by sudden silence.

She's found our hen, I thought.

"Don't worry Cinki," I said under my breath, half to her and half to the rooster. "This bastard is about to get what it deserves." The thought of decapitating the bird with a machete while it hung upside down from the tree next to Helen's dead garden somehow seemed a particularly just reward.

Certainly it was more appropriate than simply sticking a knife up the rooster's throat and through the jugular into its brain, as we'd learned at the Ag school in Jimma was the humane way to do it.

"Mindeno?" What's this? asked Cinki, startling me just as I was raising my machete.

I turned around to see Cinki holding our fat red chicken in her arms. Her face was wet with tears. "Mindeno?" she repeated sounding a little brisk in her pain.

"Yanchi no." It's yours, I translated into very crude Amharic. I'm sorry. I broke the leg of your chicken this afternoon.

"Ounet?" Is that right! said Cinki. "Indayet?" How? she asked.

The chickens were in our garden, I explained, translating my thoughts into Amharic with some difficulty. They ate everything. So I shot at them with my slingshot.

I'm sure Cinki had never heard of a slingshot, but she must have taken my translation of 'Gadelkui' to mean I had killed it with some sort of gun because she carried straight on.

"Tarias." So what, she said. Why did you leave this at my door? She held up the red hen in front of her.

It was all I had, I said. I'm sorry Cinki, really, I added.

But why? persisted Cinki.

I killed your only laying hen. I said

"Tarias." So what? she repeated, opening up the door of our chicken cage and pushing the fat American hen back inside.

I looked at the tears streaming down her face, aware of how serious the loss of her hen would be, but puzzled by her response to my offer to replace it.

Then for some reason the haunting image of the old man flashed into my head, not the old man that had just come to our hut that morning, but the old man we had watched die six months earlier.

It had happened one afternoon not long after our arrival in Shileh. Telehoon had unexpectedly appeared at our hut door and invited Helen and me to what had sounded to us from a distance like a party going on down at the far end of the village.

Feeling honoured by the invitation and anxious to meet more of our neighbours, we eagerly followed the chief into the packed hut of an old man just in time to see some of the villagers sewing him, still alive, into a cloth bag made from his own gabi.

We had tried not to show our shock, but Telehoon quickly picked up on it. Using hand gestures and a few simple Amharic words the chief tried to reassure us that the old man was really already dead. At least he was as good as dead, even though he was still breathing.

Once someone with the "bishta" starts to breathe with a rattling sound, the chief had tried to explain there isn't anything anyone can do. However, for over an hour while the drunken village wake grew louder and louder, Helen and my attention had remained fixed on the old

man's burial sac and the death rattles that filled the little hut over the din.

Finally, there was a loud gasp from inside the bag and then silence. For a brief moment afterward there was silence in the rest of the hut too, then an audible sigh of relief, but almost immediately after that, several of the villagers broke into a shouting match, which quickly spread to everyone else in the room.

It had taken several minutes for me to figure out what the argument was about, but eventually I deduced it was over who would pay for the home brewed beer that everyone had drunk. The old man had apparently died without a cent.

I just couldn't believe the villagers' callous attitude. I checked inside the wallet I had not yet stopped carrying, and then after standing to thank the chief for inviting us to the hut, put an Ethiopian ten dollar bill on the body bag with the handful of coins that were already there. But as Helen and I walked out, the silence that followed us was like the blackness of the night after a light rain.

Now, in Cinki's tears, the villagers reaction to what I had done in my arrogant ignorance, almost made sense. How could I think I knew how much Cinki's chicken was worth to her? What right did I have to set the price of her pain? It made me think of Ruth, the old woman on St Croix, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

Stammering for something to say, I asked Cinki in broken Amharic about the crying earlier that morning.

Oh that was for Tesfay's uncle up in Walamo Sodu. He died last month, she said wiping her tears. We just found out about it yesterday.

"Na be ye tinish megib bewhala, y'Aberra leetch motowal." Oh by the way, she added as she disappeared around behind the termite mound in the direction of her hut, Aberra's baby died this afternoon.

I turned back to the rooster hanging by its foot from the tree with a rapidly growing lump in my throat.

Damn, I said to myself, how am I ever going to break the news to Helen?

The rooster picked up his head briefly to give me a one-eyed stare, and then put it down again, realizing it had no say in the matter. I didn't hesitate. In a wide arc, I swung the machete at the dangling neck and then quickly stepped back out of the thrashing splatter of blood.

AÉROGRAMME



MRS MELVIN H GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
U. S. OF AMERICA

JUNE 3, 1969

DEAR MOM,

I GUESS THE FIRST THING IS FOR ME TO APOLOGISE FOR NOT SAYING HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY. SOMEBODY WARNED ME ABOUT IT LAST MONTH. OH WELL. HAPPY BIRTHDAY FOR NEXT NOVEMBER.

WE CAN'T BLAME OUR MAIL NOW. IT SEEMS TO BE GOING THROUGH VERY WELL, OFTEN TAKING LESS THAN TWO WEEKS TO GET TO US. SPEAKING OF WHICH, DID YOU GET OUR FIRST TAPE? I REALLY THINK THESE THINGS WILL BE THE LETTERS OF THE FUTURE. THEY'RE SO EASY, AND IF YOU DON'T MIND LISTENING TO AN HOUR OF CHATTER, IN SOME WAYS MORE EXCITING BECAUSE YOU GET TO HEAR WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE BACKGROUND. THEY ARE ALSO VERY CHEAP TO MAIL.

I DON'T HAVE YOUR LETTER WITH US BUT I REMEMBER IT HAD A LOT OF QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE SLIDES. I THINK THE TAPE, IF YOU CAN BORROW A RECORDER WILL ANSWER MOST OF THEM, LIKE NO ONE HERE KNOWS MUCH ABOUT CARPENTRY OR HAS THE TOOLS TO PRACTICE IT. THOUGH A VERY FEW PEOPLE IN A TREMENDOUS TIME CONSUMING EFFORT KNOW HOW TO MAKE THINGS. FOR INSTANCE OUR FRONT DOOR AND

TABLE ARE MADE FROM PLANKS OF WOOD THAT WERE HAND HELD FROM A TREE THREE FEET IN DIAMETER. SOMEONE WITH A TOOL THAT LOOKS LIKE AN AXE TURNED SIDEWAYS, CUT DOWN (ITSELF, A RATHER AMAZING FEAT), SPLIT IT INTO WEDGES AND THEN CHISELLED IT INTO BOARDS SIX FEET LONG BY TWO AND A HALF FEET WIDE BY THREE QUARTERS OF AN INCH THICK. WE BOUGHT IT IN OUR LOCAL MARKET FOR ABOUT \$1.50 US.

ABOUT BUYING THINGS IN STORES. ADDIS IS 300 MILES AWAY FROM HERE. EXCEPT FOR AN EXTREMELY LIMITED AMOUNT OF GOODS, LIKE BATTERIES, MATCHES, SOAP, FLOUR AND SUGAR, ONCE YOU'RE 5 MILES OUTSIDE OF ADDIS, YOU JUST WON'T FIND ANOTHER STORE. ALL THE COUNTRY'S WEALTH, POWER AND BRAINS ARE IN ADDIS.

ACTUALLY THERE ARE MANY STORES OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL, BUT THEY ARE NOTHING LIKE YOU MIGHT THINK. IN ADDIS THERE ARE A SCATTERING OF BUILDINGS FOUR OR FIVE STORIES OR MORE, MOSTLY HOTELS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICES WITH SHOPS ON THE GROUND FLOOR. OUTSIDE ADDIS THERE ARE ALMOST NO BUILDINGS EVEN TWO STORIES TALL. THE FEW STORES THAT EXIST IN ARBA MENCH, FOR INSTANCE, ARE ALL ONE STORY SHOPS MADE OF STICKS PLASTERED WITH MUD, ABOUT HALF THE SIZE OF OUR LIVING ROOM, WITH ABOUT ONE TWENTIETH THE NUMBER OF THINGS YOU'D FIND IN AN OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD SHOP IN THE US AND ALWAYS WITH LOWER QUALITY GOODS THAN ANYTHING IN THE CHEAPEST STORE AT HOME.

THE SIZE OF THE TOWN OR CITY DOESN'T SEEM TO AFFECT THE SIZE OF THE STORE OR THE KINDS OF THINGS THE STORES SELL, ONLY THE NUMBER OF STORES IN THE TOWN. ARBA MENCH, FOR INSTANCE HAS PERHAPS 5 OF THESE SHOPS. IN GONDAR, A MUCH OLDER AND LARGER TOWN UP NORTH, PERHAPS 20 OR 30.

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE A YEAR HAS GONE BY SINCE SCHOOL ENDED. TIME HAS SO LITTLE MEANING HERE.

WELL, THAT'S THE NEWS FROM US.

MUCH LOVE, TED + HELEN

## Chapter 6:

### AT THE END OF THE ROAD:

*In which Helen and I visit the remote kingdom Konso  
and find nothing is as it seems*



The spring rainy season in Shileh started in early April and continued to sputter well into July. Though it closed the road through our village for nearly three months, the rain brought with it some benefits. The most significant was that it gave local farmers their first good harvest since their arrival in the valley a year before we joined them.

The villagers' attempt to get a crop out of the smaller autumn rains six months earlier had been a disaster. The stunted ears from the prolonged summer drought ended up rotting in the brief rains that finally came in early December more than two months late. As a consequence, the Amhara immigrants had lived most of their first year on nothing but the dregs of the corn and dried red chillies that they had grown cooperatively shortly after they moved into the valley and cleared their first field.

But this time the wet came at the right time. Despite considerable pillaging by the baboons, the villagers even managed to harvest a surplus, and the extra grain brought new traders to the Thursday market. For the first time since our arrival, soap, razor blades, matches, sugar and salt all appeared in little piles on the barterers' grass mats.



For a short time, it even looked like General Getacho, the police chief in Arba Mench who owned the farm in neighbouring 'Old Shileh' was going to erect a small diesel powered mill next to the market clearing to grind the new grain. His farm manager hiked over to the new town while the rains were still making travel difficult, and seemed pleased with the site shown on my plan. But for reasons which didn't become clear to me for another year, the idea was shelved in late July, much to the disappointment of the villagers.

In addition to the new traders, however, as the road dried up, new vehicles also started to appear. The four-wheel drive Mercedes truck that brought in supplies once a month to the police post in Gidole when the

roads were passable, and also hauled in goods for the shops there, was joined for the first time by a white four wheel drive Toyota "taxi". Every couple of weeks the six seater made the four-hour trip via Shileh with up to 12 people on board, returning the next day with an equal number of human sardines. It was so successful that not long after it began, a second taxi, a Land Rover, started to drive the route too. By midsummer, there was a vehicle going through Shileh virtually every two or three days.

So it was not surprising that neither Helen nor I paid much attention when a four wheel drive Toyota pickup pulled up in the open space in front of our hut late one hot Thursday afternoon in early August. We had just got back from our customary weekly swim after the market and were debating whether we felt like fried dried fish and fresh spinach for dinner or some pancakes with crystallized maple syrup for a change. The latter sounded better, but neither of us could talk the other into sifting the worms out of the flour.

We assumed the driver was stopping for a glass of tella at our neighbour Cinki's hut, since she and several other villagers had found a new trade selling their home brewed beer to passing travellers. But moments later a very large round, well dressed Ethiopian appeared at our door with a cowboy hat in his hands, looking very apologetic and somewhat anxious.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he said in flawless English with an American accent. "I am Afework. I'm your neighbour."

Both Helen and I instantly hopped up out of our seats at the table in the centre of the room. I was nearest the door and stuck out my hand. "Hello," I said to the large man who looked not much older than us. "Welcome to the Shileh Valley. Are you going to move here to live?" I asked, puzzled by his words.

"I already do live here. I have a farm just south of Lake Chamo, about ten miles down the road."

"Really! Come in. We're just about to have dinner. Would you like some?" I waved the big man over to my seat and sat down on the chopping block coffee table in front of the woven leather couch. Helen ducked into the storage area under our bed platform for another plate. "We had no idea," I went on. "How long have you been here?"

Afework's apologetic expression increased. "For about as long as you have," he said hesitantly. "I'm very sorry I haven't come to visit you sooner, but I have been really busy trying to clear land and grow some corn and cotton," he added very seriously. "Do you know anything about cotton?"

I paused for a second trying to think of something, but the subject drew a total blank. "It's white and fluffy," I said hoping to brighten the frown on Afework's face, but added quickly when I saw no hint of amusement, "Helen, you grew up in the South. What do you know about cotton?"

Helen backed out of the storage area under the bed with one of the empty can lids that often doubled as a spare plate, not looking at Afework. "I'm from east Tennessee, honey," she corrected in a heavy southern drawl before she could see the expression on his face. "An' we din' raise no cot'n! Jes' a few peigs an' d'uks."

Afework wasn't amused. "It rained last night," he said, shaking his head and almost breaking into tears. "It's not supposed to rain now. It's ready to harvest. I think the rain has ruined everything!"

"I'm sorry," said Helen quickly. "What rain? We didn't get any here last night."

"We didn't get any in Konso either," he said. "But when I got back to my fields a few hours ago everything was soaking wet. I think it's going to rot the cotton just like it ruined my corn last year."

I reached for a book on the shelves behind the desk, but a quick thumb through our vegetable seed manual confirmed we had no information at all on growing cotton. I turned to Helen again. "The South isn't all that dry, is it? Yet they grow a lot of cotton, don't they?"

Helen nodded. "I don't think the farmers are very happy if it rains when it's time to pick," she said thinking hard, "but there is a lot of cotton in the South and we do get rain in the summer sometimes, if that's what you mean."

Afework looked up with a slight hint of relief on his face.

"And it's been pretty hot today," I added. "So perhaps what ever got wet will dry out quickly."

Afework glanced outside at the cloudless late afternoon sky with a hopeful smile on his round face. "I sure hope . . ." he started to say, but was interrupted by a long penetrating shriek outside that sounded like someone being murdered.

Helen, Afework and I jumped up and ran out into the road.

"Ibab, merzegna ibab!" A snake, a poisonous snake, Cinki, our neighbour repeatedly screamed at the top of her lungs from inside her hut next door. I turned back toward our hut for my slingshot. Afework headed for his pickup.

Suddenly Cinki came charging out through her front door wildly swinging a large piece of firewood as she came. Once outside, she turned back and started whacking the top of the wall posts just above the door with all her might. "Yet abat? Yet abat?" Where is your father? Where is your father? she yelled over and over. It was the Amharic equivalent of 'You bastard! You bastard!'

"The anti-venom kit!" Helen exclaimed suddenly as she passed me coming out of our hut with my slingshot.

It was a large spitting cobra nearly ten feet long wrapped tightly around the top of the wall posts, enjoying the cool shade just under Cinki's thatched roof. While the usually quiet woman continued to scream and whack away at it, I angled in close to get a clear shot at its head. Suddenly there was a deafening explosion just behind my ear and the snake's head disappeared from sight along with a chunk of the wall post behind it.

I turned around, my whole head ringing, to see Afework holding a shiny silver pistol in his hand with a large smile on his face.

"I got it!" he said, sounding very surprised.

Helen ran up to Cinki with her small box of medicines as the woman pulled the headless but still wriggling snake out of the wall. "Indeminalesh?" Are you okay? she asked.

"Dehina. . . exhabier erstaling." I'm fine . . . thank the good Lord, she said, pausing to check her arm where it was still wet from the cobra's spit. "Bur agenyalo becha" I was just getting a glass, she said, demonstrating how her arm had been raised up over her head when the snake spat. Cobras spit at their victim's eyes to blind them before striking, but this one hadn't had time to complete its attack before Cinki had swung at it with the glass in her hand.

Helen looked at her friend's arm just to be sure, but there were no holes. She wiped off the saliva with alcohol. "Idileгна nesh!" You're lucky, she said finally, giving her a hug.

"Isty gebu, tetu!" Please come in. Have something to drink, said Cinki, embarrassed and anxious to say thanks. She flicked a self-conscious smile at Afework, which he returned.

We ducked into the hut and sat down in a row on a low bench that curved along the inside front wall by the door. The tall, attractive woman took down three sawdust covered glasses from the shelf above our heads, wiped them out and sat them carefully on the cow skin in front of us. Then she dipped a fourth glass into one of the large black clay pots by the small bed of skins at the back of the hut and poured each of our cups to overflowing.

Helen and I had drunk her tella many times. Like all tella, it smelled like warm urine. I knew that once I started drinking, the smell wouldn't matter, but it was still difficult to take the first sip. Not only was the smell foul, but the hallmark of good tella was the amount of sticks, leaves and other less recognizable debris that floated to the surface when it was poured. Though most of the "extras" were blown off before actually drinking the brew, the more there were at the start, the better the tella was supposed to be.

"Do you know what this woman does for a living?" asked Afework under his breath when Cinki disappeared into the lean-to off the side of her hut for some grain to roast for us.

"I don't care if she's a prostitute," said Helen, casually. "She's a very smart woman; my best student, actually, and she's also a very good friend."

Afework looked at Helen a little surprised, but didn't question her further. "Well, she certainly makes good tella, anyway," he said after a moment, and took another large gulp of the brew.

We both nodded, blew hard and followed Afework's lead.

Cinki came back into the room and Afework said something to her which made her smile and blush slightly, but Afework didn't offer us a translation.

"That's quite a gun you have," said Helen. "Sometimes I wish we had one. Or at least I wish that someone in the village did."

Afework took out the pistol from his pocket, checked that the catch was on and handed it to her. "That's only the second time I've ever hit anything with it," he said proudly. "I got it to kill the baboons down on my farm."

"Really?" I said, feeling a little nervous about Helen holding both it and her full glass of tella. "The baboons are a problem here too," I went on. "But volunteers aren't allowed to have guns."

Cinki was standing beside Helen staring at the shiny object with wide eyes. Helen looked up at her and then at Afework, and suddenly handed the pistol to the woman. It caught Cinki by surprise, and she quickly passed it back to the large Ethiopian.

Afework smiled at her and then turned to me. "Well, it wouldn't do you any good anyway," he sighed. "It doesn't work."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because baboons are too smart. Before I planted my cotton I tried to grow corn on my farm. When the rains came late last year, that finished me, but it was the baboons that really did most of the damage. They were everywhere. I shot one right after I got this gun, but the rest never gave me a chance. They just ran into the jungle as soon as they saw me coming."

"I let one of my workers keep my gun for a while too, but he had the same problem. They quickly learned who had the gun.

". . . . Actually," he added after a pause, "You don't want a mill here in Shileh do you?"

"A mill?"

"You know, for grinding grain?"

"Are you serious?" I asked. "The villagers would love one. It's now all done by hand."

"I would have to find someone to run things, but it seems silly for me to leave all the equipment packed up in my barn now that I've given up the idea of growing corn."

Afework turned to Cinki and asked her several questions in Gamunian. The last one left her with a large smile across her face. She got up and poured the large man another drink.

"The mill is in pieces?" I asked, putting down my glass when Afework turned back to us.

"I'm sure you could put it together," Afework smiled. "Why don't you come have a look at it. You could see my cotton too."

I was already feeling the effects of the tella but it sounded exciting and I could see Helen's interest rising. "That would be great," I said, after getting her confirming glance, "We've never been down the road past here."

"Not even to the lake?" asked Afework with surprise.

"No, our village is as far south as we've ever been," I said.

Afework stopped to think. "I've got to go to Arba Mench tomorrow, but how would you both like to spend the weekend at my family's home in Konso?"

"Sure," I said, not knowing exactly where Konso was, but excited about the prospect of a new adventure.

"I'll come pick you both up Saturday morning."

After that, under the warm influence of the tella, the conversation drifted into stories about Afework's family. His father had been a resistance fighter during World War II and was now the Ballabat of Konso. He had an older brother who was a mechanic for the Ethiopian Airlines, and he had spent most of his youth in the American School in Addis, only finishing his degree at Haile Selasie University two years earlier.

His dream since leaving home at the age of twelve had always been to come back and start a farm down in the valley. It was an extremely unusual dream for an educated Ethiopian, but he felt he owed it to the local people. Then ten months ago, only a month before our own arrival in the valley, he had finally got up the courage to start.

So far, however, all his efforts had ended in disaster. Not only had there been trouble from unexpected rain, crop rot, bugs, disease and giant herds of baboons, but he had had extreme difficulty trying to get anyone to work on his farm, and both his tractor and his pickup had broken down several times. His only luck to date had been that his two vehicles had not yet broken down together, for more than once he had used one to rescue the other.

Although Cinki didn't understand anything that Afework was telling us, after feeding us a delicious dinner, she pulled up a three

legged stool by the centre post and listened to us talking. Every once in a while Afework would say something to her and she'd smile back, but mostly she just patiently sat with us keeping our glasses full.

It was late in the evening when Helen and I finally left Cinki's hut feeling quite pleased with life and our new-found friend. We never heard Afework leave the village that night, nor did we hear him return two days later, though he must have, for his pickup was gone Friday. As we climbed down the ladder from our bed for our usual breakfast of sliced bananas with sugar and reconstituted milk early Saturday morning, there was a knock on our door.

"Teddy? Helen? You two ready to go?" came a cheery voice through the door.

"Just about. You got here early," I said, as I let the big man in. "Want a banana?"

"No thanks. I've eaten already." said Afework with a large grin.

The road beyond Shileh was mostly just like the road before Shileh; potholes, boggy patches, straight dusty stretches and numerous detours around fallen trees and other obstacles. But what set it apart was about 5 miles south of Shileh, the road literally went under Lake Chamo for a quarter of a mile.

Lake Chamo was a salt lake. In places it filled the Rift Valley wall to wall, but it had no outlet, and its water level rose and fell with the dryness of the decade. The last few had been particularly wet and the lake level had risen well above what the Italians, who first cleared the track during World War II, had ever imagined.

It was now so high that anyone using the road could expect to get wet up to their waists in places, unless they were in a large truck or stood up while driving. The two "taxis" had attached vertical exhaust pipes like the one Durk had, to keep from flooding their engines, but Afework had found a simpler solution.

"How does taking off your fan belt, keep the lake water from shorting out your spark plugs?" I asked, as we came up to where the road disappeared underwater in a large marshy area overgrown with something that reminded me of cat'n nine tails. About 500 feet off to the right was a low cliff that marked the edge of the lake. "This isn't a diesel, is it?"

"No, but the water isn't that deep," said Afework, enjoying my nervousness. "As long as the lake remains calm and nothing splashes water directly onto the engine, the lake doesn't get high enough inside

the engine to short anything out. You may want to get in the back though," he added. "You'll stay dryer through the low bits back there."

How Afework even knew where the road went was a mystery, for in places there were large areas of open water between tufts of grass. Eventually, however, he turned toward flat land past the steep shoreline and gradually drove back onto dry land.

"Did you see the crocodiles?" asked Afework after he had replaced the fan belt and Helen and I had climbed back inside the cab with him.

"No. Where were they?" asked Helen.

"Sometimes right beside us," said Afework laughing. "You really didn't see them? Their eyes? Two round bumps sitting together in the water like large bubbles?"

We both shook our heads.

"You'll have to look more carefully when we come back. Somebody was killed right here just last month by one."

"Really?" asked Helen, shivering involuntarily.

"He was fishing; standing on one of those mounds of grass over there," said Afework, pointing with his left hand to an open spot of water on the edge of the lake, "He must have lost his balance, or a perch pulled him in. My workers say he didn't even have time to stand up."

Just down the road, the route suddenly turned westward and began to wind its way up into the low hills on the side of the valley. At that point Afework pulled off the rutted road we had been following and continued south up the flat valley floor following a faint track through the tussock grass and thorn trees.

In a few minutes we came to a small corrugated iron roofed shed with a large clearing behind it full of scrawny plants that looked not much different from the thorny landscape we'd just come through. They were covered with bits of white that looked to me like entangled rubbish blown from a nearby dump. Next to the shed was a large new tractor. Afework climbed up on it and tried to start it up. It turned over several times but wouldn't catch.

"I'm still having trouble with this too. I guess I can't drive you down to my other field."

"You have another field?" Helen asked. Just what we could see was impressive enough, here in the middle of nowhere.



"Yes," said Afework, stepping back off the tractor with a proud smile. "This one's about two acres, but my other field down through the woods is more than twice as big. It's not yet ready to harvest though. It's still at least a week or two away."

We walked over to the closest field and looked at all the bits of fluff. It was dry, and most of it was pure white, ready for picking.

"Darn it. This is what I was afraid might happen," Afework said very gloomily, holding up a ball of cotton that had yellowed slightly, "See, some of

it has turned rotten."

Helen took a look. "I don't know, it may just be a bit discoloured rather than rotten."

Afework didn't argue but was clearly not happy. "Come on, I'll show you the mill."

We didn't stay long. Afework was worried about the time. It was almost a three hour drive to Konso from his farm, and he wanted to be able to show us around before dark. So we drove back onto the main road and bounced slowly up through the foothills to Gidole, a town built in the cool highlands high up the western side of the Rift Valley.

Though perched less precariously than Zeyse, the town in the mountains immediately west of Shileh, it was still very picturesque, for it too looked down on Lake Chamo in the distance. It was much bigger, however, with wide dirt streets lined with eucalyptus trees, and many rectangular houses with corrugated iron roofs. It also had a school and a half dozen shops. Despite being substantially more isolated than Arba Mench, it seemed somehow more civilized and inviting.



Gidole was the end of the line for most vehicles even during the dry season, and the road south out of town was the reason why. It was more like a wide animal trail than anything else. It took nearly an hour in low range four wheel drive for Afework to work his way back down off the side of the Rift Valley again.

"What lake is that?" I asked, when we came around the base of a hill into a wide valley and saw water in the distance. "It looks almost like Lake Chamo."

"It is," said Afework with a sigh. "That is Lake Chamo. You can actually see the clearing of my farm," he added, pointing to a light spot three quarters of the way between us and the water in the distance.

"So how come you don't just drive straight up the valley floor instead of making such a rugged detour through Gidole?" I asked.

"We used to when I was little. But there are several small gullies between there and here where the old road is now washed away. I could fix it easily enough but the people of Gidole don't want the road to bypass them, so I haven't tried."

An hour and a half later the white Toyota pickup pulled into a sloping stony clearing lined along one edge by five or six whitewashed huts with rusty iron roofs.

To the north in the far distance behind us, Lake Chamo was still visible, but the view in other directions was limited by a hill which formed the backdrop to the white huts, and a long low pile of stones and stunted old trees beside it.

"This is where I live," announced Afework, "at the end of the road. This is the kingdom of Konso."

The stony mound commanded an imposing position overlooking the head of the long flat valley we had just come up, and my immediate response on getting out of the pickup was to try to scramble up it to get a better view.

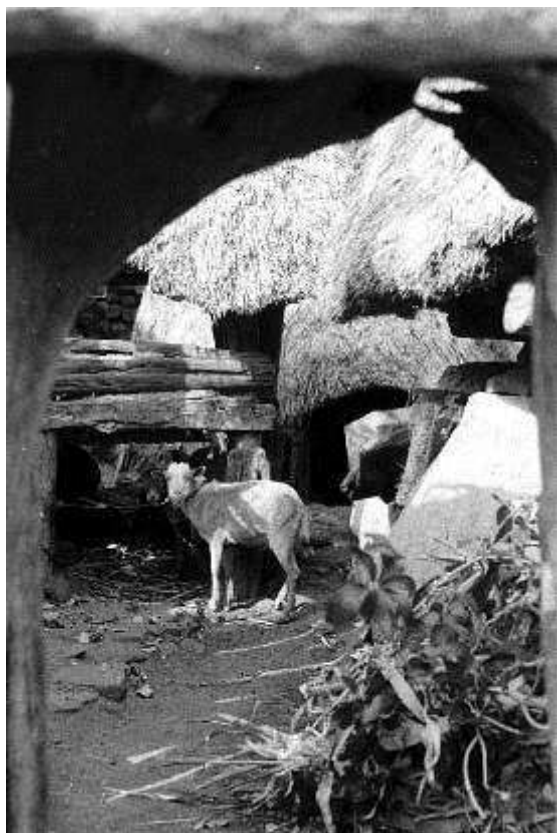
"Not that way, Teddy," said Afework before I had a chance to climb up the wall like pile of stones. "Over to the right," he said grinning.

There was a small depression in the rocks where Afework was pointing. I went over to it not sure what to expect, for the mound already had an air of mystery about it, but instead of finding a way up the stones, I found myself facing an opening that lead straight ahead through them.



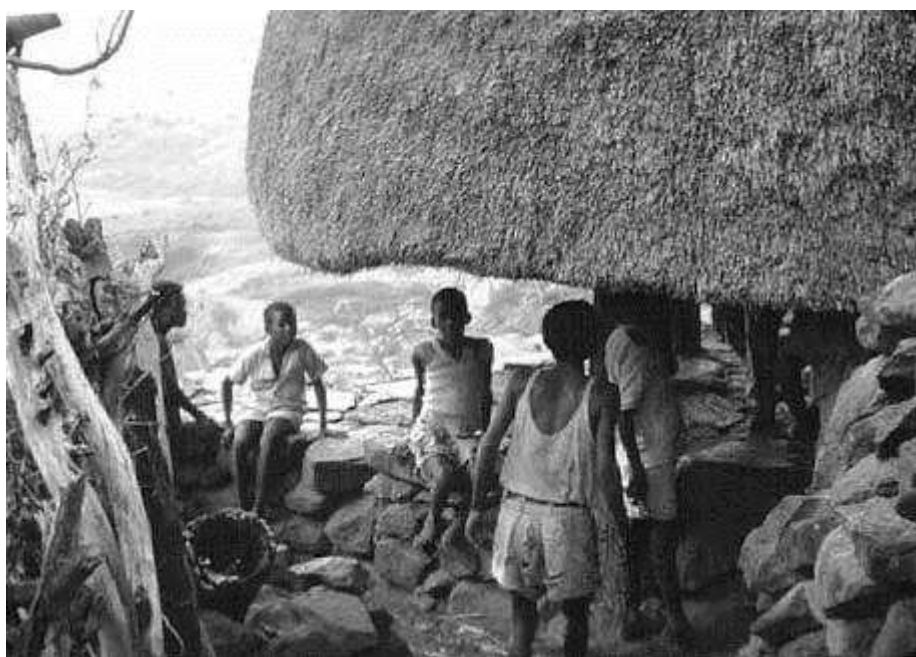
The pile of stones wasn't really a low hillock at all, but an intricate maze of stone walls, wooden stockades and thatched roof huts with spindly ancient trees entwined all through it. Heavily worn stones led through small wooden arched doorways and around tiny compounds. Goats, chickens, mules, babies, old people and kids peered out at the three of us through hidden openings.

Afework smiled and nodded to each person as we passed, and hesitantly, they returned his smiles.



Helen and I, however, felt like naked voyeurs in a church. There were no giant tightly fitting boulders or corbelled arches anywhere, but the village had an air of intense sophistication about it. Its hand carved wooden doors, woven bamboo baskets and meticulously thatched roofs capped with clay pots made it feel ancient and timeless.

Under one large particularly beautiful hut that stood on fat poles about four feet off the ground, a handful of curious young teenage boys waved timidly at Afework, and then



quickly disappeared up a notched pole into a dark hole in the raised hand hewn wooden floor.

"That's the young men's hut," said Afework, in explanation. "They live there after they leave home, until they get married. . . And sometimes they come back here if their wives kick them out," he added with a chuckle.

"It's beautiful," I marvelled, wishing I could take a look inside, but now very embarrassed by the impact of our presence.

An old woman with her head tightly bound except for a single waist length braid of hair, and wearing nothing but a hand woven

skirt, met my eyes and then disappeared under another raised hut not far away.

"And that's the hut for the village women. . . ." said Afework, following my gaze. ". . . so they can escape their husbands," he laughed. "They like communal living here."

Helen nodded. I blushed.

"What are those?" asked Helen, pointing down an alley past the raised hut to a small, low, three sided thatched shelter that looked a little like a large Christmas crèche, for it had a half dozen statues inside it.

Afework led us closer. "That," he said, "is the grave of a man who was the Ballabat here a long time ago." Under the thatched shelter stood a collection of hand carved wooden statues plastered in red and white mud. The three main statues were each about four feet high, one of a naked man, and two of his naked wives, according to Afework. The most striking feature of all three was the careful attention the carver had paid to their giant, larger than life genitalia.





This time it wasn't just me that blushed, although Helen tried to hide it.

Afework pretended not to notice. He stood there for several minutes explaining that the other statues in the crèche were of animals the man had killed, and the rocks in front represented the land he had owned. He then went on to show us other similar rude statues of long dead local celebrities in various stages of decay. Finally, to our relief, we followed Afework out through a narrow opening in one of the stone walls and found ourselves back in the stony clearing not far from the Toyota.

"Konso has a history as old as Gondar and Axum," said Afework as we walked toward a large house sitting by itself near where the road entered the clearing. "Our old people say that long ago this place was an important centre of a kingdom that once spread across most of central Africa," Afework explained, "although I've never read anything about it in school."

The three of us stepped up onto a raised concrete porch under a rusting veranda. "This is my home," said Afework as he pushed open the borer-riddled front door. "My parents moved in here after my dad helped the Kenyans and the British chase the Italians out of this area during World War II."

"This house was built by the Italians?"

"I think so," he said. "Well, by their Ethiopian slaves," he qualified himself, as he led us into one of two large rooms at the front. The first room, sparsely furnished, had a high sagging ceiling made of soft board, and whitewashed walls of mud covered eucalyptus logs in the traditional Ethiopia style of construction.

"Please sit down and I'll let my parents know you're here," he said as he waved us over to the only two seats in the room and then disappeared.

Afework's parents were surprised, to say the least, at seeing us, but they were instantly warm and friendly. They led us across to the other front room which was more fully furnished with couches and chairs and photographs of themselves and their children. Although the two older Ethiopians knew no English, they knew a lot about the rest of the world. They had travelled extensively around Ethiopia and East Africa when they were younger. From the war years, they had learned Italian, and through Afework's brother, had recently even been to Italy.

Afework's mom, Wesero Tadessa, eventually excused herself to go organize dinner, and the rest of us wandered outside for a guided tour around the Ballabat's nearby fields. By the time we returned just at dusk, Wesero Tadessa had rearranged the chairs in the second front room around a single brightly coloured woven basket, shaped like a giant waterless birdbath. Nearly covering the basket was a large stack of injerras, traditional thin, soft, Ethiopian sour bread, each the diameter of a small car wheel.

Afework lit two oil lamps on the wall, and brought in a pitcher of water and a towel to wash everyone's hands with. Then we all sat down in a small circle facing the table, while Afework's mother ladled various stews onto the bread. It wasn't a surprise that we were expected to eat with our fingers from a common plate, for Helen and I always ate that way with the villagers in Shileh. But the amount and variety of food put before us was astonishing. In addition to the usual hot peppered siga wat or beef stew, there was also hot chicken stew, hot lamb stew, hot fish stew, unspiced vegetable stew; gomen, a kind of spinach; milk curds, raw minced beef, and several other dishes that we had never seen before. To drink, there was smelly tella, tej, a sweet wine made from honey and even a tiny bottle of Coke.

We hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and everything smelled absolutely delicious so it didn't take much persuasion for us to begin. But Helen hadn't taken more than a few bites when she suddenly stood up shaking violently.

"Something's wrong," she said in a voice that was barely audible.

Everyone looked up at her. Helen was as white as ivory and sweating profusely. She clutched her throat, struggling for breath.

"What is it, love?" I cried, jumping up in horror. I grabbed Helen just as she fainted and carried her over to the small couch at the end of the room. The others instantly gathered around her.

In front of our eyes giant round red welts suddenly appeared all over Helen's body, covering even her hands and face.

"What's wrong with her?" asked Afework looking very worried.

"I don't know," I answered, trying hard to keep calm. "I've never really seen anything like this before," I said in quiet panic.

"Helen?" I said loudly, trying to wake her up. "Did something bite you? Do you know what's wrong?"

She opened her eyes and shook her head. I quickly looked for marks on her arms and legs, but apart from the giant welts, couldn't find anything that looked like a snake or spider bite. I felt slightly relieved. I hadn't thought to bring our anti-venom serum with us and if it had been something deadly, the cure was now too far away to be of any use.

"There isn't a doctor here, is there?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No, but there is a dresser in Gidole," said Afework. A dresser was the Ethiopian equivalent of a nurse.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked.

Afework turned to his parents and talked with them for several minutes. Eventually he turned back to me. "They don't know what it is either. It came on fast like malaria but they are worried it might be typhus. They think I should take you out to Arba Mench tonight."

"Would you mind?" I said. "At least to Gidole? I hate to ask you, particularly now, in the dark, but this really worries me."

Afework put his arm around me. "I don't mind," he said.

I looked up thankfully at the big man. "Would you please apologize to your parents for us and thank them for offering us such a wonderful dinner. I'm really sorry we couldn't finish it with them."

In less than two hours we were at the house of the dresser. By then Helen's breathing had improved, but she was still covered with large red welts from head to toe, dizzy and sweating profusely into the blankets that Afework's parents had wrapped her in. The dresser, however, had no idea what was wrong with her either.

He was sceptical that it was malaria or typhus, but he also couldn't find any sign of bite marks. He took some blood samples, despite the fact

that it would take several days incubation to tell him anything, and then recommended that we keep going to Arba Mench. As we thanked him and waved good bye, he gave me a packet of aspirin and suggested that I continue giving Helen as much liquid as possible to make up for the fluids she was rapidly losing.

The two of us bundled Helen back into her blankets and took off down the winding mountain road ignoring the slight squeal that had started in the right front wheel just before we drove into Gidole.

Half way down into the valley, however, the squeal suddenly grew much louder accompanied by the strong smell of overheated steel and grease. Afework turned to me in dismay. "That's a broken wheel bearing!" he said in frustration. He pulled the Toyota up diagonally across the rutted road so that it was relatively level on the hill, and got out.

"Ouch!" he said, burning his finger on the hot hub. "Would you hand me the tool box behind the seat, Teddy?"

I leaned over and pulled out a broken wooden box crammed with wrenches and screw drivers, then handed it to him. Though the stars were out, there was a strong wind across the exposed hillside and it made me shiver at our predicament.

We were in the middle of nowhere with my wife seriously sick and with absolutely no hope of finding help where we were. I wanted to cry, but Afework's determined look forced me to put away my thoughts.

I pulled out the jack and a large plank from the back and climbed down beside my new friend. In a few moments, we had the wheel off and the roller bearings exposed. Working only under the lights of his pickup, Afework pulled out the steel ring holding the bearings in place, removed several bits of crushed metal, covered the remains of the ring in grease and then slid it back onto the axle. The Toyota was moving again in less than thirty minutes.

I was incredibly relieved. I was also amazed. "I didn't know a car wheel could turn without all its bearings. Where did you learn how to do that?" I asked.

"Trial and error, Teddy," said Afework with a brief smile. "It seems to work as long as the remaining bearings still have something smooth to roll against," he continued, still looking concerned about something. "How's she doing?" he asked.

Helen opened her eyes and tried to smile. "I'm okay," she said, giving a slight shiver as she leaned against me. "For a wet blanket."

I smiled, but Afework didn't.

"That's good," said Afework, though the tense expression on his face didn't lessen. "We have another problem, though," he continued. "The wind has come up since we went through the lake this morning. If we try to go through now and get stuck, I don't know how we're going to get out since my tractor is out of action."

I looked at Helen and then Afework with renewed fear. For the next half hour no one said anything as the lights of the pickup picked out thorn trees waving at us, first on one side of the road and then on the other, like surreal images in a horror movie warning us of impending doom. Then abruptly, the truck lights shone out into the blackness of the lake. Small whitecaps glistened as we approached the edge of the water.

"Well I guess we won't see any crocodiles," said Afework after staring at the movement of the water for a moment. He got out and lifted the hood to take off the fan belt. Helen and I climbed into the back of the pickup without saying anything, and then we plunged into the lake.

The first part was across open water. There was no way to tell where the road went except by the shadowy opening between the reeds 200 feet away. The driver aimed for it, but half way across the front end of the truck dropped into a shallow hole dipping the headlights briefly into the waves. Afework raced the engine and the Toyota bounced back level, its engine coughing.

The car dropped into another depression just as we reached the opening in the reeds, only this time the engine almost stalled completely before the truck popped up again. Afework stopped with the lake water now nearly to his waist and raced the engine to dry the spark plugs.

As he did, I climbed down off the side of the truck into the reeds. "I'll check out where the holes are," I yelled over the whine of the engine. "Then you can follow me."

Afework stared out his window in horror. "Get back inside! There are crocodiles around here!"

"What? I thought you said we wouldn't see any now?"

"No, but they can still see us!"

With the clutch out, the driver shoved his foot to the floor. The truck shook as the engine roared. There were several startled splashes in the blackness nearby. I lunged for the front hood and scrambled onto it, thankful for Afework's quick thinking. Helen jumped up still wrapped in her blankets, and as I came over the top of the cab, she grabbed me in a relieved hug.

"You're acting a bit crazy!" she said quietly. "I'm not that sick, honest!"

With a glance back at us, Afework carefully let in the clutch and the Toyota moved forward again, slowly. Thankfully, there were no more surprises. We rounded the headland and turned back toward shore. A quarter of an hour after driving into the water the reeds gave way to dry land.

Afework climbed out of the cab and put the fan belt back on, sweat pouring from his face despite the strong cool wind coming across the lake. The two of us in the back climbed down and gave him a long hug. For the first time, Afework looked almost embarrassed.

"Boy Teddy, there aren't many people who have walked in Lake Chamo and lived to talk about it!"

I smiled sheepishly.

Helen suddenly dropped the blankets around her and headed toward a large tree just off the road. "I need to pee," she said in a whisper as she walked into the blackness.

Afework and I stared after her for a moment, and then turned away when we realized what she had said.

"Do you think she looks a little better?" asked Afework, as we both climbed back inside the cab.

I nodded, "I think so. She's not sweating as much, and her face doesn't look quite so swollen as it did."

"That's what I was thinking."

Helen came back a moment later, smiling. "I think my bumps are going away," she announced. "And I don't feel dizzy any more. I think I'm getting better."

By the time we reached Shileh, Helen's spots were gone, her sweating had stopped and she said she felt just fine, even if a little weak. After some discussion she convinced us that she didn't need to go on to Arba Mench, at least right then, since it was already almost midnight, and that a good sleep in her own bed would probably do more than anything the day clinic in the provincial capital might do.

Afework held out longer than I did, but eventually he agreed, saying he would stay until morning never the less, and then walked off in the dark in the direction of Cinki's hut.

I gave Helen a hug. "God," I said. "That's two scares for you. I don't think I can live through another one like that."

Helen returned my hug and then climbed up the ladder and under the mosquito netting.

Afework went back to Konso the next morning as soon as he found out that Helen was really better, and we didn't see him again until he

showed up a week later with the mill equipment in the back of his white Toyota.

"I've got your test results from the dresser in Gidole," he said as he stepped out of his pickup in front of Helen's women's class the following Monday morning. He had a large smile on his face.

"Am I going to live?" asked Helen.

"The dresser still doesn't know," he chuckled. "The tests say it's not typhus, at least. He seems to think now it must have been an allergic reaction to something you ate."

Helen looked surprised. "Really? I hardly ate anything," she laughed. "Actually, I feel like I was really gypped not getting to eat all that food! I hope your parents weren't too angry."

"No, not at all. They're just glad you're okay," smiled Afework again.

So what makes you so happy?" asked Helen.

"My cotton is okay too," he beamed. "I've just finished picking it, and only a small part of it turned yellow in the end. I gave that to my workers and now everybody wants to work for me. As soon as I unload this mill, I'm on my way to Addis for a decent size truck to haul it all out.

I overheard the conversation from my desk and walked outside, excited but curious. "I thought you were going to wait until you found someone to run the mill before you brought that up here?" I asked.

"But I have," said Afework, looking over at Cinki who was sitting on the circle of benches with the other women.

Cinki was already looking back at him. They both smiled at each other.

8 752 C 0047 N 17

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MR + MRS M. H. GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

AUGUST 29, 1969

HELLO STRANGERS,

YESTERDAY WAS OUR SECOND WEDDING ANNIVERSARY. IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE LIFE AND LOVE. HERE TIME, PLACES, FADE, GROW, CHANGE SO QUICKLY AND YET DON'T CHANGE AT ALL. IT IS SO GOOD TO HAVE HELEN WITH ME. I WOULD HAVE GONE INSANE HERE MONTHS AGO WITHOUT HER. (OR HAVE I ALREADY? . . . I CAN'T TELL)

IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I'VE WRITTEN YOU . . . SINCE THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER, I THINK WE'RE NOT LOST HERE, THOUGH OUR THOUGHTS WANDER IN AND OUT OF CONFUSION CONSTANTLY.

YOU WERE WONDERING WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING LATELY, AND AS WE HAVE BEEN TOO, THIS LETTER CAN'T GO VERY FAR IN CLEARING UP YOUR QUESTIONS. BUT WE SHOULD BE GOING TO AIRBA MENCH SOON TO GET SOME POISON TO KILL THE BABOONS AROUND HERE, SO I THOUGHT I'D BETTER GET SOMETHING ON PAPER SO I CAN MAIL IT WHEN WE GO OUT.

IT IS BECOMING A REAL STRUGGLE TRYING TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO EACH DAY. IF I WASN'T TRYING TO DODGE THE DRAFT, WE'D HAVE BEEN ON THE ROAD HOME MONTHS AGO; HOME MEANING BACK TO A LANGUAGE AND A CULTURE AND AN ATTITUDE I GENERALLY UNDERSTAND, EVEN THOUGH PERHAPS NOT APPROVINGLY.

YOUR LETTER AND MERRITT'S CERTAINLY HAVE

THEIR GOOD POINTS, BUT ABOUT STAYING HERE, THERE IS NO POSSIBLE ARGUMENT SHORT OF DEATH THAT COULD MAKE US STAY A THIRD YEAR, EVEN IF IT WOULD ALLOW ME TO GET PAST MY 26TH BIRTHDAY AND BE FREE OF THE DRAFT.

WE'RE SUPPORTING A CAUSE WE CAN'T HOPE TO BELIEVE IN. LIKE NEGROES PAYING DUES TO THE KKK, THE GOVERNMENT IS CROOKED AND A FEW CITIZENS FROM THE CHOSEN CLASS (THE AMHARAS) THOUGH BEGGARS IN POSSESSIONS AND IN MIND, DOMINATE, ENSLAVE, STEAL FROM ALL THE OTHERS. BEGGING IS A SHREWD PROFESSION PRACTISED BY ALL PEOPLE ON ANY OTHER SUSCEPTIBLE PERSON. (USUALLY THE SUCKERS ARE THE WHITE PEOPLE); PRACTISED BY THE GOVERNMENT ON ALL THE OTHER COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD. AND BEGGING IS THE ONE THING THAT I CRINGE AT, THOUGH I'VE LIVED ALL MY LIFE ON FREE HAND OUTS FROM YOU. I HAVE NO GROUNDS FOR COMPLAINT.

WE BRING THEM A CLINIC, A MILL FOR THEIR GRAIN, TRY TO HELP THEM WITH THEIR SICKNESSES, TEACH THEM TO WRITE AND COUNT, GROW BETTER CROPS, MAKE STRONGER HOUSES. WE FIND MONEY FOR MEDICINES AND OTHER PROJECTS, SHOW THEM HOW TO MAKE WHEELS TO REDUCE THE LOADS ON THEIR BACK, HOW TO USE TOOLS TO CUT DOWN THE FORESTS, TELL THEM ABOUT NEW POISONS TO KILL THE BARBOONS THAT ARE DESTROYING THEIR CROPS. . .

AND THEY BEG US TO GET THIS AND THAT, BUT WHEN WE DO GET IT OR FIND OUT HOW THEY CAN GET IT, THEY OFFER NO HELP, PHYSICALLY OR MENTALLY. NO THANKS. WE HAVEN'T TIME TO HELP YOU BUILD THE CLINIC OR KILL THE MONKEYS. THOUGH THE MEDICINES COST MONEY, CAN'T YOU GIVE THEM TO US FREE. GIVE ME YOUR FILE TO SHARPEN MY AXE, SAW TO CUT THE TREES ON MY LAND, NO PLEASE.

THERE ARE SEVERAL NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS, LIKE OUR NEIGHBOR CIMI AND THE REALLY GREAT (WEALTHY AND EDUCATED) ETHIOPIAN FARMER WHO LIVES ONLY TEN MILES FROM HERE, AND SOMETIMES WE FEEL LIKE WE CERTAINLY COULD DO MUCH TO HELP. BUT AT THE MOMENT WE ONLY SEEM TO BE TEACHING PEOPLE HOW TO BEG BETTER. MOST JUST DON'T WANT TO USE WHAT THEY HAVE; THEIR RESOURCES OR THEIR MINDS, THEY JUST USE THEIR MOUTHS, AND HANDS, WIDE OPEN.

I'VE RUN OUT OF ROOM, ENOUGH DEPRESSION ANYWAY. I HAVE OBVIOUSLY LOST MY MIND.

LOVE AND PEACE.

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 7:

### THE POISON:

*In which a journey is made to a mission and I see the connection between baboons and spacemen*

There were at least four radios in Shileh besides the short wave that Helen and I had. Two of them were new since the last harvest. They weren't turned on much because batteries were expensive and could only be bought in Arba Mench, but among the two dozen grass huts of the tiny new town, their very existence was disconcerting to me.

Radios seemed to me to be a luxury the villagers could ill afford. They were as much a waste of limited resources as the Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals that I had seen in the front yards of the east Tennessee farm houses where Helen was born and raised.

Helen didn't really share the same concern. The daughter of an Oak Ridge scientist who had put every cent he had into finding the good life down on the farm, she had an intuitive idea why something so extravagant could be so important to people without money.

Her father's dreams of a fancy house on a hilltop, of a long life as a successful nuclear chemist were now all gone. He had helped figure out how to purify uranium for the first atomic bomb, but for his efforts, the Government took the hilltop house site on his small farm for a giant TVA power pylon and then his wife got cancer and died. It took the dream out of him and everything went downhill from there.

Helen had once said she wished they had bought the fancy Volvo her father had always wanted before it all turned sour. Her explanation why, however, never made sense to me. I grew up among bankers and politicians in an old New England family. Reinforced by the poverty that followed my father's death, economic rationality and financial planning were taught to me from an early age.

"I'm sorry I told him you could fix it. I just thought you could try," she said, sounding frustrated. "I think it would really mean a lot to him if you did."

I turned back around to Shoatruss who had a desperate but hopeful look in his eyes. "Ishi, min albat." Okay, I'll give it a try. "Escomet." Sit down, I said.

Shoatruss burst into a toothy smile and extended the dusty plastic radio to me. It looked familiar.

"Y'ato Telehoon radio no, whim?" Isn't this Telehoon's radio? I asked.

"Neberegn, K'issacho gezow k'amit befit." It was, but I bought it from him last year."

I nodded. In the bright light of our noisy kerosene lamp I pulled out my Swiss Army knife and unscrewed the back. I knew nothing about electronics, but I could tell the radio had been around for a while as it had an ancient looking glass tube inside. Lifting the back, a large pile of sawdust fell out onto the table. I blew out the insides.

"Besu til alleh." Lots of borer, I laughed.

Shoatruss frowned and nodded seriously.

I fingered all the wires I could see but I could find nothing loose. It wasn't the tuning dial either. Some clever Japanese designer had obviously known about the problem of borer dust and had enclosed it in plastic. In desperation, I pulled out the tube thinking its filament might be broken or its prongs rusty, but they weren't. I looked it over carefully anyway, trying to impress my two onlookers, and then reseated it.

There was nothing wrong with the radio as far as I could tell. I felt discouraged. "Azenalo." I'm sorry, I said. "Chiggar, algenyaom." I can't

find a problem. I put the cover back on, and flipped on the switch more as a reflex action than thinking anything might happen. Ethiopian music suddenly blared into the little room.

All three of us jumped. I couldn't believe my luck. Shoatruss grinned. "Degmo, y'indjetta metfo." Also the handle is broken, he added quickly over the loud one stringed masinko's whine and female warble that engulfed us. He pointed to the top of the radio where it had obviously suffered a major catastrophe at some point in its long career. There had once been a plastic



handle moulded into the top of it, but now only a few jagged edges at either end of the casing hinted at its past form.

I didn't have the language skills to describe how plastic was made or moulded, but I felt slightly agitated for even being asked the question after I had just made the radio work. "Ichillum." I can't, I said simply. "Chiggar yebezal." That's too big a problem.

Shoatruss's grin disappeared. He started to say something, but was interrupted by someone else at the door.

"Mindeno, chachata?" What's all the noise, came a loud voice. It was Telehoon with several other men. He had no time for the music that was coming out of Addis Abeba, and he never hesitated to tell me his views. "Indayet temisalatchew?" How do you listen to that? asked Telehoon, with more than his normally dour expression. He paused to add drama to his rhetorical question and then added, "Mata hesab timhertbet yellum?" No math class tonight?

"Ow, metow" Yes, I'm coming, I said, reaching up and grabbing the roaring lamp over the table.

Several evenings a week, most of the men of the village were learning how to add and subtract so that they could help run the cooperative store that Telehoon was determined to set up. The village chief was the only one in Shileh who had ever been to school before, but math was not his strong point, so I was helping him teach the class.

Shoatruss left his radio on for effect and carried it out to the circle of benches in front of our hut where another dozen men were already sitting. Someone in Addis was describing, in Amharic, the precautionary measures that the Americans had taken to protect themselves from anything that they might have unintentionally brought back from the moon. Two men had landed there the previous month, and the whole idea was something that even Helen and I were having a hard time coming to grips with.

Most of the other villagers, in fact, were extremely dubious anyone had actually gone there, since there had been absolutely no sign in the night sky that anything so momentous had happened under their very noses.

"Algabanyum." I don't understand, said Tesfa, one of the new radio owners. "Seemalis, lemin be satin wost, mecoy alebachu?" When they came back, why did they have to stay in a box?

As usual, Tesfa was thinking way ahead of everyone else in the village, and I was impressed. But the fear that the astronauts might have brought back some strange virus or deadly creature was something that I found difficult to explain. I struggled with my Amharic.

“Seemalis, chiggar ayfellegum.” When they came back, they didn’t want a problem, I said eventually. “Inda betam metfo bishta, wheym ibab” Like a really bad sickness, or a snake.

When Tesfa continued his puzzled expression, I paused to think of another example.

“Lemisale,” For example, I went on in Amharic, “look how bad the baboons are at the moment.” Tesfa nodded as several of the other men turned to listen to the conversation. “Imagine if someone accidentally brought a new kind of baboon down here that was poisonous, and they killed people when they bit them.”

“Negurgun, ahoon yegedeignalin.” But they are already killing people, “y’inya magib yebalal,” by eating our food, said Tesfa without hesitating, and then added as though it was a simple continuation of the thought. “Ena mechay ye zindjero merz l’inya tegurzaleh?” Anyway, when are you going to buy the baboon poison for us?

I looked at Telehoon, who quickly looked the other way. “Betolo.” Soon, said I. “Betolo wada Dorse ehedalo.” Soon I am going to Dorse.

Tesfa didn’t have to remind me of the need for the poison. Helen’s kindergarten and women’s classes were now both in permanent recess because every person in the village was needed to help guard the new crops from the large dog faced brown monkeys. It was good that the baboons at least slept after dark, because the villagers were barely holding their own in their struggle to keep them out of their fields.

The half dozen manned platforms over their sorghum, maize, barley, peppers and teff were not enough. The baboons could still out-run them and they were clever at creating distractions in a distant corner of a field and then sending in another part of their troop to feed somewhere else while the villagers were chasing them off.



After the class, I caught up with Telehoon as he walked off in the dark toward his hut. The chief turned around without a smile. He already knew what I was going to ask him.

“Wada Dorse heed, ‘na bewhala genzeb ewosedalo.” You go to Dorse and I’ll give you the money later, he said and turned back towards his hut without waiting for a reply.

I pulled up in the road and watched Telehoon walk away puzzled by his curtness. Only two weeks earlier the chief had been very excited when I first told him about the baboon poison that Afework had heard about.

According to the Konso cotton farmer, a mission up in the mountains northwest of Arba Mench had started selling the poison as part of their community services. For 50 dollars they would guarantee to kill one entire troop of baboons. Afework had only heard about it when he went up into the highlands to sell some of his latest harvest to the local weavers. He hadn’t tried it on the baboons around his farm yet, but he’d heard it was supposed to be a particularly effective killer.

The tasteless powder, planted in sweet potatoes under the baboons’ sleeping trees by mission staff, took six days to take affect once eaten. The long time delay meant the baboons could never figure out what it was that was killing them. All the other methods local farmers had tried, like guns, traps and faster acting poisons, always soon lost their effectiveness, for the intelligent animals were quick to learn what to avoid.

Almost immediately after I told the Chief about the poison, Telehoon called a village meeting and through dogged persistence, got the villagers to donate the funds to try it. Fifty dollars was a very large sum of money for them to find, but Telehoon kept reminding them of what the baboons had cost their last harvest.

Then suddenly Telehoon went sour on the idea.

At first, I thought it might have been because the baboon problem turned out to be considerably bigger than anyone initially realised. Following the first meeting, local villagers spent several nights in the jungle and discovered there weren’t just one or two troops around the two rivers, but six. But this couldn’t have been the entire reason because I then managed to get several government officials to pledge large personal donations for the project, nearly making up the difference.

“What are you doing out here in the road?” asked a voice from behind me.

I turned around. My wife's thin figure was silhouetted in the bright light of our open hut door. I couldn't see the expression on her face, but her long hair was down and glowing in the light.

"Why don't we do it in the road?" I sang, repeating the Beatles song we had just taped off the new volunteer teachers in Arba Mench.

"You'd be lucky," laughed Helen. "What were you and Telehoon talking about?" she asked, as she walked over and put her arms around me.

"I was just asking him about the seventy dollars he's holding onto for the poison," I said with a sigh. "He seems reluctant to want to give it to me for some reason."

"Maybe he's spent it," Helen chuckled.

"Don't laugh," I cautioned, "Maybe he has."

"You're not serious? Telehoon? He is more careful with money than anyone else in the village," said Helen.

"I know, but then why won't he give me the fifty dollars he worked so hard to collect last week and the other twenty he's holding of ours. I won't be able to collect the hundred dollars General Getacho pledged, or the fifty each promised by the Governor and Ato Alaling if the villagers don't contribute the money they

said they would."

Helen's response was very quiet. "Maybe he's just jealous of all the money you donated to this project, like he and the others were when you paid for the beer at the old man's wake?"

I had already thought of the possibility. "But why?" I said. "I only pledged to give thirty dollars, just enough to top up the twenty we gave Telehoon to hold when the villagers helped build our house last year. Anyway," I said, "How else could the villagers have afforded the three



hundred dollars to kill all six troops if I hadn't offered to give something?"

Helen didn't answer.

I sighed and then started walking back toward the light of our hut. "It's just so frustrating sometimes," I said as we reached the doorway. "The people here always seem to think I can do things I can't, and then when I can help, they still get angry at me because it's never enough!"

"You can please some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time. . . ." Helen left off the ending as if the rest didn't need to be said.

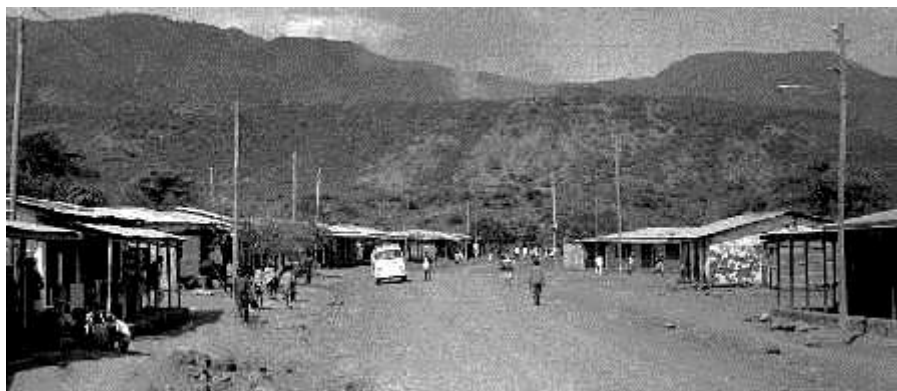
"Yeh," I said after another long sigh, "Anyway, I guess I'll be going to Dorse tomorrow. You want to come?"

Neither the white Toyota nor the Land Rover taxi came through the next day, but despite a brief light shower during the second night, the Toyota showed up the day after that. I flagged it down as it passed through on its way to Gidole and asked Mamo, the driver, if he would hold two spaces for Helen and me on the way back.

Kindly, Mamo did.

There were only six people already inside the six seater when we climbed on board in the orange grey sky of the late afternoon. I sat on my lumpy pack, and Helen sat on my lap, squashed against the ceiling for the long muddy ride to Arba Mench.

An hour and a half later, stiff and sore, we climbed out next to the house of the two new American English teachers who lived in the lower part of town near the high school. We had begun staying with them on our way in and out of Shileh as the two men lived only a block away from the main Arba Mench bus stand and they always had great new music to listen to. They also always talked about things that were familiar, in a language we could understand.



But the two Americans were not at home when we knocked on their door. We didn't know that all the volunteer teachers were in Addis Abeba discussing their future in Ethiopia. We hadn't heard that students all around the country had been on strike for the last month, and that most of the schools were now closed again. We only knew that our friends' house was dark and empty.

"Now what?" asked Helen, beginning to regret she came.

"I guess it's the buna bet."

We wandered back down the muddy dirt road to the only hotel in the lower town, opposite the bus stand. It was the typical single story whitewashed mud walled 'buna bet' found everywhere.

No one was at the tiny counter by the hall to the back bedrooms when we entered, but a white woman with short sandy hair was sitting alone at one of the two tables in the front room. She had her back to the door and was writing something in a notebook under the room's only light bulb. We went over and sat down at the second table. It was extremely unusual to see a single white woman anywhere in Ethiopia, much less in a buna bet in Arba Mench.

"Hello. What brings you to this remote part of the world?" I asked finally, my curiosity getting the better of me after waiting several minutes for her to look up.

"Oh!" she said, startled. "Hello."

"Are you staying here, or just stopping for something to eat?" It was a dumb question at that time of night, but the hotel was known around town for its goat wat, and I couldn't think of anything else to say.

The young woman smiled nervously. "I'm on my way to Chenchä."

"Chenchä?" I asked, surprised. "That's where we're going, at least as far as Dorse. What are you going up there for?"

Chenchä had been the capital of Gemu Gofa Province before the new town of Arba Mench was built. It was located high in the mountains on an old Italian road that from all accounts, didn't really deserve to be called a road. It was the primary reason why the Government had moved the capital down into the lowlands eight years earlier, even though at that time virtually everyone in the province lived in the mountains.

Some official overseas funded Government study had come to the conclusion that it would be easier to build a new capital in the barren valley than fix the road up out of it to where everyone lived. I often wondered how much the desires of the local population had been factored into the 'easiness' equation.

"Dorse?" she said with surprise, now looking at us seriously for the first time. "That's actually where I'm going, except the bus couldn't get up there today. The road is washed out or blocked or something."

One battered, ancient, 20 seat, four wheel drive blue bus usually braved the Chenchä road three times a week when it was passable. During the height of the last dry season, when some other problem closed the road to Chenchä for almost a month, the bus had driven through Shileh several times on its way to Gidole for "something to do", as its driver had told us when he passed through. It was how we even knew the bus existed.

"Damn, really? That's how we were going to get up there. Do you know how long it will take to fix the problem?" I asked.

The woman shrugged, "I'm not sure, but I've heard it could be several days."

"Are you a missionary?" asked Helen.

The woman laughed. "No, I'm an anthropologist. I've been studying the Dorse weavers in Addis Abeba for the last few months. I'm now on my way to live for a while in the village they come from. I'd like to find out more about their lives, what motivates them and why they have become so successful in the city."

"You're certainly brave," said Helen, "coming down here all by yourself."

"Well, I didn't know it would be quite like this," she said looking around her, "but I'm not really alone. I've got a student with me who's helping me learn the local language and find my way up there. He's just gone to see some old school friends not far from here."

We never quite caught the woman's name that evening. It wasn't until we read her National Geographic article on the Dorse weavers several years later that we learned who she was. But that night, the small gutsy woman provided good company.

She filled us in on what she knew of the student strikes, and on the many rumours of beatings and killings. During our brief afternoon visit to Arba Mench the week before to beg for poison money, none of the government officials had said anything about what was happening, and it was not something that either they or the Shileh villagers would have heard about on the radio.

The Government heavily censored Ethiopian news, and given the Vietnam war, student unrest in a lost corner of Africa was hardly the sort of story that the BBC or Radio America might have picked up on.

Her descriptions put Shileh's baboon problem into perspective and made us glad we were far out of the way, in a place where broken radio handles and stolen bras were the traumatic highlights of the year.

Helen and I decided that we didn't need to wait around for the bus, since it was only supposed to be a six or seven hour walk to the mission and we only had one small pack to share between us. We tried to talk the anthropologist into coming with us, but she said she still had things she needed to do in Arba Mench and didn't really want to leave her belongings for her student to put on the bus.

So the next morning just the two of us skirted the experimental government farm on the north side of town, and found the main trail up into the mountains.

The path crossed and re-crossed the old Italian road many times as it rose up out of the brown valley. It was hard to see how any vehicle, much less a bus, actually used it, for in many places it seemed even worse than the road through Shileh. While there were no fallen trees to dodge or sections that went under water, the road was narrower, the terrain much more terrifying, and the ruts even deeper.

The road reminded me of a life-sized version of the wooden track of my childhood train set more than anything else, for it consisted of just two deep parallel grooves that wound their way back and forth up the side of the valley on a narrow ledge. The ruts might have been a comforting guide to anyone going up or down the road, except that in numerous places, parts of the ledge were missing, and the outer rut led off into space.

Several thousand feet above Arba Mench, the well worn trail we were following joined the dirt road around a brown outcrop and then unexpectedly the landscape levelled out and turned lush green. We had reached the top of a large plateau.

Eucalyptus trees and giant leafed banana-like incet plants were everywhere, and in amongst them along both sides of the road were huge, twenty foot high, beehive shaped houses made of woven bamboo. On the gently rolling hills behind the houses were cows, goats and sheep that were actually fat and healthy looking.

Helen and I had never seen anything like the houses before, and the landscape seemed healthier and greener than anything around Shileh. It felt for a moment like we had stumbled upon Brigadoon.

All the scene needed to be complete was for some happy, singing children to come skipping down the road. But around the next bend we came across a reminder that it wasn't. A four wheel drive Mercedes truck lay upside down just off the road almost on top of one of the

amazing bamboo houses. After having somehow avoided all the missing sections of road up the side of the escarpment, on a narrow but relatively gentle incline past some houses one unsuspecting wheel must have got caught in a shallow rut that led the truck out over the edge of the low embankment.

The accident had happened within the last day or two because there was still fresh mud on the upturned truck's tires, although its load of corrugated iron was already neatly stacked back up on the side of the road. It must have happened in slow motion too, for few of the sheets of iron were even dented, and apart from being on its back, the truck itself looked surprisingly undamaged.



"That's why the road is closed, I'll bet," said Helen.

I nodded. "Probably," I said. "Although if they're waiting to get the truck out before opening it up again, I've a feeling the anthropologist may be in Arba Mench longer than she thinks. I've not seen many cranes hanging about lately."

There was a large group of people gathered at the top of the bank beside the endangered house. Helen and I hurried past, conscious that we were staring at someone else's misfortune. We hadn't gone far, however, when a half dozen teenagers came down the road toward us, singing and dancing to the strum of a small instrument that looked a little like a harp.

Helen and I stood in the road as the kids passed around us, not quite believing what we were seeing. The scene really could have been out of Brigadoon.

One of the girls in a bright blue dress with a white gabi over her shoulders and a red bandana covering her hair, said 'Hello', in English, as she danced past.

Helen couldn't help returning her captivating smile. "Hello," she said back. "How are you?"

"I am . . . fine," said the girl slowly, as she stopped and looked back at us.

"We like your dancing," said Helen, but the girl didn't understand her this time. "Dehina no. Musika true no." It's great. The music is nice, Helen added quickly in Amharic, hoping the girl knew more Amharic than English.

The girl with the red bandana smiled again. "Exhabier erstaling." Thank you, she said, and bowed to Helen. "Yehe cra no." That's a cra, she said pointing at the musical instrument. The girl playing it stopped dancing, though she continued strumming. She looked up with a matching smile. They must have been sisters.

The others started clapping to the rhythm of the strum, and then as if she had been expecting us to ask, the girl in the blue dress stepped onto a grassy spot in the road and did a brief dance. Her innocence and openness was overwhelming.



We clapped loudly when she finished, wondering if we should give her something, but it was clear the girl was only looking for smiles. She

waved back as her group turned off the road and down a path through the incet plants in the direction of the overturned truck.

"How absolutely beautiful," I said.

Helen nodded in agreement.

As we started up the road again we heard more singing and chanting. This time we turned just in time to watch the top of the house next to the truck on the other side of the incet plants rise up and move slowly sideways out into a small field. It was, quite literally, a community house-raising.

"Can you believe this place?" I asked in awe, "They're just like the Amish, except they seem even better off," I exclaimed with enthusiasm, and then caught the irony of my words, ". . . relatively speaking, anyway."

Helen nodded again.

"You wonder," I went on, "why most people in America don't sing and dance to strangers . . . or help others just for fun." I felt suddenly depressed. "Don't you ever wonder what virus . . . or poison we must be carrying that will inevitably kill this?"

Helen still didn't answer. She didn't have to. They were both parts of the same question we had been asking each other ever since we first realised there was a third option to either going to Vietnam or escaping to Canada.

Neither of us had an answer, at least no answer that made any sense in our present surroundings. We both knew when it all came down to it, the real reason we were there, despite our outward protestations of world peace and love, was for our own survival, not for anyone else's.

The trail over the next half hour parted from the dirt road and rejoined it again several times, and more than once Helen and I found ourselves among the amazing beehive houses surrounded by swarms of warm smiling faces. We quickly discovered that a surprisingly large number of the younger kids spoke Amharic, though most of the older people didn't. It wasn't Gamunian or Gugi the older people spoke either, but something else again.

We also quickly discovered what the anthropologist was coming to see, for there were weavers everywhere. Their hand spun cotton warps, three feet wide and more than 20 feet long, were stretched along the ground outside nearly every hut.

With the help of a dozen playful kids around our knees, we eventually came upon a single story white weatherboard house with blue shutters and a frosted glass front door that belonged in an Ohio suburb. It was set back from the dirt road on a meticulously landscaped

quarter acre lot with a flower garden surrounding the house and a half dozen fruit trees in the lawn on either side. As if these weren't enough clues for any stranger to tell who lived there, painted on the house just over the door, was a large elaborate white cross.

We turned up the rose bush lined concrete path and twisted the mechanical door bell. The kids that had been following us stayed out in the road. There was no response to the first ring, but on the second, a middle-aged woman opened the door halfway and peered out at us. She showed no surprise at all at seeing white strangers on her doorstep.

"Hello," she said, opening up the door its full width. "Won't you please come in."

"Thank you," we said together. We followed the woman down a dark plywood-panelled hall with polished wooden floors into a large carpeted living room filled to overflowing with two sofas, two stuffed chairs, a tinted glass coffee table, a roll top desk and a grandfather clock. The mantelpiece over the brick fireplace and every other ledge in the room were crammed with knick-knacks and pictures of well dressed white people.

"This is a very nice place you have here," I said, not so much out of envy, though the comfort was overwhelming, but out of sheer amazement that such a place actually existed in this part of the world.

"Yes," she said. "The good Lord is merciful to those who hear His calling."

We took a seat on one of the oversized couches. The other woman sat down in a straight-backed chair next to the large, lace curtained front window under a black felt picture of praying hands. She picked up some knitting casually left on the desktop beside her. "And what brings you two to Dorset?" she asked as her needles started to click.

The first impression of Mrs Adams didn't altogether do her justice, for she turned out to be a very pleasant and gracious woman. After we exchanged names and she found out where we were from and why we were there, she invited us to a dinner of steak, cooked cabbage and potatoes with thick gravy and home baked bread. When her husband came home just at six to say grace, he showed more genuine surprise at having company, but he too turned out to be very pleasant, once we got past his religion.

After dinner the four of us sang a few hymns around the fireplace under a silent Aladdin lamp, accompanied by Mrs Adams on the accordion, and then we got down to the business of the baboon poison.

Mr Adams was pleasantly surprised that I was interested in poisoning so many troops. He confessed that the mission had only done

five baboon groups altogether at that point. The poison, however, did work in the way Afework had described, and it was very effective. He thought they could send someone to Shileh in just a few days, provided we could organize getting the sweet potatoes.

It was almost nine when Helen and I left the Mission with directions to a buna bet in the small village centre just up the road.

Our parting was amicable, with everything agreed and paid for, but we walked away feeling a little apprehensive about what we had just done. As we were leaving, Mr. Adam had confided in us that the poison itself only cost the Mission a few dollars a troop to administer. Most of the money was being used to finance the first printing of bibles in the Dorse language. I thought again about the children's dance that afternoon and what it was that would ultimately kill their grace.

The next morning we walked back down to Arba Mench past the truck, already levered onto its side with the help of a million people if all the footprints in the mud around it were an indication of how it was done. Then we spent the next two days beside the road to Shileh with a giant sack of sweet potatoes, waiting for a vehicle going south.

Eventually, we were rescued around noon on the third day by Afework, who had driven to Arba Mench after finding us not at home and correctly deducing that we might be having trouble getting back. According to Afework, the man from the mission with the poison was already in Shileh. He hadn't come by road, but had used a trail that ran directly south across the plateau, dropping down into the valley only when he got to the Shileh River.

Helen and I were glad to see our friend and thanked him repeatedly when we learned why he had come, but we were somewhat stunned by the news he brought.

"He's already put the poison out?" I asked

"Yes, Teddy, at least some of it," said Afework. "There must have been a few sweet potatoes in Shileh's market yesterday. This morning when I came to visit and found no one at home, Telehoon told me where you had gone. That was when I heard about the man from the mission."



“Telehoon,” he went on, “told me if I found you, to tell you that he and the mission man had put out the poisoned potatoes around one of their nesting places last night. But they still needed lots more potatoes. He seemed quite pleased with himself, actually.”

“Telehoon?” I exclaimed, surprised at the chief’s apparent change of heart for the second time.

Five days later the baboons started to die. It was the afternoon of the market day when we first noticed something different. Helen spent the morning handing out pills to people and then we went for our usual bath up the river. But the jungle around our swimming spot was hauntingly quiet.

Neither of us said anything about it, though, hopeful that the silence would be the end of the matter, but it wasn’t.

As I was filling up our water bucket in the dying light that evening, I was startled by a slight movement in the deep grass on the opposite side of the ditch. It took a moment for my eyes to focus in the darkness, but as I stared into the jungle opposite me, I saw a pair of eyes staring back not more than 20 feet away.

A large brown baboon was slumped on the ground trying to get up. Another one lay motionless beside it. He looked at me with large dark eyes that were as easy to read as if I was looking into Helen’s. Can you help me? they asked. My mate is dead and I hurt all over.

Its agony sank into the very core of me, and I saw, for just a brief moment, the connection between myself, the baboons, the villagers, the anthropologist, the missionaries and the moon walkers. Darwin was really right, life is just about the survival of the fittest, I thought to myself. How sad.

The next day, after the first of many burial brigades, Telehoon gave me the fifty dollars he had collected from the villagers for the poison, and over the next few months I managed to collect all the donations the Government officials had pledged.

But I never did see the original twenty dollars I gave Telehoon to hold for the village for helping build our house. The only acknowledgement he ever made of its existence was the fact that after the baboon poisoning was finished, the Chief stopped berating Ethiopian music and trying to hide from us the small fancy transistor radio that he had bought nearly a year earlier.



HELEN'S NOT WITH ME, CURSE HER. ON THE TWO OTHER TRIPS WHERE I HAD TO LEAVE HER ALONE FOR SEVERAL DAYS, I THOUGHT WE'D LEARNED THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SURVIVE WITHOUT EACH OTHER. BUT WE'D JUST RETURNED FROM ADDIS AFTER GETTING SOME FREE MEDICINES FROM VARIOUS DRUG COMPANIES FOR OUR

CLINIC WHEN I BROKE MY FRONT TOOTH AND SHE FELT TOO GUILTY TO LEAVE THE VILLAGERS ANOTHER FEW DAYS. (DON'T ASK ME WHAT THEY'LL DO WHEN WE LEAVE FOR GOOD.) SO I'VE JUST SPENT A MISERABLE TWO DAYS HERE AND WILL SPEND ANOTHER 12 HOURS TOMORROW ON THE BUS. IF I CAN GET BACK TO ARBA MENCH BEFORE 6 I'LL HOP ON OUR BIKE AND RIDE BACK TO SHILEH. YES, OUR BIKE IS WORKING! A FRIEND FROM BOULDER JUST SENT US OVER SOME THORN PROOF TUBES AND IT'S NOW GOING GREAT.

YOU WERE WONDERING WHAT WE'D DO AFTER OUR TWO YEAR CONTRACT IS UP? AT THIS POINT IT LOOKS LIKE WE COULD BE DOING MORE TRAVELLING. WE NOW SAVE OVER HALF OF OUR SALARY (SINCE WE HAVE NOTHING TO SPEND IT ON EXCEPT A BIT OF FOOD AND AN OCCASIONAL BUS FARE TO ADDIS), SO WE ARE THINKING WITH WHAT WE WILL PROBABLY SAVE IN THE NEXT SIX OR SEVEN MONTHS, WE'LL COME HOME BY GOING THE OTHER WAY AROUND THE WORLD TO THE JAPAN WORLDS FAIR, THEN PAY OFF MY STUDENT LOAN AND BUY A CAR BEFORE GOING INTO VISTA, THE TEACHERS CORPS OR TO CANADA. I SURE WISH THE NEW DRAFT LAW THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT GETS PASSED SOON, SO WE COULD MAKE DEFINITE PLANS ABOUT OUR FUTURE.

THIS, OF COURSE, ASSUMES WE LAST THAT LONG. THINGS ARE GETTING PRETTY HECTIC HERE. THE SCHOOLS HAVE CLOSED AGAIN JUST AFTER OPENING AND THE VOLUNTEER SERVICE MIGHT BE KICKED OUT OF ETHIOPIA ALTOGETHER FOR HELPING SUPPORT THE STUDENTS AGAINST THE OLD MAN. HE JUST HAS NO COMPREHENSION OF WHAT IS HAPPENING BEHIND HIS BACK.

WHETHER HAILE SELASIE WANTS IT OR NOT, EVERYONE HERE WANTS SOME REFORMS TO HIS TOTALLY INEFFICIENT DICTATORSHIP THAT HAS BOGGED ITSELF DOWN IN LIES AND BUREAUCRATIC RED TAPE. EVERYONE ALSO WANTS THE US OUT; ITS HUGE COMMUNICATION BASE IN ASMARA, ITS USAID SPREAD MONEY AROUND PROGRAMS AND OUR VOLUNTEER SERVICE "BRAIN WASHING" PROGRAM.

ANYWAY, THAT'S THE NEWS FROM US IN FAR AWAY SHILEH.

LOVE, T + H

## Chapter 8:

### THE HIGHWAY ROBBER:

*In which I am shot at while riding along a dirt track and then lose my mind.*

It took me quite a while to fix the flat on my bike. There were actually two thorn holes in the tube and I didn't find the second one until after I'd put the tire back on and tried to blow it up. Then the valve inside my bicycle pump came loose. I had to take that apart as well. The sky was practically black when I finally got going again.

What made matters worse was that the almost full moon struggled to be seen behind scattered clouds and I'd forgotten to buy new batteries for my flashlight before starting back. It was barely glowing. I was beginning to wonder whether it might be doing more harm than good.

Paul Jankura in Wajifo had told me that any light, however faint, kept the lions away, and trouble of some sort was very much on my mind. Just before I left the American Embassy Annex in Addis Abeba that morning, I had witnessed a large group of students march up the alley, heave a dozen rocks through the main office windows and then scatter. I had thought about nothing else all the way back to Arba Mench on the bus.



But the light was hard to hold onto as I rode, and I was acutely aware that it could also attract the attention of trouble, like highway robbers or the Gugi. Further east, the main road across the border into Kenya had been closed for several years because of the robber problem. And our educated friend, Afework, had recently talked about both the robbers and the Gugi moving further this way as the Government continued to reduce its local presence to focus on the student unrest up north.

“Watch your testicles!” Afework had joked reminding me of the local Gugi bride price, just before I had taken off on an earlier ride to Arba Mench. The big Ethiopian always had a smile on his face and I had not taken his words very seriously when he had said them, but now they made me nervous.

I clicked off the light.

Fortunately, the rutted dirt road beyond the provincial capital was getting familiar to me. Not only had Helen and I been on it more than a dozen times in various four wheel drive vehicles over the last year, but in just the last month I had also ridden the road several times on our ten speed bike. It was all thanks to Joy Coombs, a bicycling friend in Colorado.

Helen and I had brought a bicycle to Ethiopia with us expecting to work in a city somewhere and thinking a bike would help us get around. We had first met high in the Rockies on bikes and were avid cyclists. But in the village of Shileh a ten speed light weight touring bike was distinctly out of place. There were just too many thorns around. Despite taking care to ride only in tracks worn smooth by villagers’ feet, we quickly discovered that neither of us could even get to the river crossing down the road, before picking one up.



Then Joy sent us a pair of thorn proof tubes. Combined with a strip of leather between the inside of the tire and the tube, the new thicker tubes made all the difference. The first time I rode to Arba Mench, I made it there and back without a single flat. The round trip had taken only three hours, almost as fast as a trip by Land Rover, and it meant that we were no longer subject to the mercy of the gods getting in and out of our village. We could go and come whenever we wanted, at least during the dry season, like this time, when I had broken off the cap on my front tooth eating a piece of sugar cane, and had to make a quick dash to Addis to see a dentist.

This was the first time, however, that I had ever ridden the road after dark. It was scary, not just because of the shadowy thorn trees that overhung the road, but because I had to feel rather than see my way. The smooth bottomed tire ruts were good to ride on when they went straight ahead, but sometimes in the most unlikely places, they didn't. I quickly discovered the only way I could keep my balance when they changed direction unexpectedly was to go as fast as I could and hope my momentum would carry me over the rough spot and back into a new track.

So far I had been lucky, but the potential for disaster kept me focused on the darkness in front of me.

What happened next should probably have been expected, but it wasn't. I was less than a quarter mile down the road from where I had stopped to fix my tire, just changing into eighth gear and starting to fly when from slightly behind and to my right there was a single loud gunshot. At the same time I felt something fiercely sting the back of my bare right leg just below my calf.

Bang!

The sound of the explosion and the sudden sharp pain above my ankle jolted me abruptly out of my concentration. "Oh my God!" I said out loud. "Somebody's just tried to shoot me!"

My rear wheel instantly went flat and started to wobble.

"Jesus, they hit my back wheel too!"

I stepped down hard on the pedals, but the deflated tire immediately worked itself loose and started flapping on the rim. I knew it would be only a matter of seconds before it flipped itself into the spokes.

"I've got to get off the road and hide," I said, struggling for breath and trying not to panic.

I raced around the sharp bend just ahead, my lungs straining, then deliberately drove my bike off the road straight into the shadow of a large leafy thorn bush.

"I don't believe it!" I panted as I fell to the ground peppered with unfelt thorns. "Why would anyone want to shoot me?" I was shaking hard and trying to hold my breath. "I've got to be quiet or they'll hear me," I gasped to myself.

Over my pounding heart I listened to the dark forest around me, but all I could hear were the warnings of Telehoon, Alaling and Afework, now ringing in my head. "You're crazy to go on that road alone," they had all said. "What will you do if you come across a lion, or a black mamba, or a robber? You know there are Gugi out there looking for male private parts!"

No, this could not be, I thought to myself. Someone must have thought I was somebody else and are now panicking too. No one would shoot at a white person . . . they know what the Police would do!

I felt the wound on my leg. It felt very sore and there was a small trickle of blood running down into my sneaker. I reached over and felt my back wheel. Even in the total blackness, I could feel a sharp nick on the rim and a large chunk of rubber missing from the tire just above it.

God, somebody really has tried to shoot me! I thought. Just nicked me, Thank God.

There was a faint noise down the road toward Arba Mench. I stopped breathing.

My heart's too loud, I can't hear, I cursed silently. I peered into the darkness. Maybe I should I take off on foot? No, the Gugis know the woods much better than I do. I wouldn't stand a chance. What was that?

I must keep calm. Look, they probably don't have any more bullets, right? They can't afford more than one. Bullets are worth more than

gold. I know that. Be thankful they weren't as accurate with their first shot as they usually are.

What's that? Is that someone coming? I stopped my breathing entirely so I could hear better and held perfectly still for nearly a minute, then I slowly let out my breath and took in another.

God, if there is a God, this is when I could use you. What is it? I swear I hear something.

Over the infinitely loud silence, the pounding, squeaking, peeping silence, I heard the faint, almost imperceptible sound of an engine. I clutched my bicycle under the bush, not believing my ears. Far in the distance toward Arba Mench, a dim flash of light lit up a tree. It went out and another tree lit up. The sound grew louder.

It was the Toyota taxi. I couldn't mistake that sound anywhere. My heart drained onto the ground with relief.

"God, Thank you!" I said aloud, without my usual sarcasm. How could I be so lucky? I thought. After all those days, seemingly years, I've waited for the taxi, here it comes whining its way to my rescue in the middle of the night.

It was an agonizing ten minutes, but eventually the lights of the white Toyota flashed into my eyes and I climbed out from under the bush with my bike and waved. It pulled up in the road beside me.

"Tenystaling Ato Ted," Hello Ted, said the familiar driver as he poked his head out the window.

"Tenystaling Mamo," Hello Mamo, I said. Oh Mamo, I said to myself, can we skip the greetings?

"Tenystaling," Hello, said Mamo again, and then as if he'd read my mind, went right on. "What are you doing out here?" he asked in Amharic, "It's dangerous to be here alone, especially in the dark. Don't you know you could be robbed or even killed?"

"Eh Mamo, Owkalo!" Oh Mamo, I know." My throat was choked as I tried to translate my words. "Somebody just shot at me back down the road," I said in Amharic, pointing in the direction of Arba Mench.

"Gadelkuit? Eyeh? Eyeh?" Somebody shot at you? You see, you see?

"Ayechiggeregnum. Gun, bicyclet metfo." They didn't hurt me. They just nicked my leg, but they hit my back wheel, I said, lifting up my bike and showing him the large hole in the tire.

There was commotion inside the car. Another window opened and someone in the back whom I didn't recognize poked his head out. "Yet no?" Where are they? He asked.

A hand reached out the window and pulled up the outside door handle. The door popped open like a jack-in-the-box and out fell three people, including the one who had spoken to me. He was a rather well dressed man in a white shirt and dark brown jacket, but he was quite drunk. He had a small opened flask he was trying to keep from spilling in one hand, and what looked like a 38 pistol in the other.

"Coy, Coy!" Hold it! Hold it! yelled Mamo. "Zare wada Console mehed alabegn, 'na ahoon yesegay no!" I've got to get to Gidole tonight, and it's already late. I didn't catch the rest of what was said, but after a brief heated discussion, the three men shrugged and then slowly stuffed themselves back inside.

"K'issu gar wada Shileh mehed echilaleh?" Can I go with you to Shileh? I asked desperately.

Mamo looked at me sympathetically and then lifted his arms. "Indayet?" How? He asked simply.

My eyes focused on the contents of the car for the first time. On the roof of the four wheel drive Toyota was a table, four chairs and three large suitcases strapped down with an assortment of ropes and bark strips. Inside, besides a large variety of pots and grain sacks, were eight canned people besides Mamo already. The idea of finding space for another person was out of the question.

I hesitated only for a moment, "Ke mechina feet lie mescomet echilalo, ke goma kerb?" May I ride on the front of the car, by the wheel?

Mamo gave a long sigh and then nodded.

With my bike tenuously entangled in the legs of the upturned table, I climbed onto the front right fender and braced my feet on the bumper. The springs under the chassis were already fully compressed and the frame rested heavily on both axles, so the nose of the car sank no lower. The car just creaked.

Mamo's taxi moved forward down the road and then slowly picked up speed.

Just over an hour later, with my bum feeling very fuzzy from the vibrations of the engine, and still feeling nauseous from my fright, I lifted my bike off the top of the car in the middle of Shileh and weakly hugged the driver. The embarrassed Ethiopian didn't say anything in the crowd that as usual had gathered around his vehicle, but he smiled in relief.

In the time it took for me to unload my bike and repeatedly shake everyone's hand inside the Toyota, the story of Mamo's rescue made it around to everyone in the gathering. Our neighbour, Cinki, was one of

the first to hear it. In a dash she ran over to our hut to get Helen and then to her own hut to get a glass of tella for Mamo.

Helen came out of our door looking like she didn't quite believe Cinki, but when she saw my face in the middle of the commotion, she ran over and grabbed me.

"You okay?" she asked, and then with her usual sense of humour, glanced at my crotch and added, "Still there?"

I couldn't help smile despite the drama.

The Toyota disappeared south into the darkness soon after, and everyone turned to me for a more complete explanation of what had happened. Though the Gugi traded in Shileh's market, the villagers were all still afraid of them, and the news of someone shooting at me in the dark gave them no comfort at all.

With Helen bracing me upright and listening in silent horror, I described the events in detail. As I was finishing the story a second time for those arriving late, Telehoon came out of his hut and walked over to me with an "I told you so!" look on his face. He had obviously been briefed by Shoatruss or Grasmatch Ayella already. I looked down at my feet embarrassed.

"Tenystaling." Hello, said the chief, as the crowd in the street spontaneously opened up to let him through. He took my extended hands and shook them.

"Tenystaling." Hello, I said back, in a subdued tone.

I exchanged the normal greetings with him several more times, each time feeling slightly more a fool than before. Eventually, when Telehoon knew he had made his point without words, he smiled and pointed to my new tooth. "Indeyet?" How did you get that fixed? he asked.

I had left the village three days earlier with a hole in my mouth where the cap on my right front tooth had broken off on a piece of sugar cane. Telehoon and the villagers had seriously grieved over my loss and had tried to console me despite my attempt to explain that the tooth that broke wasn't real in the first place, and that I was just going to Addis to get it re-capped.

"Hakim. Tirs hakim b'Addis wust neber." A doctor. It was a tooth doctor in Addis, I said, pleased to have my traumatic rescue finally taken out of the limelight.

The villagers all gaped at the filled hole.

"Konjo no," It's beautiful, said the chief, slapping me on the back. "Tetu, whey?" Do you want a drink?

I turned to Helen, then back to Telehoon and nodded. It was a signal to everyone that the excitement was over. The villagers broke up into

little groups of nervous laughter and headed back to their huts, trying not to think of the Gugi that might still be out there lurking in the forest. Helen and I followed Telehoon back to his.

The next morning, I got up late. I hadn't drunk much at the chief's hut, but I felt very hung over all the same. I'd had a bad sleep. Something about the gunshot and the hole in my tire had bothered me all night.



I walked outside to the bike leaning up against the side of the hut and carefully inspected the back wheel again, this time in daylight. A large flap of rubber about an inch across was missing from the side of the tire just below the strip of leather. The tube inside was so shredded that it wasn't clear exactly where it had been hit.

I found more than just a nick in the rim, too. There was a big crack in it just below the large hole in the tire. More curiously, on the side of the tire opposite the hole, the rubber was undamaged.

How could a bullet hit the wheel without going all the way through both sides of the tire? I thought.

Then suddenly it dawned on me. There had been no Gugi robber waiting for me in the thorn forest. The sound I had heard and the sharp pain I had felt in the dark on the road to Shileh was not from a gun shot. I'd just had an extraordinary blow-out. I'd hit something in the road so hard it had cracked the rim and blown the tire out at the same time. It

was just a piece of the blown tire that had struck me on the leg hard enough to draw blood.

I sat down on the school bench by the hut, shocked by my discovery. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't.

Sometime that evening I managed to tell Helen the truth, but I was never able to tell anyone else. Each time I tried, it just reminded me of Ruth on the Caribbean Island of St. Croix, of her angry son, her uneaten fish, her bottle of rum, and the even deeper mess my "helpfulness" had left her in.

For a time after that in our Thursday markets, I tried to be friendlier to the Gugi to compensate for my mistake, but it was clear our neighbours didn't understand my change of heart. So I soon gave it up.

STICK TOGETHER

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MR + MRS MELVIN GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASSACHUSETTS 02067  
U S OF A

DECEMBER 5, 1969

DEAR EVERYBODY AT HOME,

WE HAD A PILE OF LETTERS FROM YOU WHEN WE CAME OUT OF SHILEH THREE WEEKS AGO. IT SEEMED LIKE WE HAD JUST WRITTEN TO YOU, BUT CONSIDERING WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ETHIOPIA AT THE MOMENT, IT IS VERY POSSIBLE THINGS JUST AREN'T GETTING THROUGH.

IN THE MAIL WITH YOUR LETTERS WAS A LETTER FROM OUR BOSS IN ADDIS SAYING THAT ALL OF US WERE FREE TO GO HOME, EXPENSES PAID. THE TEACHERS, THOUGH, ARE THE ONES WHO ARE MOSTLY AFFECTED. WE DON'T REALLY HAVE ANY EXCUSE TO LEAVE. BUT THE VOLUNTEERS IN THE SCHOOLS ARE THE SUBJECT OF AN ORGANISED ATTEMPT BY THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TO OUST AMERICAN PRESENCE HERE AS THEY ARE THE MOST VISIBLE AND VULNERABLE. BROKEN JAWS, RIPPED EARS, STONINGS HAVE ALL GIVEN VOLUNTEERS THE MESSAGE. A GOOD MANY HAVE LEFT ALREADY. WE'RE NOW ON VACATION IN KENYA AND WE HALF EXPECT NOT TO BE ABLE TO RETURN TO ETHIOPIA WHEN WE ARE SUPPOSED TO GO BACK.

SPEAKING OF VACATIONS, YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHERE WE ARE RIGHT NOW. AS I WRITE THIS, I'M LOOKING OUT OF OUR RENTED VOLKSWAGEN AND 15 FEET IN FRONT OF US IS A CASCADE OF WATER OVER THE ROAD RACING DOWN A SMALL GULLY IN THE SERENGETI. WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF

NOWHERE. IF YOU HAVE A MAP, WE'RE JUST OVER THE TANZANIAN-KENYAN BORDER IN THE SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK ON A DIRT ROAD WHICH DURING THE DRY SEASON IS PASSABLE FOR MOST CARS. ACCORDING TO EVERYONE THIS IS THE DRIEST OF THE TWO DRY SEASONS, BUT LAST NIGHT AS WE WERE PARKED BY THE SIDE OF THE TRACK DARK CLOUDS CAME UP AND WE SHOOK ALL NIGHT AS A THUNDERSTORM STRUCK THE AREA, AND THE RAIN HASN'T LET UP YET (IT'S NOW 10:00 AM.)

AS YOU CAN GUESS BY WHERE WE ARE, WE EVENTUALLY DID MEET UP WITH HELEN'S SISTER AND HUSBAND. IT WAS GREAT, ALTHOUGH WE ALL IMMEDIATELY GOT INCREDIBLY SICK AND SPENT THE FIRST WEEK IN BED IN AN ADDIS HOTEL.

WE WENT NORTH FROM THERE. ETHIOPIA HAS AN AMAZING HISTORY THAT ISN'T IN MOST TEXT BOOKS. THERE ARE HUGE SOLID OBELISKS AROUND AXUM FROM AROUND THE TIME OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE, AND THERE ARE DOZENS OF UNDERGROUND CHURCHES CARVED OUT OF SOLID ROCK IN A REALLY REMOTE PLACE CALLED LALLIBELLA.

IN THE FAR NORTH, ERITREA, ETHIOPIA HAS A MORE EUROPEAN FLAVOUR, AS IT WAS OCCUPIED BY THE ITALIANS FOR MORE THAN FOUR DECADES AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS CENTURY. IT WAS FROM THERE THAT THEY INVADDED THE REST OF ETHIOPIA RIGHT AT THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR 2.

ANYWAY, WE FLEW TO NAIROBI WITH MARGE AND JOHN AND SPENT LAST WEEK DRIVING AROUND UGANDA, LEAVING THEM AT THE KAMPALA AIRPORT TO FLY BACK TO NIGERIA JUST A FEW DAYS AGO. THIS LAST PART OF OUR TRIP WAS A BIT SCARY BECAUSE THERE WERE LOTS OF ROAD BLOCKS AND MACHINE GUNS AROUND. WE NEVER DID FIND OUT WHY, BUT WE THINK THERE MUST HAVE BEEN AN ATTEMPTED COUP.

... TO KEEP THIS RUNNING ACCOUNT UP TO DATE, IT'S NOW 6 PM. WE JUST FOUND OUT FROM THE PARK GATE KEEPER NOT FAR BACK DOWN THE ROAD ON THE BORDER (IN HIS GRASS HUT), THAT THERE IS NO WAY OUT OF HERE AT THE MOMENT. THE ROAD IS BLOCKED IN BOTH DIRECTIONS. BUT IF YOU GET THIS LETTER, WE GOT OUT.

LOVE AND PEACE

## Chapter 9:

### THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO:

*In which Helen shares her thoughts on my good intentions and then climbs a mountain.*

"Of course I do," said Helen softly, sounding hurt.

"Then why?" I asked, "Ever since we picked up this V-dub," I went on leaning on my elbow in the hot darkness, "I've wanted to find a quiet spot off the road somewhere with you."

Helen's stomach tightened slightly under my touch. "What's the turn on with this car?" she asked.

I paused. "Don't laugh," I said, beginning to feel vulnerable, "It's the shape of its front end." Adding gently, "It looks a little like yours."

Helen managed to suppress a giggle, but I could still feel it through my hand.

I lay back down on the uncomfortable floor of the Volkswagen Beetle feeling suddenly depressed. For a time I listened to the rain pelting the curved metal roof overhead, wondering if the car seats I'd removed were getting soggy outside. After a while the rain began to distort the blackness around me and make me hear things that weren't really there, like the voice of Helen's desire. When she reached over to me some time later, I actually thought I heard her speak, but I hadn't. It was only her guilt.

The next morning we were both startled awake by a black fist banging on the back window.

"You's okay?" came a muffled voice through the fogged up glass. It was the first sign of life we had seen since it had started raining two nights earlier.

I sat up abruptly and stared out at the vague shape of an unusually short African man dressed in baggy green shorts and a T-shirt standing on the underside of one of the upside down car seats. Helen struggled to find something to cover herself up with.

"Yes, we're fine. Thank you for stopping to ask." I said with an embarrassed laugh as I cracked open the side window and stared out into the bright clear light of the sunrise. The unseasonal storm was over. A battered Land Rover with two women and a half dozen small children inside was pulled up in the road beside us going the opposite direction.

The man stepped off the seat and came around to the side of the car in large squishy steps. "Big wata!" he said, waving down the road in the



direction Helen and I had been heading before the flooded road had blocked our way. "Big wata," he said again. "You's okay?"

I nodded and smiled widely so he could clearly see we were not in trouble. "Yes, thanks. Everything is okay."

I hoped that the man would realize without too much investigation that we both had no clothes on and didn't really need his help though we appreciated his concern. The driver suddenly did and smiled sheepishly. He turned back toward his car with an apologetic wave. In a moment we were alone again.

"So now what?" asked Helen, rising up on her elbows and looking out the windows at the soggy blank landscape that surrounded us.

"Shall we go on?" I asked, pulling on my shorts.

"You're joking!" she said, pointing at the dip in the road we could see that was still filled with fast flowing water not very far away. "What about that?"

"Well, they made it through! And the water must be much lower than it was yesterday," I said authoritatively.

"Is that another 'Wells Theory'? How do you know the Land Rover wasn't trying to go the same way as us and just got stuck further down the road?" asked Helen.

I was out of the car and wading into the water before she could finish her sentence. "See, it's not very deep." I yelled back as I got to the middle.

Twenty minutes later, after I had bolted the seats back in the car and repacked the inside, we drove into the flooded gully.

The force of the water immediately tried to push the front end of the car sideways, but the wheels caught on the dirt ridge in the middle of the road and kept us from sliding into the deep ditch just off to the right. I caught my breath, and suddenly wished Helen had put up more of an argument. When we reached relatively dry land again, however, I couldn't stop smiling.

Helen sat tight lipped. "What happens when we get to one we can't cross?" she asked, angrily.

"We won't," I said wondering to myself what was wrong with her. "The sun's just about to come out. Everything will be drying up soon," I added in case she needed a rational explanation.

"You always act like such a madman after you've had sex," she said under her breath.

I looked at her and smiled even more. When we came to a second flooded section of road only a mile down the road, I didn't even slow down.

Three hours later, after managing to navigate through 70 miles of muddy road and intermittent water hazards, our little Volkswagen came across a hazard that was substantially bigger than the rest, not far from where the road joined the main dirt road through the Serengeti between Lake Victoria and the Ngorongoro Crater.

Jammed under a concrete bridge was a tangle of small trees and leafy shrubs uprooted by the unexpected rain. Although the bridge had no rails, the debris had turned the structure into a 40 foot long 10 foot high dam holding back a giant ugly brown lake. The river that once went under the bridge now foamed over it along its entire length.

I slowed to a stop just before the rushing water.

This time it was Helen who couldn't stop smiling. "I don't think you've had enough to get over this one," she said, baiting me.

I missed the sarcasm. At the far end of the bridge were three trucks and four Land Rovers clustered on the road. A small crowd of people milled around the water's edge on the far side staring at the obstruction.

"We shouldn't be here that long," I said cheerfully. "Look at all the tourists." And as if on cue, a large bulldozer appeared on top of a small rise next to the road behind them.

Over the next four hours the dozer struggled to remove what it could from behind the bridge using a long cable tied to various pieces of debris, but its efforts had little effect on the blockage overall or on the amount of water that flowed over the roadway. Finally one of the truck drivers on the other side decided he had waited long enough and without warning drove his vehicle straight onto the submerged structure.



Everyone held their breath. Brown water foamed around its wheels, but the weight of the truck kept it from being pushed over the edge. When the truck finally passed our car, there were cheers from everybody across the flooded gully.

The two other trucks then charged across too, followed slowly and carefully by the four Land Rovers. Despite their high clearance and being fully laden with passengers and baggage, it was still a struggle for them. One was even pushed sideways slightly by the swift current as it went through the deepest part. The cars all held their course, however,

and as each vehicle reached dry land, the people inside waved a sign of relief to us as we watched from inside our Volkswagen.

Helen smiled and waved back to them reassuringly. It wasn't until she saw the expression on my face as the last one passed that it occurred to her that she would have to face the same trauma too.

"You're not seriously thinking of crossing it too?" she asked looking suddenly panicky. "Not now?"

"Sure. Why not?" I said casually. "A few large rocks inside the car should hold us down enough."

"Oh great! So if we get swept over the edge at least we won't float too far downstream," she chided as I climbed out and started to look for some large rocks. "Why can't we just stay here another night? The water will go down soon enough."

"But we're not supposed to be here," I said as I carefully placed a large boulder in the front luggage space. "The sign at the gate said it's strictly prohibited to be in the park after 7 pm. So does our visitors guide."

Helen was seething. "Damn your hormones!" she said under her breath.

Eventually, when both the front trunk and back seat were piled high enough with rocks to splay out the wheels, I drove the car onto the bridge. Helen sat silently beside me, having reluctantly conceded that it was probably safer crossing in the car than on foot.

But as soon as we hit the water it was obvious that I had made a mistake. While the weight of the car engine held down the back, the front of the car, despite the rocks, immediately started bouncing up and down in the brown foam like it was a surf board.

Once committed, however, I had no choice. I gunned the engine and pushed the car forward through the racing water. On each bounce the car spun slightly sideways toward the edge of the bridge and each time it came down the front wheels caught the rough surface of the roadway enough to pull the car back straight again.

It was a long two minutes while I cursed Helen to myself for not pointing out we'd already spent two nights in the park after curfew. When we reached the other side, Helen waved in relief at the lone African on the bulldozer who was staring at us with his mouth wide open, like the passengers in the Land Rovers who had crossed before us. I raised one arm in a victory salute, "Hey, how about that?" I shouted, as the half drowned Beagle struggled up the incline on the far side of the gully dripping water.

Helen didn't answer.

For the next two hours, after unloading all the rocks, I raced to get to the park border before seven. In the sunset the rolling plains first turned bright yellow green, and then as a full moon rose to match the fading light of the sun, it turned a haunting shade of yellow grey. The scrubby trees that had dotted the landscape and had half hidden wildlife over the previous few days were now all gone. Out in the open grassland we began to see hundreds of gazelle and wildebeest grazing in the dim evening light.

It was beautiful. I suddenly felt guilty that we had to see everything in such a rush. I turned to Helen, "I'm sorry," I apologized. "I guess we should have stayed by the bridge and seen all this tomorrow."

Helen didn't have time to think of a diplomatic response. "Look out!" she yelled suddenly.

As we came around a grassy knob, a group of male lions suddenly appeared in the narrow roadway in front of us. I jammed on the brakes and the car skidded violently in the road's two ruts, coming to a stop less than a foot from the largest of them. With a roar, the giant animal jumped to its feet and then dropped its head down so that it could look us straight in the eyes. Standing on all fours he was almost as tall as the car.

For a moment, neither the lion nor us moved. We just stared at each other. Then a couple of the other lions lying further down the road got up and started walking toward us.

"We've got to get out of here!" said Helen with some tension in her voice.

"Where are we going to go?" I answered quickly. The grassy terrain rose steeply on the right side of the car and dropped off sharply into a narrow gully on the left. There was no way around the animals.

"Back!" said Helen without hesitation.

I turned around in my seat just as the lion we had somehow missed in our skid crossed into the road behind us. I turned back quickly. "Close your window!" I said quietly, reaching for my own window handle and turning it.

"What?" asked Helen in disbelief.

"Close your window! They can't get us if we keep the windows closed!"

"We can't stay here!" she said, as she instinctively followed my instructions anyway.

"No, I don't intend to," I said.

In the last rays of the setting sun I hadn't yet turned on the Volkswagen's lights because I hadn't wanted the light to intrude on the scenery around us, but now I suddenly flicked the switch. The two animals approaching the car stopped in their tracks, temporarily blinded by the car's headlights. For a moment they stared in our direction and then turned and casually trotted off up the adjacent hill. The large lion just in front of us, however, took no notice of the light shining through his legs. He didn't move at all.

"Now what?" asked Helen.

I raced the engine.

"Don't do that," she shouted above the whine. "You'll scare him!"

"That's exactly what I want to do," I answered curtly. But the noise had no effect on the animal.

We sat there a moment and then without saying anything I let the clutch out slowly, allowing the car to move forward and gently nudge the lion's legs with its bumper.

This time the lion took notice. It swung its head sideways with a roar and backed up. I kept the car moving slowly and as it bumped the animal's legs a second time, the lion roared again and sprung onto the narrow strip of grass between the road and the ditch on Helen's side of the car. Helen involuntarily ducked as she passed within inches of the lion's deep set eyes and drooling mouth.

"Jeesis Ted," she said when she had finally recovered her voice. "You have the nerve! What if he'd tried to come through my window?"

"Lions would never do that," I said with conviction.

"Yeh, the same way bears don't attack people," she said as she watched the lions disappear behind us in the twilight.

Her remark caught me off guard. It instantly reminded me of the hike that we had taken just before we left the States for our volunteer training in the Virgin Islands, a hike that almost ended in disaster.

On our way to Philadelphia to catch the plane after visiting Helen's father, Helen convinced me to drive through the Smoky Mountain National Park. Once we got there, however, we both decided that just seeing it from inside our car wasn't enough. On the spur of the moment we threw some things into a pack and took off along the Appalachian Trail with the idea we'd hike out to one of the remote public huts and come back early the next day.

Compared with what we were used to hiking through in the Rockies, it should have been an easy stroll in the park but we hadn't anticipated either the weather or the bears.

The hut we reached in the late afternoon light had a noisy school group in it when we arrived so we wandered off through the forest to an open ridge some distance away and spread out our double bag under the stars. Around two Am, however, we were blasted awake by exploding trees as lightening from a sudden mountain storm repeatedly struck the ridge we were on.

For over twenty minutes we lay flat on the ground inside the thin plastic tube that I had brought along as an emergency bivouac, praying that the lightning would stick to hitting trees and leave us alone.

But then it got worse. Just as the storm moved away, a large black bear and her cub wandered onto the ridge looking for god knows what. They came right up to where we were huddled and started sniffing and poking the plastic. At first, Helen couldn't stop shuddering for she had eaten a liverwurst sandwich earlier and was certain the bears could smell it on her breath. But I held her close to calm her down, and assured her that she had nothing to worry about because bears never attacked people. Eventually she fell asleep, though I never did.

The next morning we discovered what had kept the bears so interested in us most of the night. Our pack, hung in a nearby tree to keep it safe, had been cleaned of every edible thing we had brought. Even the can of peaches that was going to be our breakfast had been opened and its contents devoured. One of the bears had simply punched its claws through the side of the can in several places and then pulled it apart like a giant can opener.

Later, when Helen and I got back to our car and showed the mangled can to the ranger at the park headquarters, he just shook his head and said we should thank God for our good fortune. With a poorly concealed look of contempt, he then pointed to a large red sign posted on the information counter that I vaguely remembered also seeing in the

hut where the school group was. Under his insistent finger, we both read it this time:

### **Warning!**

Bears are dangerous  
and can maim or kill.

Please take extreme care when hiking in the park.

Newspaper clippings on a nearby bulletin board showed photos of at least a dozen people who had been killed or mauled by bears over the last few years.

At the time, after she read the articles, Helen had looked at me in horror but she never said anything, and I had never offered an apology for exposing her to my well intentioned but life threatening ignorance.

Now, however, as we passed the last lion somewhere near the turn off to Olduvai Gorge on the road to the Ngorongoro Crater, something inside Helen snapped. She turned back around toward me with fire in her eyes.

"God!" she swore almost breathless. "Who do you think you are?"

There was such heat in Helen's anger it froze me to the steering wheel. I couldn't speak. I had no come back line, no "Wells Theory".

Just before 9:00 in the morning, two days later, Helen and I drove into the car park of a small single story hotel at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. Neither of us had fully recovered from the incident in the Serengeti, but both of us had decided not to be the first one to raise the subject for further discussion.

"You ready for this?" I asked with a cheery smile.

"I guess so," said Helen, smiling back. "What luck they have room for us."

The half dozen young white people standing around a small registration desk inside turned toward the door as we entered. At the same time, a tall rugged looking Tanzanian stood up from behind a pile of climbing equipment stacked up just behind the group and stepped forward.

You must be Ted and Helen," he said with a thick British accent, intensively eyeing us up and down with a friendly smile. "Welcome to you."

"Thanks for letting us come on such short notice," I said as we both shook his hand. "We heard about your guided climbs some time ago, but we never thought we'd try going up until we drove across the plains yesterday and saw the mountain glowing in the sunset. It was beautiful."



The African's smile widened but he looked a little anxious. "Yes, well, I'm M'bella, your head guide, and I'll introduce you to the others in just a moment, but first we must sort out the equipment we will be carrying for you so the porters can get started. Could you come around here and try on these parkas and gloves?"

"Porters?" I asked, looking at the guide and then at Helen with surprise. "I thought you just supplied the food and equipment. You mean we don't have to carry anything?"

The guide chuckled, "You can carry whatever you want, but it's a five day, seventy five mile hike." He looked carefully at Helen and me. We were both very thin from our year and a half living in the bush. "Kilimanjaro is over 19,300 feet high and we're only at four and a half thousand feet now. Believe me, you will want as much help as you can get."

Seven porters left a half hour later looking like they were straight out of an African safari movie. Each had a couple of giant canvas bags or a wooden box on his head.

When our group of eight eventually left with two guides an hour later, we were all laughing and talking together as if we had known each other for years. We quickly discovered we were all volunteers working in various parts of Africa. Two were French doctors working in Madagascar. The other four were British volunteers teaching in Kenya.

For the first three days the mountain teased us, revealing itself early each morning just for an hour or two to keep us intrigued. It was ideal hiking weather, hot enough to be able to hike through the scrub and tussock in shorts, but cool enough to keep the sweat down. Water on the



mountain was very scarce, but somehow at mid-morning, lunch and mid-afternoon each day, there was hot tea and biscuits for us on the trail, and every evening a hot dinner awaited our arrival at the next hut.

By the end of the third day our group had climbed above the clouds to fifteen thousand feet, higher than we had ever climbed in the Rockies. The sunset that evening through the window of our whitewashed stone hut was spectacular.

"You asleep?" I whispered once the colour in the sky had gone. I reaching over to Helen's bunk beside me and touched her leg.

"I don't know how M'bella expects us to sleep," Helen whispered back. "Even if we do have to get up again at midnight, it's now only seven o'clock."

I felt Helen's softness under the heavy wool blanket. For the last 20 minutes I had listened to and felt the quiet rhythmic movements of the two French doctors, the only other couple in the group, in the bunks below us. It had embarrassed me, but it had also made me envious. After a long silence I whispered, "Any chance?"

With an audible sigh, Helen started to move toward my bunk, but hesitated.

She took a deep breath. "No, I . . .," she said too quietly for me to hear. Then with more conviction she leaned over and repeated herself. "No, I don't think so. Not here. Not now."

The dark red glow of early dawn found us on the rim of Kilimanjaro's giant symmetrical crater, four thousand feet above the hut where we had spent the earlier part of the night. It had been a desperate five hour struggle, not dangerous at all, since it was more like climbing

up a giant sand hill than anything else, but extremely hard on both legs and lungs. For the last two thousand feet we literally had to stop and catch our breath after every step.

Two hours before we reached the rim, the French couple, the most fit members of our group, and one of the two British teachers from Nairobi were forced to turn around because they couldn't keep anything down, even plain water. On the guides' insistence, no one had eaten anything since dinner explicitly to minimize the problem, but once the trio started the dry heaves, M'bella feared they would soon become so dehydrated they wouldn't be able to get back down on their own. So he made them turn around and go down with the second guide.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Helen. "I wish I had brought something to eat!" she said with a bright smile. As I looked up at her, feeling nauseous, Helen turned toward the rising light. "Come on, let's go on around to the other side of the crater before the sun gets to us."

M'bella stood up with Helen's words, but the other three women and I didn't move from behind a large rock sheltering us from the freezing wind.

"I couldn't go another inch," I said, my voice muffled by the thick wool hat and heavy scarf around my head. "What's over there, anyway?"

"The real top!" said Helen, walking over to a small cairn nearby. "Gillman's point," she said, reading to everyone. "19,197 feet . . . This means we still have another 100 feet to go!"

I looked across the huge snow filled crater. It looked a mile wide. The circular rim beyond us dipped lower in places, but there was nothing that looked obviously higher.

Seeing the puzzled expression on my face, the guide smiled at Helen and pointed to one of the bumps on the opposite side. "That's the real top," he said. "Over there."

"Oh," I said.

Technically, no one in our group ever did make the top of Mount Kilimanjaro. Helen could never talk anyone into walking around to the other side of the crater with her, and within twenty minutes the sun had risen onto the horizon, removing any remaining motivation to do so once we'd caught our breath.

Though it was primarily my exhaustion that kept me from going with her, part of the problem was that the clouds never cleared away like they had on previous days. No expanse of savannah ever opened up through the greyness; Mount Kenya never punched out of the distant plains to the north like the climbing brochures had said it would.

So there was a flurry of portrait pictures, of people standing beside the Gillman's Point plaque, and then everyone simply turned and walked down the mountain. Within 30 hours Helen and I were back in our rented V-dub and by late that day we had checked into a fancy beach resort in Malindi on the north coast of Kenya.

There we slept for 17 hours straight, only waking mid-afternoon the following day at the insistent knock of a friendly Kenyan butler asking if we cared for a cup of tea.

"Can you believe this place?" asked Helen, as I brought the cups over to the bed. "Tea twice a day, three hot meals, a private thatched

bungalow with our own bathroom . . . that actually works, and just outside, the sea, a swimming pool, tennis courts, bar . . . all for only eleven dollars a day. No wonder the British stayed here!"

I smiled at seeing the twinkle back in Helen's eyes. It was the first time I had seen the look in months. My immediate thought was to jump back in bed with her, but then I thought of her anger in the Serengeti and her response on the mountain.

I decided that maybe it wasn't my call. "It's brilliant, isn't it!" I said, trying to think of a distraction. "Any desire to go for a walk on the beach?"

"I'd love to," she said without hesitation.

We walked for miles holding hands along the chunky white sand, turning around only after we noticed the light starting to fade. We talked about our life together and the changes in each other since our marriage; the noisy sand punctuating long lapses in conversation. Helen talked about my "Wells Theories", while I talked about her disinterest in me.

She said it wasn't so much my theories that she found frustrating as how I used them on her, as if I knew all the answers, when I didn't. I said it wasn't so much her disinterest in me that I found disconcerting as her lack of interest in herself, although I immediately felt a hypocrite for saying so.



The fact was, I did feel depressed by her lack of interest, but I knew in my gut that my self-centred manipulation of her probably had a lot to do with it.

To cover over my hypocrisy I apologized for endangering her with the lions and the bears and the flood. She seemed pleased, but said little. When we reached the hotel again it was pitch black except for the stars in the moonless sky and some light spilling from the windows of the empty dining room.

"I'm sorry, Helen, but I think we've missed dinner," I said, bracing myself for her disappointment.

"That's okay," she said, surprising me. "We've still got some things in the car we can eat. Anyway, I'm not hungry. Let's make a sand castle."

"Here? Now?"

"Yes," she said, dropping to her knees. "It's a beautiful night and the tide's coming in."

The sand castle wasn't as fancy as the one we had built on St. Croix. It was too near the water and the first waves of the incoming tide were already at its defences ten minutes after we started. Helen only just had time to add a suggestive looking tall conical tower when the final wave struck. I watched her expression as it succumbed to the inevitable, wondering if she had picked the location knowing how little time there was.

Then Helen stood up and removed any doubt. "Come on," she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me up beside her. "Let's go inside and I'll show you my V-dub."



STANDARD INTERNATIONAL

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MRS MARIANNE GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE RD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
U S A

FEBRUARY 18, 1970

DEAR MOM AND THE GANG,

WE'RE HOME, OR AT LEAST WE'RE BACK, AND WE HAVEN'T GONE THROUGH QUITE THE SHOCK WE WERE EXPECTING. THE WORLD STILL LOOKS THE SAME HERE AND ITS HARD TO PICTURE IT EVER BEING ANY DIFFERENT.

OUR LAST NIGHT IN NAIROBI WE SAW A PLAY AND THEN WENT OUT TO A FANCY DINNER AND FLOOR SHOW. A PLANE RIDE, A BUS RIDE AND A TRUCK RIDE LATER WE SPENT THE EVENING KNOCKING OFF DIRT TERMITE TUNNELS FROM THE ROOF BEFORE SITTING DOWN TO FRIED DRIED FISH AND SWEETENED LEMON JUICE.

WE WERE GONE NEARLY 6 WEEKS BY THE TIME WE GOT BACK HERE, A FANTASTIC VACATION. EXCEPT FOR THE FIRST WEEK WITH THE FLU, EVERYTHING WENT REALLY WELL. FLOODY RAINS IN THE SERENGETI, SNOWY HEIGHTS ON KILIMANJARO SANDY CASTLES ON THE COAST. ITS OVER BUT WE'RE ALREADY THINKING HARD ABOUT COMING HOME, OR AT LEAST THE TRIP TO WHERE EVER WE'RE GOING AFTER HERE.

WE THINK OUR FINAL DESTINATION IS GOING TO BE ALASKA (OR WESTERN CANADA IF I STILL HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THE DRAFT.) BUT WE'D LIKE TO STOP IN TO SEE YOU TOO, WHICH SUGGESTS THAT UNLESS WE WANT TO CROSS THE STATES TWICE, WE'VE GOT TO COME HOME

VIA EUROPE RATHER THAN JAPAN. (IT'S ALSO CHEAPER THAT WAY.) WE WANT TO BUY A CAR ON THE WAY BACK TOO. I GUESS THAT SOUNDS EXTRAVAGANT, BUT FROM HERE A VOLKS-WAGEN MICROBUS LOOKS LIKE AN ECONOMICAL SOLUTION TO OUR PROBLEMS. WE COULD BUY IT IN GERMANY AND USE IT TRAVELLING IN EUROPE BEFORE BRINGING IT HOME. CUSTOMS ON A USED VEHICLE IS CONSIDERABLY LESS THAN ON A NEW ONE. WE COULD THEN USE IT TO GET AROUND NORTH AMERICA AND HAUL OUR BOOKS NOW STORED WITH FRIENDS IN BOULDER.

THERE IS ONLY ONE COMPLICATION TO THIS DREAM. WE'RE NOT SURE WE CAN HANG ON HERE FOR ANOTHER FOUR MONTHS BEFORE THE VOLUNTEER SERVICE IS KICKED OUT ENTIRELY.

ALMOST THREE QUARTERS OF OUR FRIENDS HAVE LEFT ALREADY (TEACHERS) BECAUSE OF THE STUDENT STRIKES, BEATINGS, ETC., AND THOUGH WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE AND ARE TOTALLY UNAFFECTED (UNTIL WE GO OUT TO A BIG TOWN), OUR SYMPATHY LIES WITH THE STUDENTS (AND OUR FRIENDS), AND WE WANT TO LEAVE TOO. BUT EVERYTHING IS SET UP FOR US TO STAY TILL THE END OF OUR CONTRACT. WE WILL HARDLY HAVE ANOTHER EXPENSE UNTIL WE LEAVE AND THUS CAN SAVE ALL OUR REMAINING PAY FOR GOING HOME.

AND THERE IS STILL STUFF FOR US TO DO. WE ARRIVED BACK TO FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDDLE OF A LIVER FLUKE EPIDEMIC IN THE VILLAGE. WE'RE NOW WAITING FOR A TRUCK OR SOMETHING TO TAKE US OUT TO ARBA MENCH TO SEE IF HELEN CAN FIND MORE MEDICINES. I'VE ALSO GOT A MEETING WITH THE GOVERNOR ON THURSDAY. HE WANTS ME TO LAY OUT AN IRRIGATION SYSTEM FOR OUR TOWN. (WHICH IS A JOKE REALLY, BECAUSE THE VILLAGERS KNOW HOW TO DIG A PERFECTLY GRADED IRRIGATION DITCH BETTER THAN I COULD EVER SURVEY WITH THE POCKET COMPASS AND HAND LEVEL I'VE GOT.)

ANYWAY, MUST SIGN OFF. I HEAR A TRUCK COMING TO HOPEFULLY TAKE THIS LETTER (AND MAYBE US) OUT.

MUCH LOVE,

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 10:

### THE EXPEDITION:

*In which I join in the search for a new town  
site and learn the point of law*

"Lemin?" Why? demanded Ayella.

"Mekaniatoom inde plan idellum." Because it's not according to the plan, I explained, trying hard to hold back my anger.

"Min alleh?" So what? Ayella went on. "Ke mended gar Alabign. Tella lemekfil." I need to be next to the road. To sell tella.

"Negurgun atchillum," But you can't be. "Be mullu tukil ke mended gar Aychillum." Not every hut can be next to the road.

I cursed the man's audacity. Ayella had already heard my words before. This was the second time I had caught him digging a circle of holes next to the road nowhere near the site that he had been allocated by lottery. Only this time I hadn't discovered what Ayella was doing until he had the centre post and several wall posts already standing upright in the ground.

Ayella was one of the more 'intellectually challenged' people of the village. I might have even labelled him retarded if I'd thought about it. Ayella's existing hut, built back before our own arrival in the village, was the butt of many local jokes. Its thatched roof was put on so unevenly that sunlight actually came through it in places. And its centre post had never been put up straight, so even before the termites got to it, the hut always looked like it was just about to sit down.

It wasn't as if I didn't have any sympathy for Ayella. With termite tunnels now virtually entombing his existing hut, I was well aware of its life expectancy. It wasn't even a matter of weeks. And I also absolutely hated acting as the policeman for the new town, but I was sure if I ignored the villager, all the other people who had built their houses in the right place would soon complain and want to build down on the road too.



What made it particularly hard for me, though, was the fact that the village chief didn't seem to care. The first time I had caught Ayella trying to build his hut by the road, Telehoon had only shrugged his shoulders and said, "Minimum, idellum." It doesn't matter.

I wished I had known fifteen months earlier how important selling beer to passing travellers would become to everyone. Back then the villagers had just said, 'Design us a town like the one you come from. We want a modern town!' So I had.

What a disaster.

The only thing I got right was leaving the existing market place as public land so that one day it could become part of the village green.

No one could understand why the existing huts, built along the Arba Mench-Gidole road, had all ended up in the middle of a hundred foot wide public right of way. Why would anyone ever want a road that wide, they asked? And what was the point of having two streets going past every house, one wide and one narrow? The concept of alleys or utility corridors for future sewer, electricity and water services was beyond them.

On the original plan, I had actually included an off street pedestrian walkway system in the village using the utility corridors, but had given up that idea, well before the first house was built.

Helen's hard cleared spot for the clinic and the site of the future school were quickly abandoned as well. My explanation that the clinic site was actually located in the future commercial centre of the community was of no consequence. Neither was the argument that the

school site would be in the middle of the residential area, once the town got a few more people in it. By public demand, both were moved down to the “industrial area” across from Afework and Cinki’s mill.

All the houses were in the right place though, at least all the ones built since the new town plan had been surveyed, and so was the new Coptic Christian Church that was about to be dedicated. But ironically, it was yet another change to the plan that had led to my discovery of Ayella’s latest construction efforts.

Ayella had obviously hoped that with all the commotion going on over the official opening of the church, no one would notice what he was doing until he had gone too far to be stopped. But the village chief had just told me that I had to quickly move the cemetery, and I was on my way back to our hut to do this, when I ran into the wayward villager.

After the argument I continued on to our hut and dug out Shileh’s master plan from under my desk. Only a half hour before the church was to be officially opened, the village chief had discovered a serious mistake.

“Izzya mekabir aychillum!” You can’t have a graveyard there! Telehoon had said in horror after I had described where I’d put in on the plan. “Yemote sew yeaschiggeral!” The dead would bother everyone trying to worship!

How could I not know you never put graveyards next to churches?

With a quick flick of my eraser, I removed the word “Cemetery” from beside the church site and rewrote it across four empty house lots up against the foothills at the back end of the village.

My alteration was none too soon. Just as I was about to head off to find Helen again, she and Telehoon, along with two Coptic priests and the Provincial Governor, unexpectedly showed up at the door. The church dedication was the first time any senior official had ever set foot in the village, and the sudden arrival of three dignitaries outside our tiny hut, sent an unexpected shiver of awe through me.

Helen led them all inside, though in the tiny space there was barely room for everyone to stand. “One of the chains on Telehoon’s incense burner has broken,” she explained quickly, sounding equally awed by the high powered delegation she had brought. “I told them you might be able to fix it.”

Telehoon waited for Helen to finish, and then with more than his usually serious expression, brought out from under his clean white gabi a blackened box-like metal container suspended from several chains. He held it out to me. "Yechilallu whem?" he asked. Can you fix this?

I looked at the concerned expressions on the four men's faces. "Alokum," I don't know, I said after a pause, feeling the seriousness of the moment, "Le meyet echillalo?" May I look at it?

The unusual weight of the lidded container with a small round base, startled me as I took it from the chief. It must have weighed at least five pounds. It made me look at what I was holding more carefully. For its size, it shouldn't have been anywhere near that heavy.

Along the bottom edge of the base there was an area where the black grimy surface of the burner had been wiped clean. It stood out bright yellow like a beacon in the dark, and I suddenly understood their interest. The incense burner and chains were made of solid gold. Images of the Egyptian Pharaoh's lost Abyssinian gold mines suddenly flashed across my mind.

"Keyet no?" Where's this from?

"Ke yinya Mense agre no, ke dega lie." It's from our home in Menze, from the highlands, said Telehoon.

I took a deep breath. "Azenalo, gun aychillum." I'm sorry, but I can't fix this, I said apologetically, "Yeheh betam wid no." This is very valuable. I couldn't remember the word for 'gold'.

The village chief and both Coptic priests looked at me with dismay, but before they could speak the Governor interrupted in English, "But it must be fixed for the service," he said. "Is there nothing to do?"

I looked at the broken chain more closely. "It needs a new link here," I said, pointing to the missing catch that attached the loose chain to the base. "But the only thing I have that might work is a nail."

"Please?" Said the official with an urgent tone in his voice. "That will do!"



"Are you sure?" I asked.

The governor nodded.

It took me five minutes to locate a pair of pliers, and another twenty to shape the nail with the file on my Swiss army knife so that it was thin enough to fit through both the last link of the chain and a small hole in the base of the burner. By the time I finally linked the two back together, Telehoon had found the plan for Shileh lying still open on my desk and was showing it to the Governor and the two priests.

In the past the chief had always seemed indifferent to the plan when I had tried to explain where things were. Telehoon's reaction to Ayella's deliberate flaunting of it, seemed proof of this. But it quickly became clear that the chief had absorbed much more than I had realized. Though Telehoon couldn't read any of the English words on the large drawing, he seemed to have no difficulty explaining to the others, not only about the market place in the village green, and the extra wide main road for future heavy traffic, but where the new church was in relation to all the new houses and the clinic.

"Na mekabir yet no?" And where's the cemetery? asked one of the priests, conscious that it had to be blessed too, before they could leave.

Telehoon glanced at me. I was still filing the bent nail and wasn't fully listening to the conversation. The priest started to repeat the question, but just then the Governor found the four sections at the back of the village labelled 'Cemetery' and pointed them out. There was a relieved look on the chief's face.

Right behind the relocated burial ground, a dotted line wound along the hills just outside the town site. "Is this where the new irrigation ditch is going?" added the Governor in English.

"Yes," I said looking up a little worried. "That's the one you asked me to survey. I don't know if its location is entirely practical because it crosses several small dry creeks, but if they can be dammed or bridged, it should work okay."

"And is this my farm over here?" asked the Official, following the dotted line back to where it joined the Elgo River.

I looked over to see where he was pointing. "No, not quite. That's General Getacho's farm right there. Yours is just below it," I added.

Only the week before, I had gone over to the Governor's clearing to watch our friend Afework plough it up for the first time. The trees had all been cleared off the land five or six years earlier, back when General Getacho had cleared his, but up until recently, the Governor had not done anything with it.

Afework had not wanted the job, for ploughing up new fields, still full of stumps, was hard on any tractor, but, as the cotton farmer from

Konso had said to me, how could he refuse the Governor? He had the only working tractor in the valley. The only other one, General Getacho's, had mysteriously disappeared six months earlier.

"Do you think my farm is nine or ten hectares?" the Governor continued.

I glanced at Helen. The job had been "offered" to Afework on a "per hectare" basis, and I knew Afework had thought it was about thirteen. "I don't know, could be," I said, fudging a straight reply. "You'd need to do a survey to be sure."

I gave the crudely reattached chain a gentle tug and then handed the burner back to Telehoon.

"Exabier erstaling," May the good Lord bless you, said the village chief, bowing to me with a smile, and trying to shake both my hands without dropping his precious possession. The two priests repeated his words, and shook my hands too.

It was the first time Telehoon had ever thanked me for anything. I felt quietly pleased. "Minim yellum." It's nothing, I replied, bowing back to them.

"Would you do that for me?" asked the Governor.

"Do what?" I asked, not catching the reference immediately. "Survey your land?"

The Ethiopian nodded.

"I can try, but it won't be very accurate. I only have a compass and a tape measure," I said, hoping to put the Governor off the idea. Getting involved in a dispute between him and Afework sounded like a losing proposition to me, whatever I did.

"That will do," said the Governor as he turned and followed Telehoon and the two priests out of the hut. "Also," he said turning back around to me for a moment, "Would you come to Arba Mench before the end of the week? I would like you to go on a trip with us to Beza next Sunday."

"What?" I asked.

"I want you to help us select a site for another new town."

"Okay," I said, not really hearing the Governor's reply, but not wanting to hold them up any longer. It was already well past the time when the celebrations were supposed to begin.

Helen and I followed the four officials toward the sound of the drums. They had been going since before dawn. When we got to the large group of people gathered at the giant new thatched roofed round church, two young boys dressed in white stepped out from behind the door and held up a dark blue, intricately embroidered parasol over each priest's head.

We suddenly realized we weren't supposed to be in the line and slipped into the adjacent crowd.

Telehoon handed one of the church officials the incense burner. The priest lifted it out of the chief's hands holding the ring at the top of the chains, while the second priest lifted off the lid from the hanging burner and dropped in a handful of leaves. Telehoon said something to a woman standing not far from him, and she disappeared into a nearby hut, coming back with a glowing coal wedged in a forked stick. She shook it into the burner, and almost immediately the leaves inside began to smoulder.

As the air filled with the intriguing fragrances, the second priest took out an elaborate brass crucifix from under his robe and started to chant in *Gez*, an ancient language that only the Coptic clergy understood. Swinging the incense burner to the beat of the drums, the first one then joined him in the chant. Slowly they moved forward into the new building, followed by the Governor, Telehoon and most of the gathering.

That evening after the ceremonies had ended and the three officials from Arba Mench had climbed back into their Land Rovers and gone home, Helen leaned over me as I studied the plan still on my desk, "So what was that all that about?" she asked.

"What was all what about?"

"You and the Governor."

"You mean about going to Arba Mench next week?"

"You seem to be getting pretty friendly with him lately," she said with a slight smirk.

"You're not jealous are you?" I asked. "Actually, I have no idea what he wants. I just come free," I continued quickly, feeling a little flustered even though I knew she meant it as a joke. "It's probably just like the last time, when he wanted me to survey the irrigation ditch near his fields. He probably wants to start another farm and thinks a new town nearby will help attract labour . . . like General Getacho started the first settlement here for his farm."

"In Beza?" asked Helen.

I paused a moment to think. "He must have meant some other place. Beza's way back in the mountains in the middle of nowhere, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so. And yes, I am a bit jealous! What a place to visit. I'll bet it's like what we saw from the plane on the way to Gondar when we first got here. No roads, no iron roofs, like what the whole country must have looked like a thousand years ago."

"He couldn't have meant Beza, surely," I said.

But it was Beza.

In light rain, just at dawn the following Sunday, I climbed onto the back of a scrawny mule and started up a small trail directly behind the Provincial Offices in Arba Mench. On their own mules ahead of me, were the Governor and all six top officials of the Provincial Government. Behind me were a mule handler and seven more mules buried under cardboard suitcases and canvas bags.



It was an odd collection of people on an odd journey. According to the Governor, several foreign governments had promised the Province funds to build a new school, clinic and several other community facilities up in a remote part of the highlands west of the new provincial capital if a suitable site could be found.

The Governor, in his jacket, white shirt and tie led the way, followed by the Public Relations Officer and the head of the Provincial Community Development Department, my Ethiopian boss. After that, the positions of the head of the Agriculture, Health and Education Departments varied hour to hour, depending on how often wool jackets and scarves were put on or taken off, and who had the sorest backside and could not sit on a mule any longer.

Invariably at the rear, just ahead of me, was the Chief Engineer. He was a heavy elderly man who always seemed to be on the outside of conversations.



English was not his strong point, but this didn't seem to be the only reason for his exclusion. I could sense a niggling hostility between the Engineer and the others, and I wondered whether the problem was my own presence. The Engineer had considerably more practical experience with new towns than I had, having been Chief Provincial Engineer when Arba Mench itself was laid out, but the others seemed to put down the elderly Ethiopian when ever he spoke.

More than once they reminded him that he had never been to university, and they all seemed to speak in English with me just to

emphasize the point.

Despite the rain, our group climbed rapidly up the side of the Rift Valley. Within 3 hours we were 4000 feet above Arba Mench and onto a heavily rolling plateau. The entire countryside was deep green in colour, but it was surprisingly different from the land we had seen around Dorse or Zeyse. Except for clusters of incet plants around some of the huts, it was almost treeless, just grass and an occasional field of grain. But as Helen had predicted, trails went everywhere, and once we were out of sight of the Rift Valley, we never saw another sheet of corrugated iron.

Our expedition stopped for lunch at the top of a low saddle. The Engineer went off to sit on his own. I had tried to start up a conversation with him all morning, but my efforts up until then had been unsuccessful. When he pulled out a battered old brass altimeter from a small bag behind his saddle, however, I saw a new opportunity.

"Kifitegna indeyet no?" How high are we? I asked as I walked over to have a look at the elderly man's ancient instrument.

"We are now more than 10,000 feet," he replied pointedly in English. "We are coming to Italian road soon."



Up until then, our entourage had been following a very ancient trail that looked distinctly man-made, but not for vehicles. In some places it was so deeply incised into the landscape through generations of usage and erosion, that even on the back of a mule, I couldn't see out except directly forward or backward.

"Did the Italians build other roads in the highlands around here besides the one to Chench?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"The Italians are not building them!" replied the government official, sounding slightly perturbed as he struggled for words, "We are building them! They make us slaves. We are building many roads in our country before." He paused while everyone stared at me. I looked down at my feet feeling particularly white.

"Chench is the only good road up here still," the Engineer went on in a slightly softer tone, seeing my reaction. "The others are gone. Too much rain. Someday we are making them all again."

"Is there a map of where the old roads go?" I asked, pleased the Engineer didn't just let the conversation die.

"Oh yes, I am bringing our good one," said the Official as he stood up and carefully pulled out a cotton backed map from a waterproof tube that was also strapped to his saddle. He unrolled what looked like a large high school wall map of Ethiopia, probably made in Britain, for it had labels and a key on it in English, and the land across the border toward both Kenya and the Sudan were coloured standard British red.

Water blotched, hand drawn dotted ink lines crisscrossed the southwest corner of the country. A solid line of black ink also ran

northeast up the Rift Valley toward Addis from a new dot hand-labelled 'Arba Mench'.

By the scale of the map and the lack of other details, it was hard to tell with any accuracy where the old roads in the highlands actually went. "Where are we now?" I asked politely, struggling to believe that this was the Government's best map of the Province.

"About here," he said, pointing close to the first of several dotted lines west of the Rift Valley Lakes.

"And Beza?"

"About here," he said, pointing to a large blank space between the lines twenty or thirty miles away.

By now everyone had gathered around the map listening to the conversation between the Chief Engineer and myself. The Governor interrupted us casually. "Yes, that's also one place where we'll be looking for the new town site. Somewhere around Beza," he said. "It's about half way between Chench, and Bonke."

Chench, the former provincial capital, was on the Engineer's map about 20 miles north of Arba Mench up in the highlands overlooking the Rift Valley, and I didn't have to ask where Bonke was. Though not originally printed on the map, 14,000 foot high Mt Gughe was hand lettered on it. That was the mountain we could see from Shileh, the one our German friend, Durk, had pointed out back when we first came into the valley. Bonke was where Durk was trying to build a road to, beginning just across the river from Shileh, by General Getacho's farm. It was a large town nestled high on the side of Gemu Gofa's highest mountain. It was now completely inaccessible except by foot or mule.

"Why not put the new town along one of the old Italian roads?" I asked innocently, "instead of near Beza where there is no road?"

"I think one or two of the sites that we are going to look at tomorrow are on old roads," said the Governor, choosing his words carefully.

"That's good," I said.

"How do you like our real country up here, anyway?" he asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

I was puzzled by the Governor's choice of words. "It's beautiful," I said, and then trying to probe what he had meant by his word 'real', added, "I know building roads in the highlands is difficult, but sometimes I wonder why Arba Mench was ever built down in the valley. It's like another whole world up here."

The Governor looked at me as if he wanted to say something, but didn't. Instead he turned and pointed toward the low clouds on the nearby hill tops. They had dumped on us sporadically all morning and



were threatening again. "We have two more passes to cross before we can stop for the night," he said. "We had better continue on before it starts raining again."

It was another nine hours, the last six in cold steady drizzle, before we crossed the third pass. By then, the novelty of the expedition had worn off. Everyone was too sore to stay on their mules, and it was too black to ride safely anyway, so we all walked over the last saddle leading our animals.



We came down off the third pass to a long narrow thatched roof building on the side of a low hill. It had woven bamboo walls, multiple doors and several small glassless shuttered windows. It was the local school house.

Despite the cold and wet, two teachers and a few other people from a nearby cluster of huts warmed us up with a delicious spiced chicken wat, followed by an hour of singing to the accompaniment of a one stringed masinko.

Just recently out of Haile Selassie University in Addis, the teachers were doing their two-year service for the Country. No one mentioned the student strikes, and they did not ask.

It was after midnight before I crawled into my wet, cold sleeping bag and fell heavily asleep.

"Actually, this is one of the four sites that we are here to look at," said the Governor the following morning, once we had finally struggled out of the school house and into the morning light. "What do you think of it?" he asked.

Sharply rolling hills surrounded us. Although the tops were still blanketed in clouds, I could see several gashes scarring the landscape below. One zigzagged up past the school and on over the ridge behind us. It was the trail we had come in on the night before. Another cut across the hillside opposite.

"Are they the remains of old Italian roads?" I asked, pointing toward the latter.

"Yes," said the Governor. "This village is at the junction of two old



roads. That one once went to Chenchu," he said, pointing to one that climbed steeply up the side of a ridge off to the right and disappeared into the clouds. "And that one to Bonke," he said, pointing left.

I nodded. "There's not much level ground around here for a town."

The Governor smiled and nodded in agreement. No one else spoke. "Well, let's go on to the next site then," he said, "while it's not raining. It's only two hours from here."

"I think we should take some pictures first, sir," said the man from the Public Relations Department, as he pulled out his camera.

"Oh, yes! Of course!" said the Governor, straightening his hat and tie.

The next site, a small, exposed shoulder on the side of a hill was even less appealing. The only thing it had going for it was that no one would have been disturbed if a new town were built there, for the sloping site, barren of both trees and water, was also barren of people.

Beza itself, however, was a different story. Though it was largely hidden in thick fog when we arrived, there were people everywhere. There were also trees, a large stream, a few shops and even a reasonable amount of land that wasn't too hilly to build on.

The market was going strong when we arrived and the villagers must have known the Governor was coming, for people thronged our mules as we rode past into town mid-afternoon.

The Provincial Chief was at the front and I couldn't help thinking of religious parallels to his visit, particularly when we pulled up outside a



giant thatched church and a Coptic priest came out holding a smoking incense burner, no doubt made of gold, to bless him.

The third day was a long trek out to Chench, after stopping briefly to look at the last town site. It was foggy and rainy the entire day, so we didn't see much.

Only occasionally would a grey ghost materialize in the drizzle; a cow standing wet and silent in the fields with a set of beads around its neck to ward off disease; or almost as often, a child shepherd huddled under a thick burnoose, staring, equally silently, at our passing mules and their riders.



In Chench, there were two Government Land Rovers waiting to take us back down into the valley, and in Arba Mench, Helen was waiting for us when I stepped out of the Land Rover just at dark in front of the Government Offices.

"Hello, lovely. How did you get here?" I asked very surprised to see her, and giving her a giant hug.

"On the bike," she said with the usual sparkle in her eyes. "It was very easy. How was your trip?"

"Fantastic, but I don't think I'll be able to sit down for a week," I said, rubbing my sore bottom. "Did you come out of Shileh just to see me, or was there an ulterior motive in your madness?"

I had read her mind. "Well actually, I thought we might want to head off to Addis tomorrow if your bum's up to a day on the bus. I was

looking at our health cards yesterday, and we were supposed to get our gamma globulin shots two months ago."

"Really?" I said surprised. "Okay, but I can't go tomorrow. We're supposed to have a big meeting in the morning to choose the new town site. God knows why. I think the Governor's already made up his mind where he wants it."

I awoke just after nine the next morning with a start. "Damn," I said as I jumped up, and then cringed at my aching muscles. "I was supposed to be in the Governor's office ten minutes ago."

Helen look up from our sagging bed in the buna bet just down the road from the Government buildings. "I'll bet you nobody's there yet."

"I hope!" I said as I shuffled through my pack for something half clean, finally grabbing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

"Pick you up for lunch at one, okay?" asked Helen.

"Sure," I said as I kissed her and then hobbled sorely out the door. "If I get out any earlier where will I find you?"

"At the Health Department," Helen yelled as I disappeared.

Like most things Helen guessed, the rush wasn't necessary. The Governor's office was empty when I arrived. According to the Governor's Secretary, none of the Department Heads had shown up yet, though he was expecting them. He invited me to go in and have a seat.

The Chief Engineer was the next to arrive ten minutes later. Slowly and carefully he walked into the room with his map tube under his arm, and a pained expression on his face.

I looked away from the aerial photograph I had been studying hanging behind the Governor's desk. "You look as sore as I feel," I said sympathetically.

"You are sore too? I think it is only old people."

"No, I can hardly walk," I said.

The Engineer sat down, cautiously, in one of the chairs around the small conference table in front of the Governor's desk. "What are you thinking? Where is the new town to go?"

I was flattered the Chief Engineer was even interested in my views. "I really don't know, but I can't say I was all that impressed with either the second or fourth sites. What about you?"

The Engineer took a moment to decipher my words. "No, I agree," he said eventually. "I like the first one," he added as two other expedition members, the Provincial Health and Agriculture Ministers, struggled into the room. "Beza is good, but the new road is not to go there. The new town must be beside the new road."

My mouth dropped open. "What new road?" I asked.

"The new road from Chenchu to Bonke. Did you not know? . . . along the old Italian road. The money is approved."

I was dumbstruck. I turned away from the Engineer and the others and stared blankly at the other pictures on the walls. I couldn't believe the Governor had never mentioned the road to me. Had it been intentional, I wondered?

It was an unmerciful ten more minutes before the silence in the room was finally broken by the arrival of the Governor and the other remaining senior provincial officials. They ambled stiffly into the room and sat down.

I took the last chair, beside the Engineer.

"Well," said the Governor, in English, once everyone was settled. "Thank you for coming. The time has come for us to decide on where the new town should be. I'd like to reach a decision by consensus if we can, so after I explain my views, we will go around the table, and each of you can say what site you prefer most and why."

At that point, the Governor slowly stood up, paused dramatically, and then broke into an eloquent speech on why Beza was by far the most preferable site of the four we had seen. He talked of the people who now lived there, how hard they had struggled to survive in such a remote area and what a new school and clinic would mean to them. He talked of the traditions of the area, of the large church in its centre and the value of its sacred objects, and he talked of the local heroes of Beza who had died in the war with the Italians and what the Government owed them for their sacrifice.

By the time he had finished, it was clear not only where he stood, but where he expected everyone else to stand. And one by one, each department head stood up and repeated the Governor's sentiments as best they could remember them.

When the last Government official, the Chief Engineer, stood up however, the room became unusually quiet. It took the Engineer a moment to get to his feet, coughing several times as he did. "I believe the best site," he said simply, his voice shaking, "is the first one we are seeing, because it is the only one beside the new road." Without looking at the Governor, he then quickly sat down again.

The Governor looked as if he had been expecting the Engineer's response. He simply frowned and nodded, and then quickly turned to me with a smile. "And what about you, Ted?" he asked. "Which site do you prefer?"

I stood up and pulled my ear, then rubbed my moustache. It was suddenly clear why I was there. I was to be the Governor's alternate engineering expert.

"Well," I said nervously, "of the four sites we saw, I think in many ways, Beza is the best option. There's quite a large community there already. There are several small shops, lots of children for the new school, trees for building new houses, a good sized river for water, the land nearby is relatively level, but . . ." I paused, "but there's no way to get there."

The Governor's smile suddenly faded.

"I didn't know about the new road between Chenchä and Bonke when we were up there," I went on, "but it seems to me if there is going to be a new town, it has to be on it. I can't imagine spending scarce Government money to build new public facilities in a place that will soon be bypassed. Once the road is built people will move to it, just like they have moved here to Arba Minch from Chenchä because of the new road to Addis."

As I paused to take a breath, there was complete silence. "I think perhaps we should go back and have a look at some other sites along the proposed road for comparison. But failing that, I guess I would have to say I favour the first site we saw, even though it is far from ideal."

The Chief Engineer looked up at me in amazement. The Governor stared at me with fire in his eyes.

I sat down, and almost immediately a heated argument broke out. Words flew across the table. It was soon clear that the Engineer and I were not the only ones to have reservations about Beza because of its lack of road access.

But there were no better ideas. Eventually, everybody agreed that all four sites had serious problems with them, but no one was prepared to go back up into the mountains to look for another one. The officials already had the pictures they needed to prove to the foreign governments their involvement in the site investigation work. We broke up temporarily for lunch just after one o'clock without reaching consensus on anything.

Over lamb wat and injera, I told Helen about the meeting.

"You know what else is interesting," I added after I'd finished explaining what had happened. "The Governor has got an amazing aerial photograph on his wall of the area around Shileh. It's really recent and you can clearly see his and General Getachö's farms. I'm sure I could use it to accurately calculate how much land Afework ploughed for him, if I could only get a copy of it."

"Well that would be good news! You've struggled with that survey all week. If only he'd taken photos of the area around Beza at the same time," said Helen.

My eyes lit up. "Helen, that's it!"

“What?”

“The aerial photograph. There must be others. No one takes just one.”

I jumped up, “I’m sorry love, but I’ve got to go back and see the Governor. You really may have uncovered the key here.”

I found the provincial official sitting alone at his desk. He looked up briefly when I came in but then quickly looked back down not saying anything. I walked nervously up to his desk.

“Sir,” I said as calmly as I could, “You know the aerial photograph behind you of your farm in Shileh? Where did you get it?”

The Governor looked up both angry and puzzled, but the politician in him made him hold his tongue. He paused for a long time and then replied in a very restrained voice, “General Getacho gave it to me.”

“Does he have others?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“It looks to me like it may be one of a series. While at university, I worked for the US Geological Survey part time, and it looks very similar to photos they used for map making. They are taken in long parallel lines so they can be put together to make a detailed picture of a large area. If there are others, there may be some covering the area around Beza.”

The Governor stared at me for several seconds. Then he reached over to his phone and dialled someone. He spoke in Amharic, too fast for me to understand.

“Yes, there are others,” he said as he hung up. “They will be here in a moment.”

By the time the other Department Heads had returned from lunch, I had crudely taped together several dozen of the 200 aerial photographs General Getacho’s messenger brought over. They were in a single small white cardboard box with the words “US Government” stamped on the back. Hidden by the frame around the Governor’s picture, but present on all the others, was each photo’s scale, its sequential number and a time, altitude and date stamp. I realized they must have come from the same American mapping program that Helen and I had heard about from an American helicopter pilot when we first arrived in the country.

The crude mosaic I pieced together covered the entire area between Arba Mench, Chench and Bonke. All of the route we had travelled, all the farms and fields we had passed, all the foot paths and old Italian roads, all the clusters of huts and little communities were clearly visible. It was the Province’s first real map.

The Governor and the others couldn’t believe it. For the first half hour we all just pointed and laughed as we discovered places we knew.

We found the Government office buildings in Arba Mench where we were meeting, the Governor's house down at the end of the bluff above the isthmus, the road to Chenchä past the Government farm, and the large grass church in the middle of Beza.

Eventually we traced the route of our expedition over the highlands and found the town sites that we had looked at, and other potential ones we hadn't. We followed the route of the old Italian road that was scheduled to be rebuilt. We could see the size and location of Beza in relation to Chenchä and Bonke and the logic of making it the site of the new town, except for it not being on the road that was about to be improved.

And then the Chief Engineer noticed something that no one had been looking for.

Winding around the far side of Beza was what looked like the faint scar of an old Italian road that was not on any existing map. On our trek back to Chenchä through the fog we had actually walked along part of it for a time, and according to the aerial photos it carried on beyond Beza and joined the other old Italian road about two thirds of the way to Bonke.

"If that is old road," said the Engineer in a hushed voice pointing to the photos, "maybe we use it, and not the one now to be fixed."

The Governor jumped to his feet. He was suddenly breathless with excitement. "Of course!" he said with a wide smile across his face. "If there is an old road through Beza, we must use it."

"What about the plans that are already approved for fixing up the other route?" asked the head of the Public Relations Department.

"How is anyone to know the difference, as long as no one here says anything?" replied the Governor.

I watched the others look at each other with smiles matching the chief provincial officer's.

"We would need to check that this new route can be made useable with the funds available," the Governor went on, "but if it can be, does everyone agree?"

All the people around the table nodded their heads in consent, and then let out a collective sigh of relief. I too, felt relieved, although not exactly about the decision to pick Beza as the new town site. I was glad for that, but I felt mostly relieved that I didn't have to give an opinion about secretly altering the road funding to improve a different route. I wasn't sure what I would have said if I had to choose between doing the right thing, and doing the legally correct thing.

Helen and I spent the next four days in Addis getting shots and buying supplies in anticipation of the coming rains. Rumours of another

Government crackdown on university students were rampant, as were estimates of how many students had already mysteriously “disappeared” in the strike. Thankfully, we managed to avoid seeing any serious demonstrations. There was only one minor stone throwing incident between the students and police while we were there, not far from our hotel in Arat Kilo.

Still, we were relieved to get back to Arba Mench. We were even more relieved when we found out that the assistant engineer from the provincial office had gone back in to Beza and confirmed what we had seen on the aerial photos. The scars across the landscape behind Beza really were the remains of an old road between Chench and Bonke, and with the money available, it probably could be made as passable as the originally proposed route.

Thus, we were in high spirits when we finally arrived back in Shileh. As usual, we went over to Telehoon’s hut to say hi and to see how he was as soon as we returned. But just as we knocked on his door, I noticed the shabby new hut down at the far end of the village.

“Damn!” I said out loud.

Helen turned to me. “What is it?” she asked.

“Ayella’s built a new hut in the right of way for the new road.”

Telehoon opened the door, smiling. “Inquan dehina gebu!” Welcome, I’m glad you have come home well, he said shaking both our hands.

“Inquan dehina coyu!” The same to you. I’m glad you have remained here well, I said as the village chief ushered us inside.

After the usual pleasantries over a glass of tella, I struggled to ask about the problem that had suddenly come back to haunt me.

“Sila Ayella.” About Ayella, I said eventually, and then paused trying to think of how to phrase my words, “Indeyet no?” How did it happen?

Telehoon chuckled. “Chiggar alleh?” Is there a problem?

“Yelik bota idellum.” It’s not in the right place, I said trying not to get upset. “Be plan idellum ‘na lela newaree iwoodum.” It’s not by the plan and the other villagers won’t like it.

“Manim aychiggarum.” It won’t bother anybody. “Ayella, bemulu so yowcal.” Everyone knows Ayella, said Telehoon, tapping his finger on his head and rolling his eyes in a gesture that seemed to say the villagers all know he’s retarded.

“Yowcalu?” You know, the chief went on, clasping my shoulder like a father, “Minum denb ke hassab tillik yellum.” There is no rule that is more important than the reason behind it. “L’ahoon yechilal whom?” Shall we just let him be for now?

I hesitated for a moment, sensing the significance of my response, and then slowly, deliberately, nodded my head in agreement.

AIR LETTER  
AÉROGRAMME



MR+MRS MELVIN GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
U.S. OF A.

APRIL 10, 1970

DEAR FOLKS,

I GUESS IT'S ABOUT TIME FOR ANOTHER LETTER. I DON'T REALLY WANT TO GO OUT AND PICK UP THE BAMBOO MATS SCATTERED AROUND IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE, NOW BEING EATEN UP BY THE TERMITES, UNTIL THE SUN COMES UP A LITTLE MORE AND DRIES UP THE MUD. WE HAD A BRIEF UNEXPECTED RAIN LAST NIGHT, EARLY IN THE SEASON. A BLESSING FOR THE CROPS (AS LONG AS THE GRAIN ISN'T STARTING TO DRY), IT'S A CURSE FOR ANYTHING WANTING TO MOVE. ONE FOOT DOWN ANYWHERE AND YOU SINK DOWN THREE INCHES AND COME OUT OF THE HOLE BAREFOOT. THE SECOND TIME DOWN AND YOU CAN CONSIDER YOURSELF A PERMANENT FIXTURE. UNTIL TEN OR ELEVEN I THINK I'LL USE THE EXCUSE TO WRITE TO YOU.

THE BIG NEWS AS YOU PROBABLY FIGURED OUT ALREADY, IS THAT I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THE DRAFT ANY MORE! TALK ABOUT LUCK! I'M NUMBER 306, WHICH MEANS I'LL NEVER GET PICKED NOW UNLESS SOMETHING REALLY SERIOUS HAPPENS. WE FOUND OUT WHILE WE WERE UP IN ADDIS GETTING OUR ANNUAL SHOTS AND WORKING OUT WITH OUR PROJECT DIRECTOR WHAT TYPE OF SKILLS THE VOLUNTEERS THAT WILL

REPLACE US SHOULD HAVE WHEN WE GO. (WOULD YOU BELIEVE THE TEACHERS ARE GONE, BUT THEY STILL WANT TO KEEP SOME AMERICAN VOLUNTEERS HERE IN RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT!) WHAT A PARTY WE HAD. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? WE'RE FREE!

THE ONLY OTHER NEWS IS THAT I WENT ON A MOLE TRIP WAY BACK INTO THE MOUNTAINS A COUPLE WEEKS AGO WITH A BUNCH OF OFFICIALS. IT WAS JUST INCREDIBLE. REALLY REMOTE. PEOPLE LIVING LIKE THEY HAVE BEEN FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. NO ROADS, NO IRON ROOFS.

WHOOOPS! I SEE THE TOYOTA TAXI OUTSIDE. AND IT'S ALL COATED IN MUD. THE ROAD IS AWFUL. I THINK THIS COULD BE ITS LAST TRIP FOR A WHILE. ANYWAY, I JUST THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW WE'RE STILL DOING FINE. WE'RE COMPLETELY AWAY FROM THE STUDENT PROBLEMS YOU MAY BE HEARING ABOUT. I'LL TELL YOU ABOUT THE TRIP SOMETIME, BUT MAMO DOESN'T LOOK LIKE HE'S GOING TO STOP AT CINKY'S FOR A BEER. I'D BETTER CLOSE THIS UP SO HE CAN TAKE IT WITH HIM.

I LOVE YOU.

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 11:

### A MONUMENT TO GOD

*In which an arch is built for Haile Selassie's visit and we all find out what true power is.*

Brushing aside the cloth door, I stooped into the dark smoky hut of General Getacho's mistress leaving the bright sticky sun outside. It was just after midday. On the floor by the door sat Zelalem, the provincial Police Chief's local woman, huddled over flickering coals and a large black clay pot. In the low light her very pregnant stomach bulged heavily under a grey green dress that looked and smelled as if it hadn't left the fireside for months.

I smiled at the woman as I entered and said "Tenystaling". Rather than return the hello, however, she silently picked up the pot from the fire and with her head lowered, moved over to a cow skin lying on the almost dry new dung floor. Just to the left of the crooked centre post were three tiny handle-less china cups.

It was a disconcerting sign. Someone important was in the hut with me. I lifted my head and peered into the hazy blackness.

The note I'd found tucked between the top and bottom halves of our Dutch door had said simply, "Please come to General Getacho's hut at 6:00 - Abraham".

It couldn't be anyone from outside, I thought to myself. It's the rainy season. There hasn't been a vehicle through here in weeks. But the note was in English so it couldn't be anyone local either.

I had met General Getacho only twice before, both times more than a year earlier in Arba Mench begging things for the village; iron for the clinic roof, money for monkey poison. The Police Chief lived next to the Governor's mansion in an even larger concrete block house of his own, He also had grass huts for his mistresses wherever he had farms, but I had never seen him in Shileh before. The closest the big man ever got to our village was in nearby Elgo where his largest farm was. On the rare occasions he came to the valley he would send one of his police across the river on a tractor to get his woman.

It's got to be someone from the new farm down by the lake, I thought, just as a very tall, very dark bearded man with a genuine 'afro' haircut sprang toward me out of the haze.

"Greetings," said the stranger in a guttural voice that popped consonants as he spoke. He took both my hands in his and shook them like he was shaking a rug.

"Hello. Abraham?" I said with a mixture of anxiety and relief. The stranger's bright toothy smile and warm twinkling eyes instantly relaxed me. "So you did mean noon!"

Among traditional Ethiopians, clocks start at sunrise or 6:00 am. Six o'clock really means midday, but with the note in English I wasn't sure what to expect.

"Of course. Where is Helen, and how are you living in this God forsaken place?" asked the grinning stranger in one explosive breath.

Abraham's English was flawless, but he spat his words. Like hearing German pronunciation in a French conversation, his strange accent made it clear that he was not one of Haile Selasie's chosen Amharas. Abraham must be from somewhere up north, I thought to myself, Eritrea, or maybe Tigre.

"We . . . she got delayed vaccinating cows. She should be here soon," I said. For a moment I stared at the woman pouring black liquid back and forth from the black pot into two of the three tiny white cups trying to think of how to answer his second question. "We thought it would be more interesting than working in a big city," I added eventually. "Living in a grass hut sounded fun, and we didn't really want to live in Addis."

"You too?" asked Abraham with more than a little empathy in his voice.

"You don't like Addis either?" I asked, confused. "I thought most Ethiopians wouldn't live anywhere else if they had the choice."

Abraham stared at me for a moment as if sizing me up. "There is too much trouble there now. When I was at Haile Selasie University many people disappeared. I was afraid it would soon be me. The students are very angry."

"Yes, I know their anger," I said, encouraged by Abraham's openness. "Only a few weeks after we arrived in Ethiopia, one of them tried to poke my eye out." I raised my face to show Abraham the scar.

"Really?" said Abraham, leaning forward in the dim light to try to see what I was pointing at. "What were you doing up at the University?"

"It didn't happen at the University," I said. "It was in Arat Kilo."

"By the American Embassy annex?"

"Yes. We were walking by some shops when some kid behind us yelled out something about a pig. The next thing I knew I had blood pouring down my face and a student screaming at me."

Abraham nodded, and sighed in resignation. "The students don't believe in His Majesty any more. They say he cannot see the corruption.

Out of the city the people still think he is a God, but not in Addis." He dropped his head. "My father often told me how he saved the Country from the Italians by going to Britain. He may not be a God but I believe he is a good man. That is why I could not stay," he added quietly, the twinkle in his eyes suddenly dimmed.

Abraham turned and said something to the woman who huddled over the tiny white cups. She nodded silently, carefully poured the black liquid back and forth once more into the tiny cups and then handed one to each of us.

"Did you know coffee comes from Ethiopia?" asked Abraham, his words continuing to explode from his mouth. "Actually from Kaffa province, around Jima."

"No, really?" I lied to help Abraham gracefully change the subject, but burned my mouth on the thick salty liquid for my effort. Ethiopian coffee bore no resemblance to any American brew I'd ever had, not even its lingering smell. "So what brings you here to Shileh, anyway?" I continued, trying to sound comfortable with the drink I had never much liked. "Do you work down on the new farm?"

Abraham seemed genuinely surprised by my question. He put down his cup. "Did not General Getacho tell you?" He paused briefly, but not long enough for me to reply. "I am a Community Development Worker, like you. I live in Gidole now," he said, pointing with a cupped hand first at himself, and then at me. "He told me about you, even about Helen and the lion." Abraham's eyes twinkled again.

I glanced embarrassed at Zelalem, wondering if she was how the General knew about the lion story. "No, I've only met the man a couple times and it was some time ago," I said. "I didn't know there were any Ethiopians doing Rural Community Development work."

Abraham looked suddenly embarrassed. "Well actually, there are no . . ." He stumbled for words. "I do not think. What you do, I mean. Living in the jungle. My wife would never live down here."

I immediately wished I hadn't asked the question. "I mean, how great you've come," I said struggling for words. "It's been hard being the only ones, but at least we're fairly close to Arba Mench and the bus north. Gidole is even more remote than we are here."

"I guess that's true," said Abraham, sensing my own embarrassment. "But, there is a high school on our street, there are many shops and our house is right beside the new hospital they've just built, so it doesn't really feel remote like this."

My mind now raced ahead of the conversation. "Have you ever heard anything about a new road that might be built to Gidole from Arba Mench?" It was a question I had been intensely concerned about for more than a month.

"No. Why?" asked Abraham.

"Well, when I was up in Arba Mench in February, I noticed some plans lying on a filing cabinet in the Governor's office. I didn't get a good look at them, but on first glance they looked like they were plans for a new all weather road down through this valley."

"Really!" said Abraham.

"Yes, and they didn't show the new road coming through our village. They showed it over by the edge of Lake Chamo."

"That's a problem!" said Abraham with concern. "This place wouldn't survive without the road."

"That's exactly what I thought. But in some ways the route I saw made sense. The existing road now bends quite far inland from the lake to ford the two rivers near us." I paused. "A road that stayed near the edge of the lake would be several miles shorter to Gidole."

Abraham nodded, "Shileh would be as good as dead, though, if that happened."

I nodded my head.

"After you saw the plans, did you ask anyone about them?" asked Abraham

"Yes. I asked the Governor. I was pretty worried."

"What did he say?"

"Well, his answer seemed credible enough. He said the plans were old ones. What I had seen was one of several road alignments that had once been considered for a foreign aid project, abandoned some time ago. He assured me I didn't have anything to worry about. If a new road was ever built south of Arba Mench, Shileh would never be bypassed."

Abraham relaxed. "Actually, that fits with something I did hear about the road," he said. "When I first arrived in Gidole, the dresser told me about a German aid project to build a road down through the valley seven or eight years ago. He said it was cancelled after some funds for the initial survey work went missing. When the problem came to light, the Germans just pulled out and that was the end of it."

I nodded. My doubts were beginning to fade, but they were still not gone. "But according to a couple of local fishermen, someone is now clearing new fields down by the lake a long way from the existing road. From what they said I think the fields are right where the proposed new road was shown on the plans." After a pause, I added, "Do you know if General Getacho is starting a new farm down there?"

"No, not that I know of," said Abraham without any hesitation. "What makes you think the fields might be his?"

I glanced over at the woman by the fire. Several weeks earlier Zelalem had sold me a ten pound fillet off a perch she brought back from the lake. In response to a comment I made on how difficult it must

have been getting the fish home, she had said the General had let her carry it back on his new tractor.

Before I could say anything about this, however, Abraham flashed his captivating smile, and continued. "The General is my friend," he beamed. "He is from Makele, in Tigre, up north where I was born. I'm sure he would tell me if there was going to be a new road down through the valley."

Abraham's genuine openness and sincerity took away any lingering doubts. I returned to my original question "So anyway, why have you come to Shileh?"

Abraham took a quick breath "You have not heard?" There was a strange hush in Abraham's voice. I looked puzzled so Abraham continued with a flush of emotion, "HE is coming! HE is coming here to Shileh!"

Abraham placed a particular emphasis on the pronoun 'he' which buzzed me even more. "Who's coming? The General?" I asked.

"No, HIM! His Imperial Majesty."

"What? Haile Selasie? To Shileh? Are you kidding!"

"Yes, yes! Here! to Shileh! He is coming!" Abraham's teeth gleamed as he sputtered with excitement.

For the next ten minutes Abraham talked nonstop. The Lion of Judah, the direct descendant of the Queen of Sheba, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selasie was coming to Gemu Gofa. It would be the first time in his life he had ever visited the Province, the first time in the 40 years of his reign.

According to Abraham, he was primarily just coming to visit Arba Mench and the Governor. Both were his creations. Arba Mench, though less than ten years old, was rapidly becoming Gemu Gofa's largest town. And the Governor of one of the country's most remote administrative centres was his appointment.

Why his visit involved Shileh was because of the small eight bed hospital that had just been built in Gidole. As a special part of his visit, His Majesty had decided he would officially open it so that his people could see him dedicate his latest gift to them in person.

"And there is no airport beyond Arba Mench of course," continued Abraham, "so the road through Shileh is the only way he can get there. He has to come through here!" Abraham was practically jumping up and down with excitement by this point. "I have been in the hospital too and it already has beds in it!" he added. "It even has medicines!"

It was common knowledge among those working in Community Development that any new hospital or school His Majesty opened only saw its furnishings for a short time. The equipment and stock miraculously followed the Emperor's movements.

"When the rainy season is over and the road can be used again, He will be coming," Abraham concluded, and then added almost as an after-thought, "Shileh must be ready. I am sure the villagers will agree. You must build an arch as soon as possible." Abraham's words were certain and unequivocal.

It took a moment for his last words to sink in. I was still dazed with the news of the Emperor's visit. "What?" I said eventually, just as Abraham stood up and started for the hut door. "Build an arch? How can we build an arch?" I felt a sudden rush of anxiety.

Abraham turned back toward me. "You are an Architect, are you not?" he said with a laugh. I wanted to ask him how he knew that, too, but Abraham was already at the door. "Where does your village chief live?" asked the Ethiopian as he disappeared into the light. I followed Abraham out of the General's hut and pointed to Telehoon's hut just up the road.

After the usual greetings, Abraham told Telehoon, in Amharic, what he had just told me. Like me, the village chief's reaction to the news was first of disbelief. It didn't take him long, however, to respond to the earnestness of Abraham's plea, and the significance of the event. All the villagers in Shileh were people of Haile Selasie's own clan and their land in Shileh was the direct result of his benevolence.

Following a brief but energetic discussion with Telehoon which was too fast for me to translate, Abraham suddenly turned back to me. "Telehoon and I are going to gather all the villagers for a meeting," he said. Then they both walked off in the direction of the other huts.

I went off to look for Helen, wondering why she still hadn't shown up. Eventually, I found her down by the new cattle chute with several of the villagers, feeling quite pleased with herself.



I had helped the village build the chute several weeks earlier so that Helen could vaccinate the local cows more easily against Rinderpest and Liver fluke. But up until then, no one had come forward to use it.

"Congratulations," I said, "How did you finally get them to come?"

Helen smiled. "Eyeh," Show him, she said to one of the men standing beside her. He turned around and held up a large bloody liver to me. It hung limply from his hand, but it seemed to have a life of its own.

"Tesfa cut open the liver of a cow that he was butchering and saw all the worms inside," she said casually.

I was still feeling nauseous when Abraham waved us both over to the large bench by the Chief's front door, where he and Telehoon were already sitting. Gathered in the road facing them, was the remainder of the village.

Telehoon began the meeting by introducing Abraham, and then he stepped back and sat down. Abraham stood up, and from that point on, neither Helen nor I caught much of anything that was said, for the eloquent language Abraham used to address the villagers was well beyond us both.

We watched with interest, however, as the group started out noisily, but almost immediately hushed to absolute silence. Eyes widened and mouths dropped open. Then as Abraham continued, the buzz in the background returned, and then grew louder. Voices started to respond to the reflections in Abraham's voice, then talk without prompting.

Through the tone of their voices, we could hear both the reverence the villagers felt toward their God, and their pain. It was clear that they

did not know how they could possibly pay suitable homage to His Majesty when he came to visit. Their mid-year crop back in December had been another disaster and they had nothing they could give to Him; nothing at all.

Then suddenly all the villagers eyes turned toward me. Abraham waved his arms in the air with grand gestures. The villagers all smiled at the white man among them. I desperately tried to interpret what Abraham was saying. But all I could understand were the words "Yechilalu, Ted yechilalu!" He can do it, Ted can do it!

The meeting broke up shortly after that, and fearing the worst, I quickly turned to Abraham to ask in English what he had told the villagers.

"Tomorrow they are all going to cut you many long poles," said Abraham with his bright toothy smile and twinkling eyes, "and you will show them how to build an arch."

I didn't have a chance to protest, not that it would have done any good. Just at that point the General's new tractor suddenly came roaring down the rutted dirt track, throwing mud everywhere, hastening the villagers' to return to their huts.

"What's that doing here?" asked Abraham.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "The General must be down on his farm again and wants to see his woman. The river's too high for her to walk across, so he's sent his tractor for her."

This time it was Abraham's turn to be surprised. "Really? That's not his tractor," he said, emphasizing the word 'his'. "It's here for the villagers to use."

I wasn't sure what to say. I was surprised at Abraham's reaction. "Well, if the General didn't use it, nobody would," I said, trying to avoid a direct response to Abraham's implied concern. "It's really cheap to hire, but the farmers here haven't had a good crop in nearly a year. At the moment they're so poor they couldn't even afford the fuel for it, much less the few dollars a day for the driver."

Abraham was gone when Helen and I got up the next morning. He had left on foot before sun up, according to Telehoon, heading back towards Gidole. The chief handed us a note that said simply, "See you in a month. Good luck! Abraham."

I spent all morning trying to figure out how to make an arch out of sticks, bark and a couple of dozen four inch galvanized nails. That afternoon, right on cue, two dozen long, relatively straight poles arrived in the road outside our door. With them were an equal number of anxious men, waiting to be told what to do next.



By the end of the day, more to my surprise than anyone else's, something roughly resembling an arch was standing over the road.

"Yelewedu!" It stands up! exclaimed Telehoon. They all cheered.

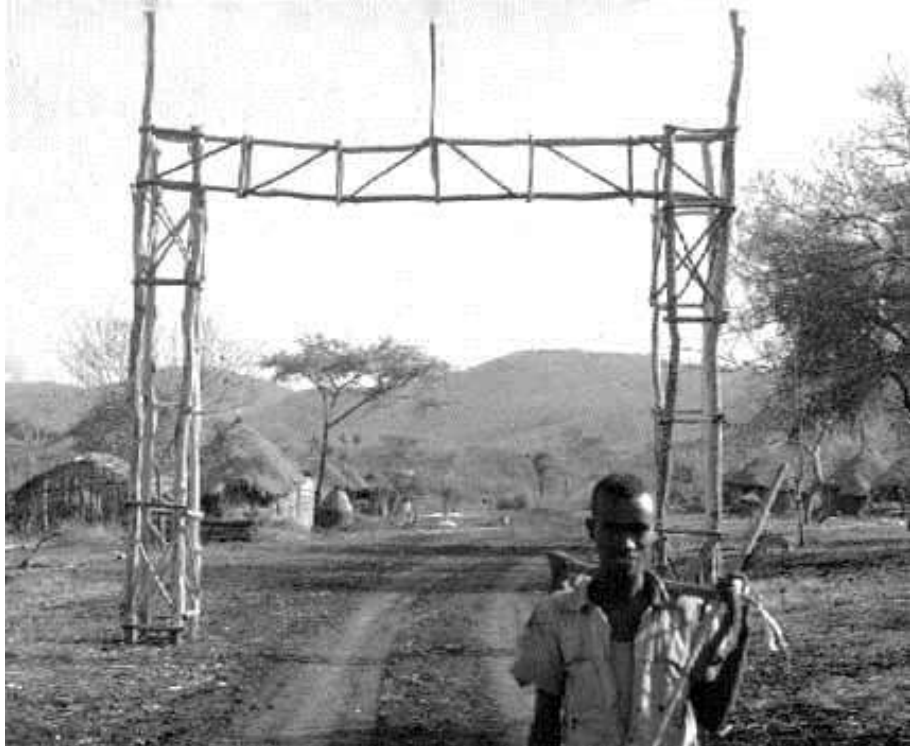
It wasn't over yet though. It was immediately obvious to everyone except me that the arch had to have a sign on it, in Amharic script, to

welcome his Majesty. A sign that wasn't going to wash away in the rain. A cloth sign.

Plain white cotton cloth in Arba Mench was two dollars a yard, and Telehoon calculated they needed about 20 yards of it to go around the posts and all the way across the road.

Well into the evening, the men all sat around outside the chief's hut trying to figure out how they could get the money together to buy some. Eventually they dispersed without coming up with a solution.

For four weeks after that, the arch sat untouched, proudly, though nakedly, proclaiming the entrance of Shileh to anyone who passed through on foot.



Then one still evening, long after the sun had set and most of the villagers had gone to bed, Helen and I heard a deep rumble coming from across the river off in the direction of Arba Mench.

It hadn't rained in the valley for almost five days, and the river was slowly going down. Everyone in the village was expecting the first vehicle to come through at any time. But so far the only tracks in the road past the huts were still just the deep ruts from the General's tractor.

I didn't hear the sound at first, only Helen did. The dull roar of our kerosene lamp drowned out most things to my ears, including any normal conversation. Eventually, I heard it too, though, and looked up from my book.

"What do you think it is?" asked Helen with controlled excitement in her voice from the possibility that coming down the road was the end of our last period of isolation.

"I don't know," I replied, not yet out of the book in my lap.

"I've been listening to it for more than ten minutes," she confessed, "but I can't figure out what it is. It doesn't really sound like the Toyota or the Land Rover."

I stopped to listen more intently. "It's got a funny rattle to it. Maybe it's the General's tractor trying to pull somebody out of the river."

Helen turned back to her book. "No, I don't think so. What ever it is, it's coming this way," she said.

For a long time, perhaps another half-hour, the noise grew steadily louder. Finally, curiosity got the better of us both and we stepped out into the night to find a large crowd already gathered around the arch. Virtually every man, woman, and child of the village was standing there with wide eyes, looking down the road toward the ford. Just around the bend, on the other side of the river, was a brilliant spotlight, sweeping back and forth through the jungle like an angry serpent.

Suddenly, awesomely, out of the woods and into the river plunged a huge, clanking, ground shaking, D8 bulldozer.

With an imperial presence, it rattled up the near side of the bank with its spot light spinning madly and its blade raised high. It lumbered down the long stretch of road past the people lining the edges, then ducked with a lurch under the arch into the village.

It didn't slow down, however. Painfully, laboriously, it cranked past the huts and then disappeared back into the night, leaving only blinded eyes, ringing ears and two more deep ruts in the road.

"Haile Selasie!" came the words to everyone's lips immediately on its departure. "Yemetowal!" He has come! they said as though it was now a fact of history.

No bulldozer had ever been on the road through Shileh before. Like many of the country's roads, the winding track down through the valley beyond Arba Mench had originally been cleared during the world war II Italian occupation using local slave labour, and it had held itself together ever since simply through continued use.

The Mercedes truck and the two four-wheel drive "taxis" that used the road during the dry season, always carried winches, tire chains, shovels, chain saws and many spare hands to help get themselves through any obstruction they might run across. The Mercedes even carried an acetylene welding torch and a variety of spare parts, like wheel bearings, drive shafts and axles in case the road simply proved too much for it, which it occasionally did.

Few villagers wondered what the huge machine was that went past them. Most had seen smaller bulldozers on the other side of Arba Mench on the main road to Addis. But everyone did wonder why it had come through Shileh in the middle of the night, and why it hadn't put its blade down to scrape the road smooth as it went by.

Telehoon had answers to both questions. "Ke Chamo Bahir gar, menged yegageralu." It has gone to fix the road down by Lake Chamo, he said, referring to the place where the road to Gidole was permanently underwater because of the unusually high level of the salt lake.

The bulldozer, said Telehoon, had obviously come to cut a new path for the road around the headland higher up on dry land. And it had come through in the night with its blade up, because it was in a hurry. It

would have taken weeks to re-grade the old road, Telehoon assured everyone. He guessed His Majesty would probably be coming through Shileh very soon. He might even be in Arba Mench already, he concluded.

Telehoon then pointed toward the arch that stood in the dark over everyone's heads like a giant prehistoric skeleton. "Negurgun, ahoon, min alleh?" But how can we have this, he asked?

The implication was obvious and his timing perfect. In the exhilaration of the moment, no one could resist. They all hurried back to their huts and searched through the secret hiding places in their shoes, clay pots and carved centre post niches. Eventually everyone came back with what was, without any doubt, every last cent in the village. Telehoon himself came back with four blackened, tightly folded one dollar bills.

Arba and bur 'na hoolet centimes allegn!" We have forty-one dollars and two cents, the chief announced proudly when he'd finished counting out the change. It was enough to buy all the cloth they needed and some ink as well.

Late the next afternoon both Abraham and the man sent to Arba Mench to buy the sign material arrived in Shileh on foot from opposite directions at virtually the same time. Both had the same story to tell. Abraham had heard it via the police radio in Gidole. The villager had heard it from a hundred people in the Arba Mench market.

His Majesty was already in Gemu Gofa. He was staying at the fancy new Bekele Mula Tourist Hotel across from the Police Chief and Governor mansions, right in Arba Mench. He would be coming to Gidole to dedicate the new hospital in the morning, tomorrow morning!

The villagers could hardly believe it. Tomorrow! Their Father, Haile Selasie, would be in Shileh! Full of new enthusiasm they worked deep into the night to finish the sign and get it tied onto the arch. Even after it was finished, few could sleep.

Before dawn, well before even the roosters had started crowing, everyone in the village was up and dressed in their finest clothes. From somewhere out of the depths of their thatched roof huts, most of the women found dazzling white dresses to wear, and feather light see-through shawls with brightly coloured intricately embroidered edges to put over their heads.

Many of the men were also in white freshly washed one piece sarong like gabies. Telehoon, however, put on a light muslin coloured suit jacket, matching pants, a white shirt, white felt hat and an ancient pair of wire rimmed glasses that had a large crack across one lens.

At sun up everyone moved the benches out of their huts. On them they placed lavish platters of injerra and wat covered with a piece of

cloth, and large gourds of tella, known to be His Majesty's favourite food and drink, which they had spent the last four weeks preparing. Then they moved together around the arch.

For an hour everyone just stood there, too excited to say much to each other, but they didn't have to wait long. Just as the day was starting to warm up, down the road toward the ford the villagers heard several of the children yell out. "Yemetalu! Yemetalu!" He's coming. He's coming!

And sure enough, not far in the distance, was the unmistakable whine of many engines as they turned and twisted toward the village along the rutted road from Old Shileh. Abraham's eyes twinkled as he looked at me, and then at the arch. I couldn't help smiling back.

Almost before the villagers knew it, out of the forest across the river came a shiny new Land Rover all covered in mud, then another, and another. The first one was open at the back. Its army green canvas cover had been removed, and a soldier was standing between the cross bars holding a rifle at attention, or at least trying to. The vehicle was unceremoniously throwing him around the open back like a pinball as it bounced in and out of the deep ruts on the road into the village.

The second one had only a driver and a large man in uniform inside. The latter was covered in badges from his double chin to his double belt. He stared intently ahead with a blank expression on his face and his arms tightly crossed, as if determined to ignore the world around him.

The third was filled with gawking eyes and fingers pressed against glass windows, as were the next eleven.

The villagers' interest flicked from one vehicle to the next, searching the fancy clothes and multi coloured uniforms inside. They were looking for a wiry little man with a grey curly beard and the Lion of Judah sewn with gold thread on his chest.

Like a giant python, the procession of vehicles moved under the arch past the people standing by the roadside, and then back into the forest on the other side of the huts without even slowing down.

Telehoon and Abraham were both standing at the head of the villagers when the Land Rovers first came out of the woods. Together they raised their hands in a grand wave as they approached, and held them there as the parade passed. But by the time the last vehicle had vanished into the jungle, the wide smiles on their faces had also vanished. They lowered their arms without uttering a word.

"Lemin Aycoyoom?" Why didn't they stop? Someone asked from the back. "Megib yebuzzal!" We have so much food!

Someone else asked who the fat man was in the second car.

"General Getacho neberegn," That was General Getacho, spat Abraham, more violently than usual. Then he turned to me. "No one

even stopped to pick me up," he said in English, almost in a whisper. "How am I going to get back to Gidole for the celebrations?"

I couldn't reply. I didn't know what to say.

"Manim alayooim?" Did anyone actually see His Majesty? asked Telehoon.

Everyone turned toward each other to see if someone else had seen something they hadn't. But after some discussion the unanimous answer was, no.

"Tarias, bewhala yemetalu." Well then, said the Chief, He is still coming. That must just have been the advance party of officials, Telehoon went on in Amharic. They probably have to get to the hospital before His Majesty so that they can greet him when he arrives.

The explanation made perfect sense, and revived everyone's spirits immediately. It was still quite early in the morning after all. Quick calculations proved that the entourage that had just passed would have had to have left Arba Mench before sun rise to have reached Shileh when it did. That was something His Majesty could never have been expected to do. He was, after all, nearly 80.

Three and a half more hours passed in anxious anticipation. The sun rose with the heat, but no one moved more than a stone's throw from the arch.

Finally, just before noon, out of the woods came the expected sound of more engines.

Conversations abruptly stopped. The women smoothed down their dresses. The men brushed off the mud from their rubber tire sandals.

The noise quickly grew louder and louder, until it felt like another D8 was about to burst upon us, but nothing came out of the trees by the river.

Then someone pointed up into the air. Two specks in the sky were travelling slowly down the valley over by the lake.



In unison, everyone turned to stare at them.

"Mindeno?" What is it? someone asked.

"Inja," Telehoon shrugged, I don't know.

Abraham stood and watched silently. By the look on his face he knew, but he just couldn't open his mouth.

Telehoon looked at the Tigrinian and then turned to me. "Aeroplane aichillum, Wada ya, mended ayer yellum." It couldn't be His Majesty's airplane, could it? There's no airport that way.

"Aeroplanoch idelloom. Helicopteroch Nacho. Ye Haile Selasie helicopteroch." They're not airplanes, they're helicopters, Haile Selasie's helicopters, I said quietly. On the tails of both aircraft I could just make out His Majesty's imperial emblem, the Lion of Judah.

"Indayet?" How is that? asked Telehoon, his colour slowly draining from his face for the second time.

Helicopters don't need runways, I went on, having more difficulty than usual finding the right Amharic. They can land in a space like that, I said, pointing over to the small clearing used for our Thursday market.

The villagers all heard my explanation, but it was clear few believed me. Most stayed by the arch for the rest of the day and some even into the night, until the fourteen Land Rovers came back through the village, and confirmed His Majesty had already come, and gone, "b'ayer".

For the villagers of Shileh, however, His Majesty's bypass of the town was not the most painful part of His visit to the Province, although this was not obvious to any of us for another week. We all found out the

awful ending to his trip from Zelalem as she was packing her bedding to move out. She and her tiny new baby were going down to live by the lake, next to General Getacho's new farm.

We were all still wondering why the giant bulldozer had not yet come back through the village, so she told us.

The bulldozer had continued on to the lake that night, just as Telehoon had predicted, she said. It spent the next day cutting a new, dry section of road around the headland so the Emperor's entourage wouldn't have to get wet.

The day after His Majesty's visit, however, it then simply turned around, and with its blade down, drove back to Arba Mench along the line of the road that I had originally seen on the plans in the Governor's office, . . . down past the General's new fields by the lake, far away from our inexorably doomed new town of Shileh.

U.S. AIR MAIL

AIR LETTER

AÉROGRAMME



MR + MRS M. GLAZIER  
56 GLENDALE ROAD  
SHARON, MASS. 02067  
U.S.A.

JUNE 9, 1970

DEAR MOM,

LAST TIME WE WROTE I THINK WE WERE WONDERING HOW WE WERE GOING TO STAND STAYING HERE ANOTHER TWO MONTHS AFTER THE AWFUL NON-EVENT OF HAILE SELASIE'S VISIT. HELEN WAS READY TO LEAVE EVEN BEFORE THE FIASCO. AND NOW THAT I'M FREE OF THE DRAFT AND ALMOST ALL THE REST OF THE VOLUNTEERS IN ETHIOPIA HAVE LEFT, THERE'S NOTHING REALLY TO STOP US FROM GOING TOMORROW. SHILEH'S FUTURE IS AS GOOD AS DEAD.

BUT YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAS HAPPENED!

A FEW DAYS AGO OUR ETHIOPIAN BOSS, THE LOCAL MINISTER OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ARBA MENCH CAME TO SEE US FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER. YES, TO OUR HOUSE IN SHILEH! ONLY WE WEREN'T HERE. WE'D GONE DOWN THE ROAD TO HELP REBUILD ONE OF THE VILLAGERS HOUSES THAT HAD BLOWN DOWN IN A SMALL TWISTER.

WHEN WE CAME OUT TO ARBA MENCH EARLIER LAST WEEK (OUR FIRST TIME IN 2 MONTHS, AS THE RAINY SEASON HAS JUST ENDED) HE HAD SAID HE HAD SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO TELL US AND IF HE HAD TIME HE'D BE DOWN ON SUNDAY. WE HAD SAID "SURE THING" (TO OURSELVES, OF COURSE), BUT ANYWAY, THIS WAS ONLY SATURDAY. A NOTE ON OUR DOOR SAID TO COME TO ARBA MENCH ON THE NEXT TRUCK.

SO WE DID THIS MORNING AND FOUND OUT THAT

THEY WANT US TO EXTEND OUR CONTRACTS. NOT JUST HIM (OR THE VOLUNTEER SERVICE, THOUGH THEY APPARENTLY AGREE WITH THE IDEA), BUT THE HEAD MINISTER OF THE ETHIOPIAN MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ADDIS. WE SAID WE WERE FED UP TO HERE  WITH SHILEH, AND HE SAID, NOT IN SHILEH, BUT IN KELAM!

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF KELAM? KELAM IS RIGHT AT THE JUNCTION OF THE KENYAN, SUDAN AND ETHIOPIAN BORDERS. IT'S WHERE PEOPLE DON'T WEAR ANY CLOTHES, KILL (SOMETIMES PEOPLE) WITH POISONED ARROWS, USE NO MONEY, HAVE NO MARKETS, WANDER AROUND WITH CATTLE SETTING UP SKIN HUTS NEXT TO WATER HOLES UNTIL THEY DRY UP, THEN MOVE ON. THE WAY ONE GETS IN IS OVER NONEXISTENT ROADS. ACROSS THE DESERTS YOU AIM FOR THE LOW SPOTS IN THE MOUNTAINS ON THE OTHER SIDE AND HOPE NO NEW GULLIES HAVE OPENED UP IN BETWEEN.

A TRUCK GOES IN ONCE EVERY FEW MONTHS WITH SUPPLIES FOR A SMALL GARRISON OF POLICE ON THE BORDER TRYING TO KEEP THE PEACE BETWEEN WARRING TRIBES THERE.

WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE PART OF THE GOVERNMENTS FIRST ATTEMPT TO PENETRATE THE LOWLANDS OF THE OMO RIVER. ALONG WITH FIVE OR SIX OTHER PROFESSIONAL ETHIOPIANS (INCLUDING THE AREA'S FIRST GOVERNOR), WE WOULD HELP ESTABLISH A NEW TOWN ON THE GIANT RIVER (SUPPOSEDLY LARGER THAN THE SACRAMENTO, IN A VALLEY OF SIMILAR SIZE AND FERTILITY) THE OBJECT WOULD BE TO OPEN UP THE AREA TO AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT USING WATER PUMPED FROM THE RIVER (BY WIND OR DIESEL).

I FEEL LIKE I'M WRITING IN EXAGGERATIONS AND AFTER WE GO IN I'LL WRITE AND TELL YOU HOW MUCH I LIED. THEY'VE OFFERED TO TAKE US IN ON THE NEXT POLICE TRUCK, JUST TO SHOW US THE PLACE, NO COMMITMENTS.

WE'RE ALSO WRESTLING WITH THE IDEA THAT IF WE WENT WE MIGHT BE HELPING TO DESTROY THE UNIQUE CULTURE THERE ALREADY. . . THOUGH PERHAPS WE'D BE ABLE TO PROPOSE WAYS OF SAVING IT? (WE WOULD NEED TO LEARN A WHOLE NEW LANGUAGE, HOWEVER.) SO WE HAVE DEFINITELY NOT SAID YES YET, BUT WHAT A WAY TO FINISH HERE, IF WE SAY NO! WISH US LUCK! LOVE AND PEACE,

TED + HELEN

## Chapter 12:

### THE ETHIOPIAN ENIGMA

*In which Helen and I go beyond the end of the road past the cost of good intentions.*

"There is no black or white in Ethiopia," I translated out loud.

"L'and and so, tikur nech no 'na nech tikur no!" continued the old man standing unsteadily next to us with an empty unlabelled bottle in his hand.

I stared at him for a moment and then continued translating the old man's words. "For some people, black is white, and white is black . . ."

I paused and then turned to Tadessa. ". . . which doesn't make sense." I said, frowning. "What's he saying?"

The new Governor of Kelam dropped his glass of araki down hard on the table and squinted his eyes to focus his mind. "I think, Teddy Boy," he said, his words blurred by his drink, "he's saying . . . we're all white . . . and you're all black."

Tadessa sat up straight and smiled at his own wisdom.

I looked over at Helen who had been listening intently to the conversation.

"Yes, I think you got it right," she concurred. "And I agree with him. This place is proof, surely!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Jinka is one of the most isolated and remote places in the country to most Ethiopians, right? The only practical way in or out of here is by plane.

"Yeh," broke in Tadessa, trying hard to speak without sounding drunk. "But in a few days . . . this town will look like Addis Abeba . . . to us . . . from where we'll be."

Helen nodded her head in agreement.

"You don't sound that excited about where we're going, Tadessa," I said.

"No . . . No, I don't think I am," said the Governor, shaking his head exaggeratedly as much to try to stay conscious as to answer the question. "I don't know what I did wrong."

"Wrong?"

The governor took a deep breath. "To be sent to Kelam."

"But you're going to be responsible for opening up the whole Omo Valley to development," I exclaimed. "The whole southwest corner of Ethiopia. Doesn't that excite you?"

Tadessa looked up at me with large brown eyes. "I must have made someone . . ." he began, blinking hard to try to hold off the inevitable, "really mad at me." Tadessa's head dropped down onto his chest. Then the short round Ethiopian slumped over the table.

Through his own stupor, the old man looked at the Governor in contempt. "Cherishialo yemeselenyal." I think he is finished, he said to us and then staggered away into the darkness.

Helen and I looked at each other. "What a strange conversation," said Helen. "Was he the Ballabat of this place?"

"I don't know, but he seemed to know Tadessa," I said. "I guess we had better get the Governor to his room."

We stood up and each holding one arm, coaxed the Ethiopian to stand up. Slowly we guided him to the back of the buna bet. I returned to the front of the hotel to pay for our injerra and tella and then joined Helen in our own room.

"I'm glad we just said we'd go to Kelam for a look," I said when I had closed the door. "I can't see us volunteering for a third year here to work with an alcoholic."

"You don't really think he is one, do you?" asked Helen looking around at me as she stripped off her clothes and dropped them into our airline bag. Other than a sagging single bed, there was no furniture in the room and the floor was dirt, so the choice was either the bag or the top of our food box.

"Well he certainly likes to drink," I shrugged, as I dumped my clothes on the latter. "He'd be better off getting a wife to share his adventures with," I said, as I reached for Helen from behind.

"Uh hum," she nodded, aware of both what I meant and what I wanted, but not interested in the proposition. She gently twisted out of my grasp and turned around with an apologetic smile on her face.

Trying not to look disappointed, I kicked off my sneakers and hopped into bed as casually as I could.

The four-wheel drive Mercedes truck was half loaded when we finally walked out into the empty market area in front of our hotel just after 9:00 the next morning.

Tadessa was already outside checking over the supplies left in the open truck overnight, despite the guard he'd posted. "Have you two decided to come along after all?" he chided.

We both nodded sheepishly.

"How do you feel?" I asked, and then wished I hadn't.

Tadessa's round shiny face glowed in the morning sunlight. "Fine," he said with a grin. "How do you feel?"

"Fine too," I said. "You know that old man we were talking to last night?" I went on quickly, trying to change the subject, "Was he the Ballabat here?"

Tadessa had to think a moment, then answered with a question. "Did he have a gold piece in one ear?"

I tried to picture the old man's face, but I could only remember the depression in his eyes.

"Yes," said Helen. "He did."

"Yeh," said the Governor after another long pause. "He's the chief of the old town of Baco up in the mountains. What's left of it, anyway. He's my father."

Both Helen and I looked at him wide eyed. "Your father!" said Helen. "I didn't know you were from around here."

"I grew up in the mountains over there," he said pointing to the rugged range behind us, "before they built the airport down here and moved everyone down next to it. When I went off to the American school in Addis I never thought I'd ever come back. Why would I?" he asked, gesturing at the collection of corrugated iron roofed mud huts that surrounded us. "When I came in here three months ago, it was the first time in nearly ten years."

I had thought about the old man's 'black is white' comment most of the night. It really bothered me for some reason. "Was he telling us the joke about how God under cooked white men, overcooked black men and cooked Ethiopians just right?" I asked. "Or something else?"

"Did he tell you that one?" asked Tadessa.

"Well I'm not sure. He just said B'Ethiopia wust, l'and and so, tikur nech no, 'na nech tikur no."

"Oh . . ." said the Governor, pausing with a sigh. "He was just talking about me. He thinks I'm white now because I spend so much time around foreigners. It's funny though. White people still all see me as black."

Tadessa went quiet for a moment. "Sometimes I think it was my father that got me posted to Kelam," he added under his breath.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, the supply truck crossed the curved sloping grass runway that we and the Governor had landed on the day before and headed south out of town. There were nine people on board. Tadessa and the driver sat in the front while Helen, myself and five other people squeezed between bags of grain and drums of fuel in the uncovered back.



Almost immediately, we came to a place where the road sloped down sharply into a small river twenty feet below. Beyond, two ruts went up a much lower bank on the far side and continued off into the open thorn forest.

With a smooth change into low range the driver steered the truck over the edge, but half way down noticed the toe of the bank missing. He tried the brakes but they had no effect. With wheels locked, the vehicle dropped the last foot straight down.

The stream, fortunately, was shallow with a soft forgiving bottom. The truck bounced heavily but none of its cargo fell into the water.

On the far bank, the Governor stuck his head out of the passenger door window. "You two okay back there?" he asked.

"Better than a ride at the state fair!" laughed Helen.

For the next six hours, the truck crawled through the lowland scrub. It was supposed to be the beginning of the dry season, but there were still many signs of recent rain. We often had to get out while the driver negotiated pot holes, fallen trees and torturously steep hills. Many times the four police with us had to use axes and shovels to clear the way.

After the first stream, everyone also had to get out at every river. We initially thought the driver was just being extra cautious after his first mistake, for none of the other streams contained anything more than wet sand. However, just as it was getting dark Tadessa pointed out the real reason as we were grudgingly climbing out of the truck beside yet another waterless river.

"Quicksand caused that," said the Governor as our eyes followed his finger. Just downstream in the middle of the river bed, a second Mercedes truck lay on its side half buried in the sand.

"That's the Police truck I was on three months ago when I came in to see what I was getting into," he explained. "We had to walk out from here."

"What happened?" asked Helen looking nervously at our own truck.

"The rains in the mountains came earlier than expected," said Tadessa climbing down out of the cab. "There was no water flowing in the river at the time, but the sand turned out to be much wetter and softer than our driver thought."

Tadessa tapped lightly on the sand with his polished leather shoes. "The truck sank up to its axles as soon as we started across and the more we tried to dig it out the deeper it sank."

The Governor then stepped down firmly onto the riverbed. Just a trace of water ponded around the edges of his shoe.

"Can it be dug out?" I asked.



"The Commander in Jinka thinks so," said Tadessa as he walked cautiously toward the sunken truck for a closer look. "Now that it's drier. The police in the back with you were going to work on it today, but it took us longer than expected to get here. It's too late now, but they'll try to dig it out next week when you come back through here."

"Do you think we can get across now?" I asked.

The Governor looked down at his feet. "We're not sinking in much. It should be okay."

The stars were out when we finally climbed down from the truck for the last time. "We'll stay here tonight," said Tadessa nodding at three thatched roofed huts in the centre of a small clearing. It was the first sign of life we had seen since we'd left Jinka.

"There's a tent in the back you can set up over there," he continued, pointing to a grassy space next to one of the huts that had 'Police' hand lettered in Amharic on a board over its door.

Helen and I hopped down with our airline bag and box of food. "Where are we?" asked Helen.

"We're at the turn off to Shileh," said Tadessa.

Helen looked at him puzzled. "Not our Shileh, where we use to live?"

Tadessa nodded. "The very same one."

"Really?" she said surprised. "I thought the road through our old village ended at Konso?"

"It does . . . for most vehicles, but it actually comes all the way around the southern end of the highlands and back up to Baco through here. It's like this road we're following to Kelam, only worse.

"Worse than this?"

"Yeh. There are some big rivers and many parts of the road regularly wash away, but as long as you're prepared for anything, and it hasn't rained in the mountains for a while, you can still use it if you don't mind recreating it as you go. Konso is only about week that way," he said pointing off into the dark. "It's how the Police trucks got in here."

The second day on the truck was much like the first, except hotter. The landscape grew flatter and the thorn trees fewer, but the incessant obstructions and missing sections of the track meant we spent as much of the day out of the truck as we spent in it. We were exhausted by the time we finally pulled into the Police post of Hamar Koke, a collection of ironed roofed mud huts scattered around a small rocky outcrop near the top of a low rise.

We had come a hundred arduous miles in two days and were now over half way to Kelam. In the distance to the north, the high mountains above Jinka were still faintly visible, but most of the land around us smoothed out into flat dry plains in all directions.

To the east, the land gradually turned white in the huge seasonal salt lake of Chew Bahir. To the west in the far distance, a faint winding line of dark grey green vegetation identified the Omo River. To the south toward Kenya, the horizon just faded into sky.

Like the earlier Police outpost we had stayed at the night before, there seemed no reason for the half dozen huts to be there except that

they were at the junction of two faint tracks through the scrub. According to Tadessa one headed west toward an old ferry crossing on the Omo River forty miles away. The other went south toward the border a similar distance away.

When neighbourly relations were better, the southern route had once continued on to the Kenyan town of Illeret on the remote eastern side of Lake Rudolf. But a decade of government hostilities combined with wind and flash floods across a barren landscape had erased most traces of the old road.

"The ferry on the Omo is gone now, too," said Tadessa casually, as he helped us take our things out of the back of the truck. "It disappeared during the last flood."

I hadn't thought about the need for a ferry before, but now I looked at him surprised.

"But didn't you tell us that Kelam is out in the desert on the other side of the river?" I asked. "How will we get there?"

Tadessa nodded his head with a smile. "It's not important. The ferry was only a couple of large boards lashed across four dinghies. I'm almost glad we can't use it."

"But how do we get across then?" asked Helen."

"We don't have to if we can get down close enough to Kelam on this side of the river," Tadessa explained. "There's an old truck still in Kelam that the Police use to bring water to the town from the river and we can get a ride on it. We'll just cross the river in one of the local dugouts."

"And there is a road from here to there?"

"Partly. The easiest way to go is to follow the old road that goes south toward the border," explained the Governor, "and then just turn west when it fades out. We should eventually run into the Omo opposite Kelam just before the river goes into the delta at Lake Rudolf."

I looked at his face to see if he was joking, but he wasn't.

By the time the sun disappeared below the horizon I had our tent up and Helen had our dinner cooked. In the last red glow of the sky just as we were about to eat, Tadessa wandered over to our campsite with a small flask in his hand.

"Would you like some?" he offered.

I looked up from my plate a little worried. I could hear a slight slur in the Governor's speech. "No . . . no thanks," I said.

"It's not just araki. It's real Jack Daniels. I've got a whole case."

Helen's eyes lit up. "That's home town brew," she laughed excitedly. "I'll make a trade. Some of our macaroni and cheese for a taste?"

Tadessa's eyes betrayed his attempt to hide his enthusiasm. "Oh I couldn't," he said.

"Sure you could, have some," she insisted, holding up a fork and a pot lid full of yellow noodles to him.

The Governor hesitated and then took it happily. He sat down on a rock next to Helen. "Thanks," he said with a smile. "I do miss American food."

Helen grew tipsy quickly with the small cupful Tadessa gave her. I watched them both like a voyeur, withdrawing from their company in my head, while my wife opened up to the short stocky Ethiopian with her drink.

"So who will cook for you in Kelam?" she asked.

"Zelalem will do that too."

Helen blushed for somehow we had thought the only woman riding in the back with us, a prostitute, was going to Kelam for the soldiers, not the Governor.

"But she doesn't know how to cook foreign food," Tadessa continued. "Would you teach her?" he asked, looking up at my wife pleadingly.

Helen hesitated. "This stuff is just straight out of a box," she said apologetically, but Tadessa didn't stop looking at her. "Okay," she said eventually. "If we come back, I'll do what I can."

Tadessa beamed.

"Why haven't you ever married, anyway?" she went on quickly, as I stared hostilely at her for hinting we might actually come back.

"I was married. For six years," he said briskly. "But it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry," said Helen.

"Don't be! I'm not." Tadessa took another sip from his flask and then poured more into Helen's cup. "I don't know why I ever agreed to get married. We always argued. She never wanted to do anything with me," he added, shaking his head and looking around him into the dark. "She would never have come here like you."

Tadessa's eyes suddenly grew wet. He wiped them on his sleeve.

Helen leaned over the Governor a little unsteadily. "There will be someone else," she said. "A woman who really loves you would never fight with you, and she would follow you anywhere."

"Do you think so? Do you and Ted ever fight?" he asked.

"I try not to. I just walk away when we start to argue," said Helen, her speech now slightly blurred. "I promised myself when I got married that I would never fight with my husband."

"In Ethiopia, women are also supposed to obey their husbands," said Tadessa also showing the effects of this drink. "But the old ways are changing." He paused for a moment. "Is it like that in America too?" he asked.

Helen giggled. "Couples in America have always argued, I think." She hesitated for a moment and looked over at me silently staring back at her. "I had to leave home when I was fifteen because after my father remarried, my parents fought all the time. I just couldn't stand trying to keep the peace any longer," she said in a tightened smile. "That's when I swore that if I ever got married I would never have the same kind of relationship. It's too destructive. Not just on those who fight but on everyone else nearby."

I listened intently to Helen's words. I already knew why she had left home so young. I had heard all about the violent arguments between her dad and her stepmother before, but I had never known about the calculated effect they had had on our own relationship.

The revelation made me think of the 'black is white' comment of Tadessa's father. No wonder Helen had agreed to come to Ethiopia, I thought to myself, even though it meant she couldn't finish her nursing degree. No wonder she's here now with me in the middle of nowhere even though she's been ready to go home for the last six months. Her lack of opposition didn't mean she agreed with what I wanted to do at all!

I stood up and walked away from the two Tennessee Whiskey soul mates.

Helen looked up at me as I disappeared into the darkness. "Where are you going?" she called out, her speech now quite slurred.

Tadessa stood up. "I think maybe it is time I go," he said slowly. "We have a very long day ahead of us tomorrow . . . I'll see you in the morning."

He looked like he was hoping Helen would try to stop him, but she didn't. She just watched the Governor walk off toward one of the huts and then stood up and followed me into the dark.

"Ted?" she called softly, stumbling on the stony ground and spilling her drink. "Where are you?"

A hyena laughed far off in the scrub.

"Ted?" she repeated, dropping her cup as she stumbled again.

"I'm right here," I said, gently reaching out of the dark for her arm. "Come on, let's get you to bed."

The third day on the truck was even hotter than the day before. We started in the cool air of early morning, but by eleven o'clock the temperature had risen to over a hundred degrees. The sun was relentless. Helen's fair skin was already red from two days' exposure despite multiple layers of clothing, but now her eyes were starting to puff up and it made me worried.

When the truck pulled up to the edge of another giant sand river, I jumped down and headed for a small patch of standing water near the far bank with a towel in my hands. Tadessa yelled out something to me

from the cab window as I went past, but his words didn't register in my brain until after I had stepped into the water and sunk quickly to my knees.

"Whoops!" I said to myself, trying not to panic. I wanted to yell 'quicksand', but with everyone watching me from the truck, it seemed a little melodramatic.

Fortunately, that was as far as I went. Under two feet of soupy sand my feet hit hard ground. I turned around with a limp smile and struggled back onto a drier part of the river bed. "Tilk idellum!" It's not so deep! I yelled back. Everyone waved.

Tadessa climbed down out of the truck looking serious. "It is deep enough," he said as he reached me. "You must be more careful, my friend," he added, putting his arm around my waist. "What were you trying to do, anyway?"

"I just wanted to wet a towel for Helen," I said embarrassed. "Our canteen is empty and the sun is starting to get to her."

Tadessa looked back at my wife worried. "Take her over under those trees," he said quickly. On top of a steep bank on the far side of the sand river some distance from the track was a leafy cluster of thorn trees. "We'll be here for at least a half hour while the police make a bridge to cross this."

I looked at him gratefully, but also with some curiosity. "A bridge?"

Tadessa nodded. "With tree branches. Lots of them."

I helped Helen across to the trees and then wrapped the wet towel I'd brought back from the sand bog around her head. Helen seemed thankful for the attention.

"You know you should have said something a little earlier," I gently scolded her. "I didn't know you had a headache too."

"I didn't want to bother you," Helen said quietly.

"Bother me?" I said somewhat briskly. "Have you ever thought how much bother it would be if you really got sick down here?"

"Why are you so mad?" she asked.

I didn't say anything for some time, wondering myself what it was I was feeling. "I think," I said eventually, "it's the things you were telling Tadessa last night."

"Oh, so you're jealous!" She smiled slightly.

I forced a laugh and shook my head. "No, not the way you think. At least not yet."

Helen looked up at me, shocked by my insinuation. I glared back at her while I tried to find the source of my anger. "What you said to Tadessa, about never arguing with me . . . All I could think about last night was the night I proposed to you. Do you remember?"

Helen looked puzzled.

"Was that why you couldn't give me an answer that day?" I continued, "... even though we had been talking about getting married for almost two years ... because once you said yes you thought you would never be able to argue with me again?"

Helen tried to speak, but I interrupted her.

"For the last three years I thought we were making decisions together. When I asked you what you thought we should do and you said you didn't care, I thought you really meant it. But you didn't, did you? You were just trying to keep the peace. God, I had no idea, but now it all makes terrible sense."

There was a long pause while no one spoke, and then I continued quietly, "... You know, we have no better relationship than your parents had."

Helen's eyes involuntarily filled with tears. "How can you say that?" she said. "We have a lot better marriage than most couples."

"No.. Just a quieter one."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ever since we got married I've copped your silent flack over the decisions I thought we were making together ... like interrupting your degree, coming to Ethiopia ... even coming down here. It's hard enough living with my own choices, but it's not fair having to take the blame for yours too."

"I don't blame you ... not even when you decide to do things I don't like."

"God!" I suppressed a scream. "Why else do you have so little interest in me any more? Even if you can't see it, it's clear enough to me one impotence is the cause of the other."

"So you're now my shrink too!" said Helen, as she wiped her eyes.

I struggled to suppress the sudden rage I felt inside and was mercifully saved by Tadessa stumbling through the bushes toward us with a small bunch of bananas and an open flask.

"Hungry?" asked the Governor, dropping the ripe bananas on the ground beside us. He acted like he hadn't heard a thing.

Helen looked at him anxiously. There was alcohol on his breath. "Sure. I'm starving," she said eventually.

"How are your eyes?" asked the Governor, moving over next to her and looking closely at her red puffy face.



"I'm okay. They're just a bit swollen," she said looking uncomfortable with his attention.

"So Tadessa, if we did agree to stay another year in Ethiopia and come live in Kelam," I asked, anxious to rescue my wife, "What do you see us doing?"

The Governor turned and looked at me with a blank expression on his face.

"The Minister of Community Development in Addis," I went on, "said something about us laying out a new town with a new school down by the Omo and setting out an irrigation system using pumps from the river, if we decided to join you."

Tadessa put on a silly grin. "That's more than I know," he said casually.

It wasn't the answer I had expected. "But what about all the technical staff like the agricultural field officer, the vet and the surveyor that are supposed to be coming down here next month?"

Tadessa sighed, "I'll believe they're coming when I see them," he said peeling a banana.

"What makes you think they won't come?"

"It all depends on what some government in some other country decides to give us, doesn't it!" he said, his drink giving away more than a hint of bitterness.

Helen and I both looked at him with surprise.

"They've turned us into beggars," he added quietly. "My father's right. None of us are in charge of anything anymore."

The Police truck on the other side of the river suddenly gunned its engine. The three of us turned toward the sound just in time to see it dive into a large pile of freshly cut brush covering the soft wet spot in the river bed where I had sunken to my thighs. Sticks and leaves whirled up under its tires and shot out the back like a dog digging for rabbits.



In a moment it was all over, the truck safely again on dry land. Tadessa, Helen and I grabbed our things and ran for it.

"Helen, why don't you ride inside with me, out of the sun?" puffed Tadessa as he reached for the cab door.

Helen didn't look at me. "Oh," she said as she caught her breath. "That's nice of you. Thanks."

The track going south ended not far beyond the dry river. In the middle of a barren landscape of stones, tufts of grass and scattered thorny shrubs the truck turned and headed due west toward a hazy peak in the far distance.

For the next forty miles we raced across almost dead flat ground. Occasionally the driver would find and follow the faint weathered tire tracks of the previous police trip. But mostly he just dodged the few obstructions on the blank landscape, while the rest of us blessed the wind that blew past.

I watched the back of Helen and Tadessa's heads through the rear cab window as they talked. I could not hear what they were saying, but it made me jealous. It wasn't so much because Helen was a beautiful, intelligent woman with a wonderful sense of humour. It was because she was the only truly selfless person I had ever met. She gave to anyone who needed her help without expecting anything in return. It caused everyone who ever met her to fall in love with her.

I, on the other hand, was born and raised the American way to have an ego and to flaunt it. My schooling as an Architect only reinforced it. But it wasn't a characteristic that made me many close friends. It was so opposite to Helen I often wondered why she had agreed to marry me.

How could anyone just decide one day that they would never argue again?

As I watched them, Tadessa suddenly pointed excitedly at two wart hogs running across the path of the Mercedes just in front of us. I could see the driver look at the Governor and then turn the wheel to chase them.

Tadessa wants to run them over, I smiled to myself. That won't go down well with Helen, I thought. I could just imagine the expression on her face and my jealousy eased.

The truck swerved sharply. There was a thump under us and then a sharp shrill squeal. One of the wart hogs stopped in its tracks beside the truck. The other stumbled out from under it and fell over. The driver put on the brakes, but before the truck could slow down, its right front wheel dropped into a hidden hole in the ground. The vehicle jerked violently and would have flipped everyone right out of the back if it hadn't instantly popped back out.

As the truck rolled to a stop, Tadessa hopped out of the cab excitedly, showing no concern for the near catastrophe he'd caused. "Look what we've caught!" he shouted as everyone in the back with me struggled onto our feet. Tadessa reached for an axe. "Pigs have the best meat you can find anywhere," he added, grinning widely.

The Police and I helped the Governor get the carcass into the back of the truck and then we all jumped back in and started off again heading west. I hadn't noticed that the landscaped had changed while we were racing across the countryside. The stony ground had somewhere turned to fine brown silt. The few rare shrubs had grown into scattered clusters of thorn trees. The brown tufts of grass had become decidedly greener. And here and there tall thin termite mounds now stood over us like ghostly hollow tree trunks from an ancient petrified forest.

Though we seemed no closer to the mountains in the distant west, we were clearly getting closer to water.

The truck proceeded slowly through the thickening vegetation. Eventually we found the tire tracks from the previous Police trip again, only this time the driver took care to follow them. Despite the slower pace, however, a slight burning smell started to come from the front of the truck. It was the smell of burning grease and steel not unlike the broken bearing odour I had smelled months earlier on our midnight ride back from Konso with Afework.

I banged on the rear window of the cab and Tadessa turned around. "I smell something funny!" I shouted to him, holding my nose.

Tadessa mouthed the word, "What?"



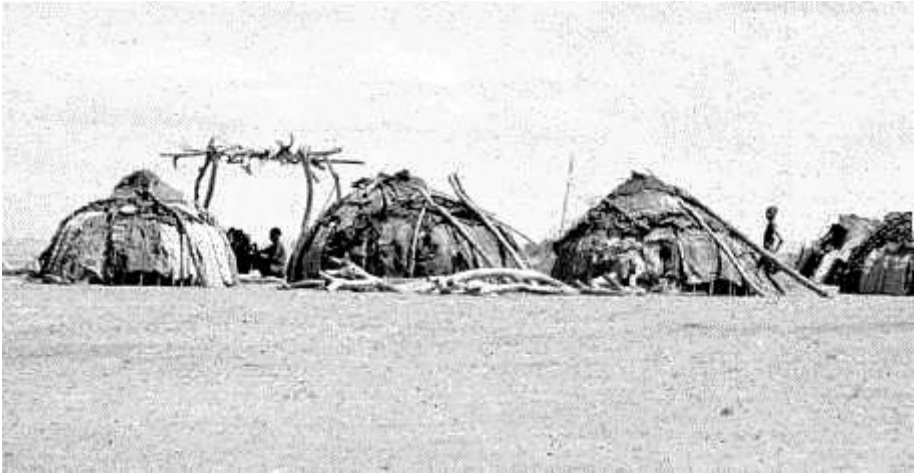
"The wheel! I think there is something wrong with the right front wheel," I yelled louder this time.

The Governor nodded and said something which I couldn't hear. Then he held up his hand with his thumb and first finger close together. I took it to mean we didn't have far to go. I nodded back.

It wasn't far either, but the Omo River still appeared unexpectedly. I had thought the landscape would continue to get greener and thicker as we got closer, like the jungle that grew next to the river by our old village. But it didn't.

Suddenly we came out of the scattered trees and shrubbery beside a thirty foot high mud cliff that dropped straight down into a giant smooth but fast flowing mass of brown water. Four hundred feet away another wall rose a similar height to a totally treeless plain beyond. It wasn't exactly desert on the far side, but it was the next thing to it. Yet dotted across the barren surface quite some distance from the water, were dozens of tiny dome shaped huts and circles of cut thorn fences corralling emaciated cattle. It was one of the portable villages of the Dasonitch.

In the shimmering heat, small groups of topless women wearing only leather skirts moved between the distant leather huts and the river carrying gourds of water on their heads.



Much closer, in the shade of the only bush I could see on the far bank, a half dozen almost naked men were chatting together just back from the river's edge. They barely looked up at our arrival.

The truck didn't stop. It turned north as it neared the river and headed upstream, occasionally turning inland where the land next to the river dropped away onto small low terraces.



Across the river were similar terraces and once I saw a small herd of goats along with their minders in the bracken on one of them.

But otherwise we passed few more signs of life until we eventually stopped opposite another cluster of huts across the river.

By that point the burning smell from the front of the truck had grown quite pungent and I was more relieved the truck had stopped than I was at seeing the normal looking stick and thatch huts on the other side. I jumped down as we pulled up to the river bank and stuck my hand on the front right wheel hub.

"What is it, Teddy?" asked Tadessa as he opened the cab door and climbed down.

"I think we may have a problem," I said.

Tadessa helped Helen down out of the truck and then turned to see what I was looking at. "Is it hot?"

I nodded, holding my burned fingers to my ear lobe. "Very!"

"At least it never started to squeal, so it couldn't be too bad," said the Governor, shading his eyes as he turned to look into the sun on the horizon. "I can see the old truck across the river. If we cross now we can catch a ride to Kelam and be there before dark."

Helen's face brightened.

"Yes, let's just leave the wheel for now," said Tadessa, seeing her relief. "I'll send someone back here tomorrow to have a look at it."

A dugout canoe was already on the near bank by the time we got our things off the truck and down the steep muddy ramp to the water's edge. Three Police stayed to guard what was left behind.



With a thin twenty-foot pole the canoe's navigator pushed the twisted giant hollowed log with its five passengers and dead pig upriver several hundred feet and then poled out toward the middle of the river. By the time the water got too deep for the pole to touch bottom, the canoe had gained enough momentum to coast to the far bank, ending up nearly opposite where we had started.

We all scrambled quickly up to the battered old truck and climbed in the back beside two open 55-gallon drums of brown water.

Tadessa followed us, puffing. "This is Rate, where Kelam gets its drinking water," he said as he leaned against the side of the truck, "and where the Government wants to build the new town."

"It's a pretty place," I said trying to look past the handful of scruffy-looking huts toward the gentle bend in the river just up from where we had crossed. "There are even a few trees around."

"Yes, and mosquitoes," added the Governor. "We'd have a lot of trouble getting the Dasonitch to move here. They now live as far from the river as their women are willing to walk, because of them."

The Governor hopped into the cab and the truck moved off slowly along the two ruts that led out into the treeless plain. It wasn't quite as barren as the land around the Dasonitch village. The grey-green scattering of shrubs and occasional towering termite mounds were just enough to block distant views. After several miles, however, the truck

went around the end of a long thin stagnant pond, an old oxbow of the river, and then the vegetation largely stopped.

From there we looked toward the setting sun and on a dead flat piece of ground a half mile away silhouetted against the shaded background of dusty distant hills, stood Kelam.

It was both an impressive and depressing sight. Perhaps thirty stick and grass huts like those in our old village of Shileh, along with a handful of native huts stood huddled together on an otherwise featureless plain. In the middle of the group a large stick fence enclosed the only huts with iron roofs.



Helen and I rode the rest of the way to the town in silence. Tadessa had described the place to us in the buna bet in Jinka, and it had sounded like a bleak spot even with his attempt to be positive, but it still hadn't prepared me for what I saw.

The encampment looked like what I imagined the old forts across the US West must have looked like a hundred years earlier, not so much a place offering protection to people living outside its walls, as a prison for those living within them. I found it hard to believe that this collection of sticks was actually shown on the large map of Africa our project director had on his office wall.

The truck pulled straight into the middle of the dusty Police compound beside a tall radio mast. As Tadessa got out he glanced up at me. I tried not to show my horror, but it was obvious.

"It is, isn't it!" he said, reading the expressions on both our faces. "If you'd like, you can set up your tent outside the fence. There are a couple of small trees over there," he added pointing toward the only green we could see.

Helen and I didn't hesitate. We grabbed our airline bag and box of food and headed for the main gate.

"Why don't you come for dinner?" said Helen looking back around at the Governor as she followed me. "We're having potatoes, spinach and freeze dried peas."

Tadessa looked up and smiled. "I'll bring the meat."

Helen nodded and smiled back. "See you in an hour."

The Governor already reeked of alcohol when he wandered over to our camp with several large pork steaks and sat down by the kerosene cooker. Being exhausted none of us talked much as we ate, but Tadessa passed around his flask and we all took sips. Finally the Tennessee whiskey loosened me up enough to break the silence.

"So if the Dasonitch won't live next to the river because of the mosquitoes, why does the Minister still want to build a new town down in Rate where we crossed this afternoon?" I asked.

"Did you see the Dasonitch village across the river when we first got to the Omo?" asked the Governor, taking another sip on his flask.

I nodded.

"What you saw," Tadessa went on, "was the local people at their best. The river's down. Their harvest is in. No one is hungry. But by the time the floods come again three or four months from now their food will be gone. Until the next flood waters recede and more sorghum can be grown and harvested in the new silt on the river terraces, they will have only the blood of their cattle to live on."

I looked at Tadessa slightly shocked.

"Yes," Tadessa nodded, "For several months of the year the only way they can survive is to drink as much blood as they can drain out of their animals without killing them. And it's not because there is some unusual drought here at the moment. They've been doing it for ever.

"So the Dasonitch asked for the irrigation program then?" I asked.

"No," said Tadessa shaking his head with a sigh. "They wouldn't. They hate the Government."

"Why?" I asked the Governor surprised.

Tadessa shrugged. "They don't like the power of the Police for one thing. They keep them from fighting their neighbours over water and

cattle. But that's probably not the main reason. I think it's mostly because they are jealous of the Police getting food brought in on trucks all year round, while they starve.

"It seems like an impossible situation," I said.

"It is," said the Governor. "At least I don't think it will be solved in my lifetime."

"So then why are you going along with the idea of building a new town and an irrigation scheme down here?" I was puzzled.

Tadessa laughed. "So I can have some company. This place will drive me mad if I have to stay down here by myself."

For a long time after the Governor wandered back to the Police compound, neither Helen nor I spoke. An entire universe of stars and a full moon lit up the barren landscape around us in eerie silver. "Shall we sleep outside tonight?" I asked.

"Sure," said Helen after more silence. "There doesn't seem to be any mosquitoes around."

"So what do you think?" I asked eventually as we lay together staring upward at the sky. "Do you want to renew our contracts and come back here for another year, or go home like we planned?"

"It doesn't matter to me." Helen sighed.

I let out a long frustrated moan thinking of our heated argument by the sand river that morning.

"Oh, I mean . . ." she started to say, and then stopped, pausing for several seconds.

". . . You know, Ted," Helen went on eventually, speaking very slowly and deliberately, "I may leave most decisions to you," she said, "but you always come across like you know everything anyway, and I really hate being patronized. Maybe it's you and your ego that shuts me up," and then added, "and puts me off."

I'm sure I heard Helen's words, but they didn't immediately register in my brain. Instead, I just pushed her response to my question even harder. "But he just said he only wants us here for company!" I said feeling exasperated. "You don't want to live in this God forsaken place for a year just to keep an alcoholic company, do you?"

"What does that matter?" Helen sounded slightly perturbed. "I'm here mostly because I want to be with you. If I remember right, at least for a while after Berkeley, being together was once your main desire too," she added.

I recoiled at her words and the potency of the memory. Five years earlier, while still only half way through my degree, I had transferred to the University of California at Berkeley after convincing myself that a degree from its prestigious school of Architecture would guarantee me a better path through life than one from Colorado. It had been a hard move, though, because Helen couldn't afford to transfer there with me. Two weeks after my arrival on the coast, I called my older brother in tears.

"I'm sure I've made the logical decision coming out here," I sobbed over the phone. "But I miss Helen. I know we both love each other, but I'm afraid of what two years apart will do to us. We will each find new friends, new things we like to do. We just won't be the same."

Tom listened patiently and then gave me some advice that took most of my lifetime to fully understand, though I applied it immediately.

"You know, Ted," he said, "life isn't black and white like most people think. It's many shades of grey. I can't tell you what you should do. I don't know. No one can see the view ahead from another person's eyes."

"Anyway," he went on, "while there are many different paths through life, I'm not sure one is any better than another. I think it is mostly what you do along the path you choose that matters most."

Twenty-four hours later Helen opened her apartment door to find me standing outside with my pack and drafting equipment.

My future wife burst into tears. "Why? What happened?" She asked.

"I want this path!" I said as I took her in my arms.

In the starry Kelam sky, this time it was my turn to burst into tears. I reached out for Helen and pulled her to me. "I love you Helen," I said. "I'm sorry for my patronizing ego. You are still my only path."

Helen and I spent most of the next day dozing in the heat. It felt good just to stay still. Then in the fading light of the late afternoon the Governor came over to our tent looking very depressed.

"Ted? Helen? I've got some bad news," he said without waiting for our greeting.

We sat up and rubbed our eyes.

"Is it the truck?" I asked, reading Tadessa's expression and remembering from the day before the ominous smell of the wheel.

Tadessa nodded. "The truck won't be able to go back to Jinka tomorrow," he said. "We did break a bearing like you thought. The entire right half of the front axle has turned blue from the heat and will

now be seriously weakened. Unfortunately, we didn't bring a spare, and if it snapped on the way out of here, both of the Police trucks would be stuck in the middle of nowhere. We have to get another axle down here."

I looked at our half-empty box of food. "How long will that take?"

"We should have a replacement here early tomorrow."

We both looked at Tadessa to see if he had been drinking again.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. I just radioed Addis. The Police are going to fly in the part. They can't afford to have both trucks not working." Tadessa paused while he took a deep breath. "The good news, at least for you, is that you'll be able to fly out of here tomorrow with them. You'll be back in Addis before lunch."

Tadessa stayed for dinner again and passed his ever-full flask around, but this time conversation came hard despite the whiskey. I tried hard to hide my guilt, but eventually it got the better of me.

"Do you think the Minister just wants us here to keep you company too?" I asked, looking for an excuse for our decision not to stay.

Tadessa shrugged. "I don't know. Why did you come here?"

I thought for a moment. "I just want to help people," I said eventually, feeling somewhat disturbed about having to answer such a question from the Governor.

"Well, I think that's probably what the Minister wants to do too," said Tadessa much more clearly than my mind felt. "But it's not that easy. He faces the same problem we all do."

"What's that?"

Tadessa looked at me puzzled. "You know, the enigma. What ever he does, everyone will hate him for it, sooner or later."

I stared blankly back at him.

Tadessa seemed surprised at my response. "You know about the enigma, don't you? Surely Americans have more experience with it than most."

I shook my head. "I have no idea what you are talking about. Why should anyone hate him . . . or me, for wanting to help them?"

Tadessa paused for a long time before he answered.

"When someone has something that someone else wants," Tadessa explained slowly, "the person who has the thing: money, food, education, whatever, really has only two choices. Either he can ignore the other person or he can give some of what he has to that person. The

first choice will generate envy and ultimately the other person's hatred; the second will generate dependency in the other person and ultimately his same hatred. It's a problem with no solution," Tadessa shrugged. "A true enigma."

No one spoke for some time. "There is a third choice," I said eventually.

"What's that?" asked Tadessa.

"You can try to help the other person help himself."

Tadessa couldn't help a wry smile. "Yeh, like building new towns and irrigation schemes. "I wish it were an alternative." He said quietly. "But it isn't. It's just another side of the same enigma. In one way or another we are all just pawns in another person's game. The real problem is power . . ." he paused, "or the lack of it. Have you ever heard of anyone helping someone else without making sure they still hold onto the power that goes with it."

I thought for a moment, but my soggy brain was having trouble absorbing what Tadessa was saying. I wondered how Tadessa was still so focused with all the alcohol he had inside him.

"Of course not," the Governor went on, "because no one ever gives away anything of value without some reason; to get more power, more money, more friends, more women. . . ." Tadessa chuckled to himself. "Sometimes just to live longer."

"That's a bit cynical, isn't it?" I said, and then I suddenly remembered why Helen and I had come to Ethiopia; as a way for me to avoid the draft and the Vietnam War.

"It's like Darwin said," Tadessa added quietly, as much to himself as to us. "It's just a question of survival."

I struggled with his conclusion. For some reason I couldn't think past its relevance to my own life and my relationship with Helen.

"You're not really going to come back, are you?" asked Tadessa, after another long silence.

I wanted to jump up and shout, "Of course we are!" just to show the Ethiopian that not all people had an ulterior motive when they offered help. But the drink and my thoughts and our bleak surroundings held me down. He looked at Helen who looked equally unable to respond.

"No, I didn't think so," said Tadessa quietly, taking another sip from his flask.



The silver grey DC3 bounced on the barren rock hard ground beside the village right on ten the next morning, and then rolled to a stop just outside the Police compound.

Several police rushed up to the plane door as it swung open and manhandled the large truck axle out onto the ground. Four 55 gallon drums of kerosene and several giant bags of flour and potatoes were then unloaded too. Already smelling of alcohol Tadessa slowly walked us over to the plane with a look of resignation on his face. I couldn't help thinking of Napoleon and his exile to Elba.

"I suppose you haven't reconsidered your answer?" asked the Governor when we got near.

I looked at Tadessa for some sign. For me it was no longer a question of personal survival or selfless good intentions. I finally understood there was no black and white right answer whatever I decided. But I also knew in my gut that I had to get beyond the enigma or I'd end up on a psychiatrist's couch like Akin, my original Virgin Island encounter group leader. I wished to hell there was some other choice, some obvious way to reach a happy ending.

I flipped a coin in my mind and then looked at Helen and lifted my eyebrows slightly. Helen nodded imperceptibly. I smiled to myself, for some reason greatly relieved.

"Tadessa, we'll be back," I said as both Helen and I put our arms around him in a hug. "It may take us a while to sort things out in Addis, but we'll be back."

The Governor dropped his flask on the ground. There were tears in his eyes. He returned our embraces. "Yinya guadenia, exabier erstaling." God bless you, my friends, he said.

We then turned and climbed through the door of the plane. For a brief moment, I could see our path ahead very clearly, and it was no better nor worse than any other.

## INTERESTED IN A SEQUEL?

If you are interested in the issues of power and paternalism raised by the stories in "**The Old Man in the Bag**", you might be interested in Ted Wells' sequel to this book; "**Power, Chaos and Consensus**".

His second book is a conceptual rather than chronological sequel to this one. Using the ideas of Montesquieu, Geddes, Confucius, Jesus, Hitler, Marx, Arizmendiarietta, Schumacher, Mohammed, Aristotle and others, his second book explores possible ways to resolve the problems of power and paternalism raised in the true short stories of this book.

**Power, Chaos and Consensus** discusses several dozen major complex interrelated problems we now face as individuals and as a planet, including population growth, the environment, human rights, justice, privacy, economic power, defence, the elderly, poverty and unemployment, and then describes why our existing institutions are now often making things worse rather than better.

Then, after evaluating various ways to deal with the problems, it suggests one way that all of the identified problems might be resolved together if we chose to use consensus when making decisions in our public institutions.

Far from being an idealistic dream, **Power Chaos and Consensus** shows that Consensus Decision Making is an entirely practicable, realistic choice for us all that could be introduced to our existing government institutions peacefully, right now.

The author's second book is partially aimed at Political Scientists, Planners and other ideological thinkers, but its target audience is intended to be much wider. All those in minority groups who are being suppressed by those who hold power over them will find it equally appealing; that is most women, and most men who are not white upper-class corporate stockholders.

The last chapter of this book explicitly sets out what the author sees as the "basic rules" of an alternative approach to the exercise of power, or his "Consocratic Theory".

He describes how a Consocracy based on "structured consensus" within an economically competitive yet sustainable environment might evolve from any existing community board or city council into a local, regional or even global system of government.

The creation of a Consocracy would allow the resolution of the problems of Palestine, Afghanistan, Fiji or Tibet without having to resort to paternalism, subversion or violence. It would stop the marginalisation of American Indians, Aborigines, Maori and other native people by their colonisers.

It would also allow the introduction of a social and environmental conscience to the market place and eliminate the institutionalized inequality that all women and other "minority" groups now face in present day institutions that rely on democratic majority vote decision making.

In short, Ted Wells' second book "**Power, Chaos and Consensus**" describes a realistic way we might achieve peace, social justice and environmental sustainability on this planet without having to resort to further violence, terrorism or war.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

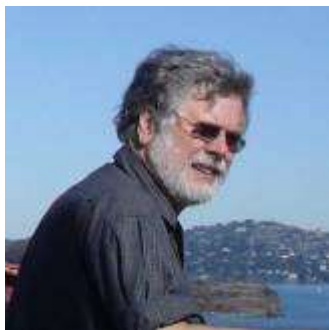
Ted Wells is an Urban Designer and Planning Specialist. He was born, raised and educated as an Architect in the United States. After completing his degree in the sixties, he and his wife chose the Peace Corps rather than the Vietnam War.

For three years he planned new towns in remote parts of the Ethiopian Rift Valley while his wife treated sick people and cattle there. They then spent a year traveling the back roads of Europe in a VW van exploring their new towns to see what he should have done in Africa. Eventually they returned to the States where Ted worked for five years as a planner for a small city in Colorado.

In the mid 1970s, he and his wife became disillusioned with American politics so they moved their young family to New Zealand in search of an alternative approach to peace, social justice and the environment. They found a comfortable place by the Tasman Sea and decided to stay.

Apart from the three years he spent back in the States while he researched his book on consensus decision-making and undertook planning work in Philadelphia, Ted spent the next 35 years working for various governments in New Zealand and around the Pacific helping local people plan their own futures.

This book and its more conceptual companion work; **“Power, Chaos & Consensus”** finally came together following two years in Samoa helping local residents prepare coastal management plans using their traditional methods of consensus decision-making.



ISBN: 978-0-473-22867-5

ISBN-13: 978-1481118101

ISBN-10: 1481118102