

The Engineer

“Your father,” my uncle said, waving the book I had brought him, “and the other university professors—they are the ones responsible for the mess this country is in!” It was ten o’clock at night. As usual at the end of his long workday, Tadesse’s thin, angular frame was stretched out on his bed. Hot tea and a light supper sat on his nightstand; his satellite television broadcast CNN International while we waited for the start of an English football match. The book he’d just flipped through was the *Bahra Hassab*, a treatise on the Ethiopian calendar that my father had published in the U.S. a few months earlier. The Ethiopian calendar is unrelated to the Gregorian calendar of the West, and many people find it hard to use. As part of his ongoing efforts to preserve and disseminate Ethiopian history and culture, my father had explained the correlation between the two calendars and prepared a chronology of important dates with rich commentary on the exploits of monarchs, the course of military campaigns and other historical events. He had drawn much of his material from Ge’ez primary sources, sources that few people can access because Ge’ez, like Latin, is the language of Ethiopian church liturgy and scholarly texts, but has not been spoken for centuries.

The book is an excellent new resource for anyone interested in Ethiopian culture and history, especially the history of the Christian highlanders.

My uncle was teasing me about my father, of course, but I also heard a serious note in his words. Tadesse *does* believe that the university professors and students who thirty years ago led widespread demands for political freedoms, land redistribution and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, were naïve about the nature and limits of state power. Tadesse would welcome a representative government, but he thinks that regimes are nearly impossible to change and, once in place, inherently disposed to self-preservation. An engineer by training and an apolitical businessman by temperament, he prefers to ignore politics and fight instead for economic progress, specifically through the construction of infrastructure like roads, dams and factories. While my father believes that a nation is built with the bricks of political institutions held together by the mortar of national identity, Tadesse—who is as committed to Ethiopia as the most outspoken advocate of political reform—prefers the “real” bricks of infrastructure and the mortar of a free-market economy. For my uncle, the *Bahra Hassab* was proof that my father was still chasing impractical ideas—for how did decoding an antiquated indigenous calendar contribute to true progress in Ethiopia? Did the treatise create a single job? Could anyone drive a truckload of cement or spare parts down these highways of history?

Tadesse became a part of my family in early 1975, the year he married my aunt Mimi. Their wedding was a huge, boisterous celebration that must have been attended by half of Addis Ababa. It was the last major event attended by all of my extended family and friends, taking place as it did just before the revolution displaced so many. My aunt and uncle

hadn't yet marked their first anniversary when my father was arrested, but Tadesse welcomed us with open arms and worked harder than anyone to deliver me and my sisters to our parents in the U.S. From childhood, I remembered my uncle as a benign, busy man who smelled of cigarettes and was warm and irreverent when he was with us. Now, back in Ethiopia, getting to know him as an adult was a pleasure.

Engineer Tadesse—the honorific is often employed in Ethiopia—is a man perpetually in motion. He is happiest when he is immersed in his work; conversely, he is impossibly uneasy when he is idle. Before this trip, I'd last seen him in Minnesota on Christmas Eve in 1995. He'd come to the U.S. reluctantly, for medical checkups, and stayed with us for exactly two days, even though we hadn't seen him in over ten years, and the next day was Christmas. On our first day in Addis Ababa, a Sunday, Tadesse decided to jumpstart our sightseeing and waved us into his battered blue Mercedes scarcely two hours after we'd landed. By noon, he had sped past every major neighborhood, church, palace and plaza in the city. After lunch, we were quite ready to surrender to jetlag, but he would not allow it: "You two have no time to waste!" he declared.

Back in his car, we ran a four-hour race through the countryside that took us from Addis Ababa south past the low-lying towns of Debre Zeit, Mojo and Nazareth until we finally reached the old resort of Sodere, known for its hot springs and outdoor pools. I had taken this particular drive many, many times as a child. I have cherished memories of rising before dawn to beat the day's heat and of Sossina and me bouncing in the backseat of our Renault, counting *tukuls* and donkeys along the way. Always, we would stop in Nazareth to see Ababa Haile and Temete in their dark two-room house

with the tall papaya tree in the front yard. Then, on the final leg of the drive, we would hit a ridge from which the resort is suddenly visible, our cue to throw off our clothes and wriggle into bathing suits so that we would be ready to jump in a pool the minute we passed through the resort gates.

Like visiting our house or having lunch at my grandmother's, I had imagined that going to Sodere would be a pilgrimage of sorts, a trip I would make over the course of a long, thoughtful day. But with Tadesse at the wheel, there was no room for such sentimentality. His deep utilitarian vocabulary covered mountains, rivers, roads, reservoirs, buildings, factories and agricultural complexes, but did not encompass the unproductive realm of family experience or memory. On both drives, he actually stopped the car only once or twice, practically tapping his feet at the delay when he did. (At Sodere, where we drained the beers the owner pressed upon us in a quick half-hour, Tadesse summed the place up with: "Jean, here it is—the famous Sodere. I am sure she has told you all about it. Now you have seen it and you do not need to come back." On the Entoto mountain overpass, a beautiful spot high above Addis Ababa, where most tourists relax and enjoy the view, he barked: "Here. This is the best place to take a photograph of the city. Something to remember. From there—good. Now the two of you together. Okay, that is enough." For my uncle, lingering could well be the eighth deadly sin.)

For years Tadesse matched his appetite for activity with an appetite for hard living, especially during the periods he spent outside Addis Ababa inspecting roads at remote project sites. On that last trip to the United States, the doctors my aunt had begged him to see told him that his lifestyle was taking a ruinous toll on his health. My family is typically Ethiopian in its inability—or refusal—to speak directly about illness,

so I know only that he quit smoking and drinking and began watching his diet, joking ruefully that living without cigarettes, beer and *kitfo* had reduced him to half a man. Maybe, but twice the worker, then, as the restlessness and drive that fueled those habits fed an even greater dedication to work. Now, he regularly spent twelve to fourteen hours a day in his office or on job sites, a schedule simply unheard of in Ethiopia (though much of what Tadesse does and says is quite strange for Ethiopia). Twice, my aunt cajoled him into joining us for dinner at local restaurants, but he could not sit through the entire evening. Both times, he begged her permission to leave after our plates were cleared, and while we drank coffee, he rushed off to check on his night shifts.

For most of his working life, Tadesse poured his energies into the construction company he founded with a partner in the early 1960s, shortly after his graduation from Addis Ababa Technical College. The company was one of the first private, locally-owned construction companies in Ethiopia. It eventually grew to be a big, profitable business that built a broad range of private projects and routinely won large public works contracts. The public projects included the tourist-class hotels in the northern towns of Axum, Lalibela and Gondar, which we would visit later in our stay, and roads in all parts of the country. At its peak, the company employed upwards of 2,000 people, making Tadesse a significant local employer and creating the circumstances that undoubtedly shaped his business and political views.

The Derg nationalized the company in 1978. One day, Tadesse and his partner found themselves simply locked out of their offices, replaced by men whose primary qualification for the job was party membership. We were gone by then, so we did not witness Tadesse's reaction firsthand, but I know that my

uncle was devastated. According to my aunt, he was so bereft he could not work at all for several months. Eventually, however, his enterprising spirit must have resurfaced. He took advantage of Derg rules permitting the private ownership of small businesses and petitioned the government for use of a parcel of unoccupied land on the outskirts of town. First, he tried to establish a small construction company on the grounds. However, with his diminished resources and the uncertainty Derg policies had cast over the market, he could not raise enough capital to fund even the smallest projects. Ever determined, Tadesse tried his hand at unrelated ventures. He bought sheep and cattle from area farmers, one or two at a time, brought them to the compound to be raised and fattened, then resold them to urban households. He built a pen in one corner and persuaded my aunt to help him raise rabbits to sell to the expatriate community. (If I hadn't actually seen a forlorn rabbit's foot tacked to a wall the day I toured the compound, I would not have believed that he had dreamt up—and pursued—this particular idea.) He converted a ramshackle warehouse on the property into a woodworking and furniture workshop. For the next thirteen years, while the Derg remained in power, Tadesse juggled these small enterprises and opportunities.