AUGUST RAIN
and the New Year

BY ZEWDE YERASWORK

My father never tells of miracles, escapes, and survivals. Instead he tells his life, and the history of his country in which it is inextricably entangled, in the form of mild jokes and anecdotes during unassuming conversations. Perhaps he no longer takes tragedy as seriously as others – but it is more likely that the mind naturally gravitates to the mundane and mirthful in its search for peace.

His first concrete memory, an awakening from that dream-like state that usually ends at around six or seven years of age, is of he and his brother coming home from school and finding their compound empty of the usual servants and passing relatives, who had not come back from the hospital with the baby. It was 1956, 1949 on the Ethiopian Calendar, when his mother died as a result of complications following child birth. His father, then a judge in Ethiopia's Supreme Court, was left to raise his three sons, my farther being the youngest, and his two daughters by himself. Those were the first days of anything resembling modernity in Ethiopia. My grandfather and his friends were among the first to purchase American cars and wear suits and ties. He spent most of his wealth building a church in his ancestral homeland, a few hours north of Addis Ababa, in the harsh cold of the over-tilled highlands. There, the silhouettes of fierce warriors defending the heartland of the Empire pass through the plains on horseback, casting their shadows over the barren landscape belonging to the proudest and poorest tribe of the proudest and poorest nation.

My mother likes to tell stories whenever we're stuck in an elevator, or when the power goes out as it often does in African cities, or when something else leaves us somehow in the dark, vulnerable or despairing. It may be that she remembers growing up in constricted spaces, in army barracks where her father (a colonel in the army), her mother and three sisters shared a single room and electricity was scarce. Or it could be that she remembers *how far we've come* and that darkness and constriction remind her of crumbling jail cell walls and that room stuck somewhere in time where they broke her feet in, demanding to learn something she could not tell them.

Though he lived in what was then a mansion, she in the barracks, though he barely made it through his English-language boarding school, while she was a stellar student at the only French school in Ethiopia, they both ended up part of the same great irony in Ethiopia's destiny: it was what they shared in common. They were the first generation of young Ethiopian elites to be sent abroad for their education, and the materials they found there, the banners and books, the pamphlets and the paraphernalia, brought out an abeyant disgust with their own privilege.

There was always something of a rebel in my father. My grandfather would often tell his two younger sons of dreams in which it was revealed to him that their older brother would die young, my father would turn the peasants against him – a peasant rebellion was the best his unconscious could do to grasp the rift that history had yet to bring about – and the middle brother would be left to carry the family name. He would often refer to his youngest son – whose darker skin, curvy nose and chubby cheeks evoked the typical features of the subjugated peoples from the south, servants to the highlanders – as *that slave-boy*. He would get nervous when my father would ask why they had so much and the servants and neighbors, whom they all knew by name, whom they clothed in the winter, and fed during holidays – why they had so little to fend for themselves. He was of the first generation to ask how this happened.

He left in 1969, the first of his family to attend college, the first to really grasp what college was. He had heard from friends that Sweden was a land of beautiful women where the men were all homosexuals. As he boarded the plane, someone shouted out to him to bring a pair of metal boxers along in case the temptation was too great. This is what he remembers – not the agony of leaving everything he knew and heading to a cold and quiet place where he would be poor and alone for the first – but something funny that happened at the airport.

While my mother was completing high school, before she knelt in front of the Emperor to receive his blessing before leaving for France, my father had already decided to leave Sweden for a socialist

country. But his plans to leave for Poland failed, bureaucracy in the Eastern Bloc being what it was, and he and several fellow Ethiopians stayed. They began staging demonstrations in support of protests by soldiers and laborers back home. In the midst of days spent picketing and partying, they occupied the Ethiopian embassy in Copenhagen in December of 1970. A group of loud twenty-year olds with afros and little red books, displaying the naïve optimism that would come to define their generation, crossed the narrow channels into Denmark, and, armed and trying their best to convince themselves they were angry and ready for a fight, took matters into their own hands. But my father's anecdotes on the subject are as self-deprecating as they are wistful.

We went in there…we all knew the guy, the ambassador, our hostage. He was the father of… Imagine! No sleep, no food for two days…we didn't even think of that, we didn't really know what we were doing…

No matter how naïve or criminal their actions were, there's pride behind the laughter we share today when we look at the picture of my father being brought out of the embassy door. With Che-like facial hair, and a puffed-up stature, he caught the attention of someone in the Danish police, who thought he had identified the leader of the group. The policeman grabbed my father by the arm, then *click*, front page of the Danish daily. My father's memories sharpen at this point in the story, he talks about it like some elaborate nuisance he just can't forget: *And they sent me off to one of those little single-cell jails where they lock up the alcoholics for the night…All the others got to go back, and I spent one more day, still no sleep or food. The guard brought me out the next day, and left me out in the snow saying you can go this way or that way or that,* he points forward and to his sides, laughing at the punch line of his embassy-occupation story.

But my laughter veils a nervousness: we all want to emulate our fathers, is this an example to follow? Revolutionary fervor has long since given in, but the glaring inequalities continue to exist, and I feel particularly aware of them.

Even my mother, relatively speaking a prude, devoted to religion and the traditions of her country, that isolated, exotic place in which every street, hospital and building is named Haile-Selassie, could not help but turn her back on it all once abroad. The first few years in Aix-en-Provence were difficult. She was alone most of the time, and hitchhiked to her sister's place in Montpellier over the weekends. She had not experienced May '68, hadn't been one of the thousands of naked youngsters who had gone out onto the streets and, by the sheer force of disobedience, ended up bringing down their Great Leader, who like Haile-Selassie had cemented his power during the War. She could not have imagined she'd do the same one day.

Perhaps it was to overcome her loneliness. Perhaps she missed her country and wanted to help however she could. Perhaps it was, as she says, that she was outraged at the way in which the famine had been covered up. But in 1973, my mother began attending a study group with a few Ethiopian students who would eventually become a branch of the Ethiopian student movement.

My parents met in Berlin later that year. She worked on women's issues and recorded minutes at the annual gathering of Ethiopian student activists in Europe which was held in a hall within Berlin's Olympic Stadium. Once their eyes met, they ignored what was being said about the evils of feudalism and the example of China. For a while they only met once a year in Berlin for the annual conference. They would leave the halls and go off by themselves, get lost in a city neither of them knew.

I have been to Berlin since, alone. It is no longer the same city: the wall is down, the architecture all new, the stadium remade. My understanding is they mostly stayed in the Eastern part of the City, while I wander aimlessly back and forth looking for old lines of demarcation and traces of the past.

My father admits, today, perhaps out of bitterness for the way things turned out, that he wanted to marry a woman dedicated to the cause he would die for. And so I can say I came to be through the revolution, but my parents clearly had no plans to found a family in these circumstances, so I also almost came not to be. The little gap between, the incidental happening just short of not-happening, the billion prerequisites of which each of us are a product, opened just wide enough for me.

IN 1974 the lid blew off. Ethiopia's three thousand years of monarchical history were suddenly over. The vacuum left by the most profound social revolution in the history of the developing world put an end to century-old feudal relations, a state that hosted (and still hosts) the gathering of African nations, and a leader-symbol known as Ras Tafari, then Haile-Selassie, who had spent sixty years in an exalted position from which he sipped tea with giants the likes of JFK and Churchill. For him, both of my grandfathers and three of their parents had successfully resisted the Italian occupation of the late 30s. For him, the starving masses that he routinely ignored would do anything. They would comb neatly the little hair left on their children's malnourished heads and sweep the dust-covered fields in front of their homes where he'd pass by in a motorcade. And then there were those two pictures side by side on pamphlets and placards, one of the little child with a protruding rib cage and huge sorrowful eyes, the other of him and his clique feasting and feeding their dogs choice cuts of meat. At the time, he seemed a godly figure – the Rastafarian religion committed itself to that impression. That sobering, straight-sitting, light-skinned, roman-nosed patriarch, dressed in elaborate military garments bearing all kinds of flags and medallions, seemed an embodiment of the dignity, morality and resiliency of his people. Only he was so senile by the time of his eightieth birthday that his inner circle reportedly succeeded in keeping news of the famine from him, for fear of ruining his mood.

No one was particularly angry with him; the enemy was feudalism. But the shock of shedding a burden that had been worshipped as a savior, of him being escorted away by the military, suffocated and buried under a toilet for blasphemy's sake, was never truly absorbed for lack of time. Soon thereafter, the killing began.

THE students still in Ethiopia experienced a year of great hope and accomplishment in 1975. The *Zemecha* mandatory volunteer program mobilized thousands of young people who went out to the country to learn from peasants, while setting up literacy programs, opening clinics, and distributing grain. Eventually, however, cultural differences emerged, and the elite, urban, educated classes continued to find it difficult to relate to the masses, while simultaneously trying to solve their problems.

The gap persists. I live in a different land, speak a different language, and yet call myself their countryman, in some cases their kin. I ended up being from the poorest and wealthiest nations on Earth, the meekest and the strongest. This must have been what it felt like to live on my grandfather's compound in the 1950s, the disconnectedness of never having been to a normal person's house, never knowing what they eat or how they scrape by for a living. Yet I, like my parents, have always leaned as far left as I can, have always decried the idleness of the non-productive classes. How does one lead, represent and sacrifice for people he does not know and she can never understand? But they tried. My father gave up his right to scores of hectares of land – willingly gave it, stole it in effect from his father – by signing onto a revolution that he would have given his life for, along with his wealth. In March of 1975, a few months before my parents' return, the most successful land reform in recent memory was carried out in Ethiopia, granting all land to "the collective Ethiopian people." This remains the principal, if not the only gain from the revolution. The vacant, steep terrain now belongs to every one and no one, the "collective Ethiopian people" are fleeing it. Those in the rural areas converge on the capital, those who used to live in the city have spread to the corners of the Earth.

The people controlling power behind the scenes were a shadowy bunch, a provisional military government, who declared themselves nationalists and slowly took on a more Marxist tone, as a leader emerged in the form of a short, fiery Colonel from the South whose humble beginnings inspired romantic hopes and whose hysterical speeches captivated audiences. The Colonel's picture began to appear regularly in government press by late 1975. At first he and his cohorts had the official head-of-state, a General and member of the new ruling military committee, killed by driving a tank into his compound and opening fire on his bedroom. That same night they shot sixty dignitaries, the closest people to the Emperor, threw them into a ditch and covered their bodies with lime. My mother's father had escaped this fate by declining a promotion to General a few years before.

As the old imperial structure fell, and the atmosphere in the city grew more leftist, the American government closed down any relationship with its former favorite "regional partner." Almost immediately the Cubans, the Soviets and the Chinese began congratulating the new head of state, the young southern Colonel, who would continue to purge the ruling committee of potential rivals. Meanwhile, my parents had decided to come back.

LATE one evening in 1975, my mother and father are arguing over the phone. They are back in Addis Ababa, she works for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, he at the Yekatit 66 political school. She is asking that he come stay at her mother's place, which makes him uncomfortable. The revolution is already changing familial conventions, but there is still no way of explaining the concept of a boyfriend to a woman like her mother, who'd been married off at sixteen. She does not want him to stay over at the school's dormitory, she says, "and you know why..."

By now the young couple and their friends are active in the smaller of two splinter parties emerging from the student movement in Europe. The larger party, the EPRP, was vastly more popular, while theirs, the AESM, was already being accused of being a kind of elitist clique, whose members worked for ministries and political schools under the military regime. The AESM was also accused of opportunism due to their strategic support for the military junta, who had yet to begin the campaign now known as the Red Terror. But the larger splinter party, which insisted on the immediate creation of a "people's government" had begun recruiting people to target members of my father's party, of which he was a central member. This was the reason for my mother's fear.

He hangs up and turns his attention to his work. He is sitting in the campus library, preparing his materials for the next day. Eventually, unable to concentrate, he goes back to his dorm room to find his roommate sprawled out on his bed. Already furious from fighting over the phone, he climbs the bunk and gets under the sheets of the only empty bed left in the room, the upper bunk belonging to the slumbering roommate. Several hours later, he is awoken by an explosion.

They tell my mother the next day that he is dead. The charred body they'd found was lying where he should have been. He would spend the next five months in a hospital bed. But pain and relief are not a part of the story as he tells it, nor is the feeling, for the first time in a long series extending over the next three years, of a brush with death and the unmistakable presence of divine intervention. After all, he was a Marxist. But many years later, in prison, when the executioner died the day after my father dreamt of taking the Eucharist – *and as I began to sip from the cup a block of ice came and stuffed my mouth and the wine spilled to the sides* – he awoke and announced to his fellow inmates that he would not be executed in three days as was planned. When the executioner's death led to an indefinite hold on executions within their army-barrack-turned-prison-block, he must have begun thinking things over. Today, when I find him in his room kneeling, hands outstretched, a serene smile on his face, I understand that the humor in his anecdotal history is an expression of gratitude for life itself.

Once he was fully rehabilitated, they decided to get married. Few friends attended their wedding, now that members of both parties were being gunned down in the streets in broad daylight.

As members of my father's party began to be exterminated by fellow leftists, the tragic and self-consuming nature of the Revolution emerged as the main talking point in socialist magazines through 1975. In response, the smaller party would point out members of their rival faction to be killed by their allies, the military government. Depending on the day, it is difficult for my father to admit that they were wrong in allying themselves with the old officers who now stand trial, paraded in front of government-owned television. But everyone shares some responsibility, as well as sympathy for the seventy year olds stripped of their uniforms, their faces marked with unmistakable regret and self-loathing, on trial for murders they committed while in power thirty years ago. Is there any just way of dealing with the past?

Through it all, he refused to officially recruit my mother as a member of the party, out of his desire to protect her. At this point, the conflicts in their relationship all had to do with the fear of losing the other, similar to so many couples they had befriended. With no revolution to fight, no one to fear, it is perhaps unsurprising that after

everything they had been through and seen since returning, things between them were doomed to fail.

BY August of 1977 the relationship between their party and the government has finally become strained. The young ex-patriots had rushed to grab power when it fell as if from the sky like the last rains of August, signaling the promise of New Year. Now the generation sent abroad to be the country's future is assuming that role, while dethroning and embarrassing their parents. They have to wonder if their altruistic urge is weaker than they believe, whether they are truly willing to die, now that the deluge of summer monsoons continues on well into the harvest.

My father goes to visit his father, in the old compound on the Eastern side of the city. The grounds seem undisturbed, Eucalyptus lines the stone walkway leading up to the old colonial-style house of colorless brick and wooden floors. He finds his father waiting for him by the gate – had he heard the car approaching? Now in his seventies, usually sitting immobile and fixed in the living room, his demeanor is slightly frantic. They have hardly seen each other since his return. After six years in Europe and three in the revolution the passing years have replaced distant lands in keeping father and son apart.

I know why you've come. The patriarch hugs and kisses his son for the first time since the airport and the joke about metal boxers that he hadn't understood.

What is the matter, father? Mine drops the theatrical affectation of the guerilla and tries, awkwardly, to kneel before his.

I know why you came, you have to leave town.

What do you mean? Though the order could be imminent, so far the party has decided to stay put in Addis and face the heat from both directions.

I had a dream that you were leaving and you came to say goodbye. You could have just called, I don't want you driving around, not now –

Later that night, while chain-smoking by his apartment window, my father gets a call from a muffled voice speaking in encoded language. He meets the rendez-vous person in a back alley late at night, jumps into the passenger's seat, and hears the man refer to him by his nom de guerre.

Well, Teodros, the man in the driver's seat says, *the time has come for us to leave.* Teodros does not have the time to wonder how his father knew.

The flight from Addis on the following day – a day of festivity known as *Bou-hay*, in which families gather around bonfires singing songs, lighting embers, and making wishes – is perhaps the only successful thing their party accomplished during the revolution. After all the meetings and policy seminars, no true ideological position papers exist. They had been willing to die, and now, it seemed that's what they would do. There was no longer any time to think of why, they were revolutionaries now, no longer intellectuals.

DIANA WILLARD

MY father and nine other men left the city through the Northeastern gate and ended up stranded in the countryside surrounding Addis Ababa with the goal of mobilizing the peasants and eventually liberating areas from the junta. They scouted the terrain and sought refuge from locals. How they split up determined their fate. My father's life was twice saved inadvertently by a friend of his from the movement in Europe. First one of their leaders entered a hideout, soaked from the rain. The friend from Europe suggested my father replace him for the next scouting mission. Later, when tensions developed between my father and one of the ten, who had managed to scare the peasants into informing the authorities of their presence, he suggested a switch that would allow the two friends to continue on, while the man with whom he was angry went in a different direction. The undercurrent of class tension reappears here, of all places, as my father felt an antipathy towards the man who happened to be the child of peasants, a native of the area they now roamed, and preferred to roam and hide and perhaps even be killed with his old acquaintance, *with whom he could talk because they had so much in common.* Both of the men my father replaced – the party leader who entered the hideout soaked from rain and the unfortunate peasant with whom he quarreled – ended up dead two weeks later when the army surrounded them in a granary where they had stored their arms. Two of them had shot themselves rather than senselessly kill any average soldiers coming to get them, while the other three met their end in the form of bullets sprayed from the outside, crashing through windows. The remaining five had split apart a few days earlier. They hid in a ravine when they heard the soldiers coming. The next morning they climbed out and faced the harsh wilderness, feeling for the first time the real desperation of their situation.

The mission was over, the movement crushed, and the return was a hellish, three-day event in which they neither slept nor ate, and the anecdotes my father tells me are those of peasants who felt sorry for them – as if they had finally managed to become not just the peasants' brethren, but beggars at their doors – and would open up and let them have a handful of cooked barley, just enough to keep them moving. Aside from that, he conveys disappointment at being told there was an organization prepared to help them once they reached the region the party had chosen as destination for the flight, and at the poor athletic shape of some of his comrades. The whole thing reeked of pretension and neglect that had already cost lives.

After hitching a ride from a covered van, they were captured at the edge of the city, the last true obstacle to freedom, and handed over to army forces that had been ordered to shoot them on the spot. The order was ignored, however, when the soldiers took notice of the sheer number of witnesses watching the commotion from a bus at the checkpoint, including one famous journalist whose political reportage was widely read abroad.

Instead, they were led back to a military hall, where they were humiliated, dragged about in chains in front of a cheering crowd of men in uniform. Meanwhile, my mother had been arrested, detained, and tortured, all so she could tell them where the ten central committee members were. Not being a member herself, she could not respond and had to accept the pain helplessly. By not letting her in despite her intentions and qualifications, he had meant to spare her, and had wound up eliminating any chance she had of being spared. He has no anecdotes for this story, and I wonder if he has ever forgiven himself.

UNDER these circumstances, it is not surprising that their marriage did not survive the end of the revolution. They were released after spending four years in prison, during which time they wrote each other letters everyday. He learned and mastered chess, taught himself three languages, headed the sanitation committee, directed and wrote for a secret improvisational theatre, and chaired an even more secret study group. She had survived well, but struggled with not knowing when or if she would ever be released. She was jealous of all those who had been sentenced unlike political prisoners who were simply taken away in the night, never told why or for how long. The others at least could prepare and plan and see a light at the end of the tunnel. She worried that she may never have that opportunity. When released four years later, the warden asked her why she'd been imprisoned, and insisted they had made a mistake. She had difficulty accepting that she had lost all those years because of their mistake – if not her own. After their release, they could hardly speak to each other for the next several years.

My father's eldest brother had died while my father was in prison, and his other brother had stayed in Sweden. His father had remarried to a resentful woman, whose many peasant relatives now occupied the compound instead of his own family. He began to feel like a stranger in his own home. Broke and friendless, it took years for him to find his way. One night, she left for America, where I would be born some time later, the result of an attempt at reconciliation.

IT is the summer of 2007, and I am working at the Ethiopian News Agency while visiting my father, now a professor at the University of Addis Ababa. It strikes me as ironic that I ended up, like them, coming from abroad and working for human-rights violating government, despite, I assure you, the best intentions. Still I somewhat enjoy telling people, with varying degrees of self-irony, that I fine-tune propaganda for a government they hate.

My job actually consists of writing and editing articles on the coming Ethiopian "millennium," the celebration of the year 2000, by our still delayed calendar, and other such meaningless hype. Everyday we print articles announcing how tens of thousands of "Ethiopians in the diaspora," which I recently learned includes me, were coming back and investing in the city and Ethiopia was on its way to being a "middle income nation within the next ten years." Or else I work on articles on reconciliation between the government and opposition leaders who had just announced that they took full responsibility for organizing crowds of young protesters who were brutally beaten, some killed, during the protests. Some think it is justifiable, even honorable, to have admitted wrong. My father insists this is a shameful act. As we drive through the city, he talks about how the revolution was now thirty years ago. *Those who are fifty, were twenty then, those who are forty, ten*, and so on and now his voice melts into mine, his frustration becomes mine, because I too see that no one remembers or even cares. "Those were communists back then," they say, believing that a change of ideology towards pro-American democracy changes the nature of cowardice. Those so-called leaders of the opposition, self-proclaimed democrats and freedom fighters, in signing an admission of guilt, proved that they were out to save themselves. After serving a couple of years in prison, they had begged for mercy and were to be released. Between pointless articles, I use my government-issued computer to search for other instances in history where a revolutionary force commits itself to forcefully overthrowing a government, leads others to their deaths, only for its leaders to recant for personal freedom. I still can't find one.

We are driving through *mercato*, a bustling open-air market, the largest in Africa. On the way to my office, we pass the statue of Abuna Petros, patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the 1930s who was shot in front of *that building over there*, after ordering that all who collaborated with the Italians were to be excommunicated. Around him and his outspread saintly arms, young gangs and drug fiends lean against pillars along the side of the street where tens of thousands of small boutiques built of corrugated iron pack in together. My father points him out to me, reminds me who he was and what he did.

After a pause, he mentions the five comrades killed in the flight of August '77.

"It will be thirty years soon," he pauses, "we will light a candle for them." He curses the men he recently supported, the new opposition, many of them friends and colleagues at the university. He had allowed himself, like the entire city, to believe in the possibility of bringing down an unjust state without creating something worse. Instead, the latest burgeoning movement collapsed of its own volition. With no ends or brighter future insight, all political engagement appears to be about means – about being willing to kill and being willing to die. The youth continue to look for opportunities to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs, but the belief is lost on me. I only know of anecdotes and miracles that infringe on the Big Story, on the headlines I churn out for this paper full of transparent lies. When laughter surrenders its sense of gratitude, it often seeks the opposite, signs of decay in its surroundings to satirize and disparage. But unlike most of my countrymen and kin, I can afford to laugh because I can always leave. Who will sacrifice for them? *L*