



DOWN WITH

Where is home? A question that my parents and tens of thousands of other Ethiopians had as they left the only place they had ever known. Many left their parents, siblings, cousins, and friends behind to restart their lives in new homes across the world. They attempted to leave behind the scars that the vicious political regime of the 1970s had marked them with.

My mother, Aster Selassie, loved Ethiopia but had to leave for survival. “It is a beautiful place to live, but there is a little problem because there is a war,” she says reminiscing on her life in Ethiopia. Her neck is always adorned with a golden *meskel* (cross in Ge’ez) that represents her intense spiritual connection to both God and her Ethiopian background. My mother would always remind



THE DERG!

RAHEL DEMISSIE

Layout by Peter Conway

me, “Meskelishin argi!” (“Wear your *meskel*!”) so that I, too, would hold these spiritual connections close to my heart.

After her mother died from influenza, Aster lived with her great-aunt, Fital, in Gullele, one of Addis Ababa’s sub cities. She was just one-year-old when she moved in with Fital. Her great-aunt, who did not have children of her own, was eager to raise her. My mother’s child-

hood was limited to only religious and educational affairs. Fital was notorious in Gullele for being extremely strict.

“I used to go to church... I used to go to school. [Those are] the only things I [would] do. Other than that, she would beat me [Aster laughs].”

As my mother stiffly braided my tangled curls, she would recount stories of her great-aunt's sternness. I remember her telling me about the time one of her friends gave her earrings, but Fital threw them away because she was not allowed to get gifts from others. Although Fital was decidedly stringent, Aster was understanding of her harshness. She would say it was a form of tough love that she had learned to accept.

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During the early 1970s, Ethiopia entered a period of political, social, and economic development, which was accompanied by constant violence. Emperor Haile Selassie's reign met much opposition in the last decade of his power. The Ethiopian famine of 1973 was the catalyst for the violent demise of Emperor Selassie's feudalistic reign. Following the Emperor's fall, Jonathan Dimbleby helped kick-start a macabre dictatorship. Dimbleby, a British broadcaster, author, and historian, gained the public's attention after his coverage of the 1973 Ethiopian famine in an ITV film called *The Unknown Famine*. This film focused on the mass starvation and its relation to the collapse of the Ethiopian Empire.

A group of rebel army officers obtained a copy of *The Unknown Famine* to which they intercut images of the Emperor attending a luxurious wedding feast. This film, renamed *The Hidden Hunger*, was reportedly broadcasted prior to the brutal coup d'état. The film enraged not only the military forces, but also the peasants, the urban middle class, and students. "Land to the Tiller" was a phrase often used by students, including my father, Demissie Habtemariam, during demonstrations against the feudalistic and unjust disposition in Ethiopia. This public enragement supported

the growth of a militaristic dictatorship called the Derg. This group was led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was inspired by Lenin's and Marx's doctrines—"the evil people," as my mother would call them.

Aster was in the sixth grade during the start of Ethiopia's political revolution in the 1970s. She was falling behind in school due to a lack of educational support from her family. "They are not educated. They [didn't encourage me] like we [encourage] you," she says, when I ask her why she got held back for two years. On the other hand, my father was in his second year at Addis Ababa University at the age of eighteen. Both of my parents went through several tribulations during this time.

The beginnings of Mengistu's ruthless dictatorship was marked by the execution of sixty government officials by firing squad. My parents remember discovering the news from local news reporters on the radio. They remember hearing the sounds of a marching band, followed by a statement naming each person executed and the reasons for their execution. "We [would] always [be] listening because we [were] expect[ing] something to happen," explains Aster, recalling the angst that consumed many Ethiopians during this time.

Ethiopia was split. Some agreed with the decisions made by Mengistu and thought it was best to work with him. Others were opposed to his actions and his hunger for power. My father mentions that many originally supported Mengistu because of the "confusion at the time." Mengistu's socialist dogma aligned with many Ethiopians; however, his brutal methods did not. Those who were known for opposing him were either put in



Aster (age 28) at Addis restaurant in Piazza.

jail, tortured, or executed.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was a clandestine student movement that was organized against Mengistu and his dictatorship. Those in the EPRP would use red ink, often on their clothes, to write messages such as "Down with the Derg." My parents were not very involved in the EPRP. Aster attended one meeting where the group tried convincing her to join, but she was aware of the danger in being involved.

Demissie was a member for nearly a month before he realized the danger. He would meet with other university students to prepare slogans on articles of clothing, which they would throw on electric wires. Demissie describes the day he realized the risk in being a member: "One day, our group gave us papers to distribute. It is a paper prepared by the EPRP [that] we carried and began to throw everywhere...while I was walking, a military jeep came [toward us] with machine

guns on it, and we thought that they saw us. I thought they were gonna fire on us."

Afterward, Demissie was no longer an active member of the EPRP. However, his brother, Getachew, was. Getachew was the manager for a government-owned printing company called Artistic Printing Enterprise. Occasionally, Mengistu would call Getachew requesting printouts for propaganda banners. Getachew would have to supply these demands to avoid both suspicion and execution.

Getachew's home was often filled with those who were hiding from the Derg. One of the several in hiding was a military official associated with the EPRP. He was in hiding because he stole guns from a military camp. One day, the official was arrested by the Derg while he was roaming the streets. They forced him to disclose the names of those who were working with him. Getachew was one of the names disclosed. Thus, the Derg captured and tortured Getachew, until

they killed him. Demissie learned about his brother's death from his cousin, Tibebe, an Ethiopian ambassador in Washington.

"You are not even allowed to CRY!
We cannot cry because [we will be
seen as] anti-revolutionaries. They
don't let us. If we cry, they come [to]
our house and take you. They don't
care," Demissie said.

My mother recalls the time she found a dying boy in her backyard and saved him. There was a group of students who would meet for EPRP meetings in the area called Abakoran. One day, the government ambushed them. Some members were shot and killed, while others were able to get away with injuries. While this was occurring, Aster was using the outhouse when she noticed a boy bleeding under a bush from a crack in the door. The military officers were running around looking for him. As he was attempting to get up from under the bush, Aster noticed an officer near him and told him, "STOP...Stay down. Stop!" He listened. After the officers left, she retrieved him and brought him to the house. Aster wrapped a *gabi* (blanket) tightly around his back to stop the bleeding from the bullet wound.

Aster asked her Aunt Aleme, who had a few children in turmoil at the time, for some assistance. One of Aleme's children was in prison and the other was hiding amongst the farmers in the rural area to protect himself from the Derg.

They decided to cover the boy with piles of hay in the backyard cowshed, due to the constant house searches by the military. Aster asked the boy if he knew anybody who could

help him. He gave her a name and an address, and she went there to tell them what happened. They sent a doctor to the house to take care of the bullet wound. The doctor was a man dressed in women's clothing to mask his identity and medical equipment. After the boy was treated, Aster took him home.

The Kebele, the revolutionary guards of the Derg, knocked on my mother's door a couple of days after. Aster was not there at the time. They told Fital that Aster must go directly to the Derg's office when she arrives home. Once she got home, Fital told her, "Just give yourself up, nothing will happen if you didn't do anything."

My mother describes her emotional state as she walked to the office: "My heart was afraid a little bit, but my mind told me just be strong.... I didn't even pray to God. I used to be very Christian and used to go to church and everything."

Aster was immediately sent to a prison camp, which was filled with hundreds of people of all different ages and genders. "We were all in the hall laying down in our *gabias*. There were men and women, young and old. [There were] serious EPRP, people who [didn't] know much...like me, and those who [didn't] know anything at all." Aster stayed in this camp for six months.

Aster would hear officers grab four or five people every night, as she concealed her face within her *gabi*. She could hear the sounds of the rampage. Of bullets executing them. The prisoners never knew who was going to be next. Aster survived.

After those six months, she was transported to Sebatanya, another prison about thirty minutes away. Sebatanya was a stricter prison where people were tortured more often.

A childhood friend told her, “Don’t say anything. Don’t tell them anything. They won’t do anything to you. They will only torture you. Even if they kill you, don’t say anything. Be nice.”

One by one, prisoners were being “questioned.” As they were lined up for questioning, people left the room with bleeding backs and feet—tears in their eyes. One by one, the prisoners were questioned, until it was Aster’s turn. Recounting the painful experience, she says, “He beat my back as I was naked up from the top. He beat me several times. He beat me with a Gumare (a leather whip).” She took her friend’s advice to heart and didn’t share anything with the officer. Her persistence let her off with relatively light torture. Comparatively, her friend had his back burned by lit newspapers as he was hung by his legs. Another six months passed and Aster was released to her family.

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After her release, she stayed in Ethiopia for another two years to finish high school. Aster was not fond of her life in Ethiopia. Both the emotional and physical harm that she endured had taken a toll on her. Her cousin, Zelekash, took her to Ghana to babysit her children. In Aster’s eyes, Ghana was a beautiful country with extremely hot temperatures. She stayed there for nearly three and a half years and made plans to move to the Ivory Coast.

Zelekash’s brother, Asheber, thought it would be better if she went to Italy with him. Zelekash paid for her flight and gave her five hundred dollars for her relocation to Italy. Aster stayed in a Catholic hostel, which provided her with a room, clothes, and food for roughly six months. After those six months,

she had no money to her name. She decided to get a job as a babysitter for an Italian family in Rome. Aster and Demissie met in their biweekly café meetings in Rome, nine years before getting married.

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During the Reagan administration, they passed legislation so that those who have family members in the United States can apply for immigration. Aster was elated because her sister, Amsale, lived in Boston. Amsale and Aster worked together, signing the legal papers. She began to make her journey to Boston, nearly a year after she moved to Italy from Ghana.

As my mother moved from country to country, thoughts of home were constantly floating in her head. Ethiopia will always be the place she considers home. However, as she traveled, she realized that home can be found wherever she has family. Since her arrival to Boston in 1987, more and more family members have immigrated from Ethiopia to Boston. *Where is home for Aster?* you might ask. Both in the United States and Ethiopia, places where she has family.



Aster and her brother, Bizuneah, eating at their cousin’s house in the Bole district of Addis Ababa.