

THE EXILE

by

David Wiley

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The Exile

Part 1. Revolutionaries

In the early 1960's when Haile Selassie was Emperor I found myself, somewhat by accident, teaching English in the town of Assella in Arrussi Province in Southern Ethiopia. I shared a house with one of the other teachers, Malya, an Indian who had come to Ethiopia more-or-less in the spirit of adventure, as had I. Our house was on the corner of an intersection of two dirt roads. We and our neighbors all lived in small fenced compounds lined with false banana trees. Even as full-time teachers Malya and I did not receive much pay, Ethiopia being a poor country; nevertheless, like all our neighbors, we were expected to have two servants, a houseboy and a guard, or sabanya, whose job was simply to stand by the compound gate all day with spear in hand. Even though we paid our servants next to nothing, which was the standard rate, I eventually learned that they too had servants at home. This was the way the economy worked. The poor teachers, bureaucrats, clergymen, functionaries and shop keepers paid much poorer servants who in turn paid even poorer servants. A trickle down system for a country without much opportunity. As for the students, they would either run to school every morning from their homes in the hills, and run back after classes, or else five or six of them would band together and share a hut in the town. Sometimes these makeshift dormitories had a servant too.

One day, walking home from school in the afternoon, I encountered Tessema, our sebanya, bowing and gesturing in an agitated way. He escorted me through the gate where I in turn met Demissie, the houseboy, who was apologizing and glancing toward the front porch.

There, sitting on one of the two chairs, was a man with the largest head I had ever seen. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, and beside him on the floor of the porch was a bright red and white TWA flight bag. As I approached he stood up and held out his hand.

"Hello. My name is Seyoum Sebat. I'm sorry if I upset your servants."

He was an Ethiopian who spoke English with a slight British accent. After the introductions were completed I invited this extraordinary person into the house. I poured some beer for us, and we began to talk.

"I'm your neighbor," he said. "I live just across the street."

"How long have you lived there?" I asked.

"A year and a half," he replied mournfully.

"I'm surprised I haven't seen you before," I told him, wondering indeed how I could have missed such a neighbor during the four months I had lived there.

"That compound," he said, pointing in the direction of his house, "is my prison. I'm permitted to go for walks, but it's awkward. I'm not allowed to talk to students. There are other restrictions. So I spend my time reading and writing and thinking about my wife and son. It took some time to convince my guardian there could be no harm in visiting a neighbor." After I had expressed an interest in his story, I poured some more beer, and he began to tell his tale.

Seyoum Sebat had a degree from the London School of Economics, and he had also studied in France and Italy. When he had returned to Addis Ababa after

completing his education he had become involved in the intellectual circles of the capital. From that moment on Seyoum had been watched. Rulers always feel a threat emanating from the intelligentsia, and they always have plenty of money to pay for eyes and ears. Seyoum eventually met Alem-Sihay, who became his wife, and not long after that a son, Mengistu, was born. When Mengistu was six months old there was an attempted coup d'état while the Emperor was traveling in Brazil. It was a bloody affair, and it failed. Haile Selassie's army and loyal police rounded up the conspirators and others known to have associated with them, and many were executed. Seyoum was implicated in the plot, arrested, and would have been executed as well except for the fact that his father was a national hero. Mengistu Sebat had been the Abuna, or archbishop, of the Ethiopian Church at the time of the Italian invasion in 1935, and during the occupation that followed he had been the leader of the resistance, eventually dying a martyr's death shortly before the British came to liberate the country. So instead of shooting Seyoum, or keeping him in a palace dungeon, the Emperor had decided to exile him to a small town in a province of the Middle Kingdom where he wouldn't be able to make any trouble. The secret police had sent a man along with Seyoum to keep an eye on him, and this man, Bellehu, lived in a tukel in the compound and made periodic reports. "He's a victim too," said Seyoum, "and not a bad sort. We share a bottle of tej now and then."

Seyoum and I talked for a while after he had finished the summary of his recent history. Certain things he had left out, like just what his role in the coup had been. It was a question I thought I had better reserve for a later conversation. When he prepared to go I told him I was happy he had come and that I looked forward to more talks.

About an hour after Seyoum had left Malya came in. He had been up to the Swedish Mission again to carry on his romance with May Britt, the head nurse.

"It's no use!" he declared. "It's never going to work. We like each other but there's no way to be alone. Mrs. Bergstrom keeps a sharp eye on us. She doesn't approve of May Britt and me anyway. What can I do? I can't bring her here. So we're just friends. I haven't even kissed her. We just sit under the tree and look at each other with desire. It's all impossible! She's not going to run away from the Mission and live with me in the forest. She's bound to that place."

"Look, I'm sorry," I said. "This is my fault. I never should have introduced you to her. I misled you. I thought you would like each other, and I was right about that. But I knew that having an affair with May Britt would be impossible. That's why I didn't try for her myself."

"Oh, it's not your fault," he replied. "I should have known it was hopeless." Malya relaxed for a moment and gazed at the wall. "One day, my friend, I will find a woman and we will practice the Kama Sutra." He smiled confidently.

"We had a visitor," I told him. Then I recited the encounter with Seyoum Sebat.

"Sounds like a very interesting fellow," Malya said. "We should invite him for dinner."

"Yes, we should."

It was only a few days later that I sent our houseboy across the street with a dinner invitation. A while later Demissie returned with a note: "All the world's a stage, even this little corner of Assella. I will be there at six. Thank you."

It was the first of many dinners we had with Seyoum. We would always have injera and wat, or spaghetti, along with a bottle or two of tej, or some Italian beer. These little parties became something to look forward to. Seyoum was a great entertainer when the subject of Chaucer or Shakespeare came up. He would become quite animated while reciting long passages from The Canterbury Tales or Twelfth Night. Sometimes he would tell us tales of Ethiopian history and legend, stories about Rasselas and Prestor John, Frumentius, Sheba, Queen Candace, Tekla Haimanot, the mad emperor Teodoros, Menelik; and once he told us of his father's exploits during the occupation. He knew quite a bit about Rimbaud and his bizarre life in Ethiopia. Malya told stories of India and his trips to the Himalayas. I told stories about Mexico. Sometimes we discussed Camus and Sartre. Seyoum knew a little about the American beat writers, and expressed his opinion that the movement was a reaction to American acedia, a plague of spiritual sloth in our culture. We talked about the hyenas we could all hear whooping and cackling in the middle of the night. Seyoum related the story of the hyena man of Harrar, a kind of wizard who had cast a spell on the local hyenas. They would come to him in the moonlight and gather around like courtiers paying homage to their sovereign. Once Ras Daniel Abebe, governor of the province, was mentioned, and Seyoum told us that he knew Ras Daniel personally, that they had spent a little time together in Europe, and described him as an extravagant, pleasure-loving type who probably didn't want to make any changes. That was why Haile Selassie had appointed him governor of Arrussi Province. He would make a good pawn for the Emperor, perhaps even a rook or knight someday. Seyoum of course was now persona non grata as far as Ras Daniel was concerned.

Our dinners were so pleasant I suggested inviting another person or two some evening when Seyoum was with us.

"No! Please!" Seyoum objected. "I enjoy these occasions very much but I don't want to attract attention. I hope you won't speak to people about me, or these conversations. My position is difficult. Some of the same students who come to your gate also come to mine. They want to meet a real live revolutionary. But this can't do any good, even if I were allowed to talk to them. Epecially if I were allowed to talk to them. As much as possible I have to be a hermit here. For the sake of my wife and son if not for my own." Seyoum covered his eyes and bobbed his head very slightly. "I've had no news of them for over a year. All I know is what Bellehu tells me after he reports by telephone to his superior, that they are both in good health. That's all the policeman in Addis Ababa will tell him."

Malya, who had learned to ride my horse, Balamaras, often borrowed him to go up to the Mission. One afternoon not long after they had left, Seyoum came across the road to speak with me. He had his flight bag with him, and when we got inside he pulled out several letters addressed to Alem-Sihay Sebat.

"It would be a great favor to me if you could try to deliver these to my wife while you're in Addis Ababa. I'm not sure if she's still living in our old apartment,

but it's not far from the Guenet Hotel where you said you'd be staying, and I . . ." At this point I held up my hand.

"It's okay!" I said. "I'll be glad to do it. I'd love to meet Alem-Sihay and Mengistu." I hesitated. "Are you not allowed to send her letters?"

"I am not allowed near the post office or the telephone office," Seyoum answered, smiling grimly. "These letters need to be put into her hands." He laughed lightly. "Don't worry. There's nothing here to get you into trouble." He thanked me profusely and started back to his compound. He was working on the translation of a text written in ge'ez, the ancient and mysterious language of the country, understood only by scholars and clerics.

During the three months I had known him I had become very fond of Seyoum. He loved life, laughter and literature. He had a good heart, and he was worldly in the best sense: he saw life whole, and he knew how to practice the ancient Chinese art of discrimination. Neither Malya nor I had questioned him seriously regarding his role in the bloody coup. He was, I thought, one of many educated Africans who saw the injustices and suffering in his country and wanted to change things. In Africa changes are seldom peaceful or orderly. I didn't believe in the messianic zeal of the communists, or those who opposed them. I had no desire to belong to a political group or subgroup. I believed that liberty is to faction as air is to fire. I was an anarchist, essentially. Yet I understood Seyoum's point of view. Ethiopia still had a feudal system, and it was no doubt time for reforms. Dr. Bergstrom, head of the Swedish Mission, had a reliable source in the government who had told him that the Emperor was hoarding billions of dollars in Swiss banks; but when people in the provinces, the same people who kissed the ground when his Rolls Royce passed by, began to starve, Haile Selassie would leave their fate to the inadequate efforts of the relief agencies.

We had not really talked about revolution. I thought of myself as a revolutionary of some sort, a revolutionary of the consciousness perhaps, but not someone prepared to do violence. The image of Seyoum with a gun in his hand disturbed me. It seemed more likely that he was not one of those doing the shooting. Someday I wanted to hear the truth.

It was a five day school holiday and I had made plans to go to Addis Ababa on the bus that stopped in Assella twice a month. Soon after arriving in the capital I went to the U.S. Embassy to see the family friend who worked there, the same man who had helped me get my teaching job. He handed me a letter from the U.S., several pages of writing from my father, and a check. He was concerned about me and wondered if I might not want to come home. The check was enough for plane fare. It was also enough, perhaps, to buy a used Land Rover. I had been thinking about the advantages of having a vehicle. It would enable me, during the longer school holidays, to travel to some of the fabled places I wanted to see.

"Do you know anyone with a used Land Rover for sale?" I asked the family friend. He thought for a while, then said he knew someone who might be able to help. He would do some checking and let me know at dinner the next evening.

When it got to be late afternoon I decided it was time to see if I could find Alem-Sihay's apartment. As I walked in that direction I silently recited a kind of

secular prayer on Seyoum's behalf, a simple prayer that his wife and boy would be there, and that they would be well. When I arrived at the address printed on the envelopes I knocked on the door, and fairly soon I heard a woman's voice on the other side asking a question in Amharic. I knew that Seyoum's wife spoke excellent English, so I answered that I was a teacher in Assella, an American teacher. Quickly the door opened and I was greeted by a young woman with fine, delicate, Amhara features. There was an abundance of joie-de-vivre in her expression, along with the melancholy produced by her situation. She was flushed and nervous owing to my unexpected appearance and the prospect of hearing news about her husband.

"Is he all right?" she asked immediately, with a good deal of emotion.

"He misses you and Mengistu very much," I replied, "but he's in good health, and fairly good spirits, considering." Then I reached into my shoulder bag and handed her the letters. She received them ardently but carefully, as though they were rare manuscripts.

"It is so good of you to bring these," she said. "You can't imagine how much it means to me."

The little boy, Mengistu, appeared, and after staring at me for a minute said in a strong voice for someone not yet three, "Tenastilyn" (hello).

I told Alem-Sihay about our dinners and talks, and how much I liked her husband. I asked her if she could tell me what had happened to them after the coup.

"Oh, it was terrible! The story of the coup is very complicated. But when it was all over the army and police arrested everyone suspected of being involved. Women and children even. It was vicious! Many friends of ours died. Seyoum has no doubt told you how he escaped with his life. I was arrested too, with a baby in my arms. We were in a palace dungeon for two weeks before they released me. Seyoum was kept there for months while the Emperor decided what to do with him." She stopped speaking, and a tear ran down her cheek. "I'm glad he has a friend like you in Assella. The isolation must be awful for him. He's very gregarious, you know. What about the man who guards him? What is he like?"

"Bellehu. Seyoum says he's not a bad fellow, a victim too in a way."

"Sometimes I think everybody in this country is a victim."

Eventually Alem-Sihay asked me how long I would be in Addis Ababa and if I would please come back again before I left. I told her I would return the next day at the same time. Before leaving I asked her if she thought she might ever be allowed to visit Seyoum.

"I write letters to dignitaries in the palace and the ministries, but they act as if they expect me to forget he exists. I have done nothing to arouse suspicion. I avoid contact with old friends. I have a part time job at a travel agency. And I take care of Mengistu. And I pray constantly that Seyoum will be set free. But the Emperor is very paranoid and unpredictable. Everyone who has caught his attention lives in fear. In any case, it's all in his hands."

"Seyoum told me that his father had saved his life from the grave. Let's hope the ghost of Abuna Sebat continues to do his work."

On the way back to the hotel I began to think about what I could do to help Seyoum and Alem-Sihay. Then I asked myself if I really wanted to help them.

The answer was yes. Next evening at dinner my friend from the embassy informed me there was an old Land Rover I could have cheap, one that belonged to the embassy. It had been retired but was still in fairly good running condition. I told him I would like to look at it the next day, if possible. Before the dinner was over I asked him if he could do one more favor for me. I told him about Seyoum, Alem-Sihay and Mengistu, and asked if he could make some inquiries. He seemed intrigued with the story and said he would talk to an Ethiopian friend in the government.

The next day I did buy the Land Rover, whose former driver assured me was mechanically sound, just beat up a little. When I went back to visit Alem-Sihay I told her about my new acquisition.

“Not many teachers own cars here,” she said. “You are coming up in the world.”

“It should be very handy. . . . for lots of things. Now maybe I can go to Axum and Lalaibela. Certainly I can come to Addis more often.” Then I asked her if she had anything she’d like me to take back to Assella for Seyoum.

“Oh, would you? That would be very good of you.” She found a bag and began to fill it: a couple of books, some cheese and pepperoni, a photo of Mengistu and her, and finally a stack of folded papers. “All the letters I wrote and couldn’t mail,” she explained. As I started to leave she looked at me and smiled. “You’re a wonderful friend,” she said warmly. “Thank you.”

So began a series of trips between Assella and Addis Ababa. I would take letters from Seyoum to Alem-Sihay and she would give me things to take back to him. It was all done as secretly as possible. On my fourth trip to Alem-Sihay’s apartment there were two visitors who had arrived ahead of me, an English couple introduced as Owen and Evelyn Harrison, who were also friends of Seyoum. For many years the Harrisons had taught in one of the big schools in Addis Ababa, and during that time had become part of Seyoum and Alem-Sihay’s circle of friends. They had been very helpful in the days following the coup, and their punishment for this had been reassignment to a school in Sidamo Province.

“They’re aware of our associations and our sympathies,” Owen Harrison said, “but they leave us alone because we don’t discuss these matters with our students, who are restless and want more freedom to express their views. Of course no one dares go far in that direction.”

On my next trip to Addis Ababa I had dinner again with my friend from the embassy, before visiting Alem-Sihay. He had spoken with his Ethiopian confidant in the palace, and the gist of things was that Seyoum Sebat should be forgotten. He was not supposed to have contact with anybody, and in fact there was rumor he might be rearrested. The people who sniffed around had uncovered some new conspiracy and they were cracking down. These words sent a chill through me, and I despaired of telling this news to Alem-Sihay.

The next evening when I went to see her and take the latest communiqués from Seyoum I could see as soon as she opened the door that she was troubled. She had heard stories of people she knew being detained, and the likelihood of more arrests. We had some tea and I tried to comfort her as best I could. She was a strong woman, but now, in the shadow of these events, Alem-Sihay appeared fragile and vulnerable. It was not the first time I had wanted to put my

arms around her. I realized full well, however, that any feelings I might have developed for her must be suppressed. We both understood that our relationship was about Seyoum, and that it had to remain that way. Even so, what I had begun to feel for Alem-Sihay served to reinforce what I now considered my commitment to her and her boy, and her husband. Once again a bag was filled with items for Seyoum, fruit, cheese, a book, a shirt, a crayon drawing Mengistu had done, and a thick sealed envelope.

As I drove back to Assella the next morning I looked at the men and women walking alongside the road carrying great bundles of firewood or charcoal, or huge jars of water, and I knew they had carried these loads many miles and would have to carry them many more miles. I reflected on the difference between the palace where the Emperor lived and issued his commands while he fed raw legs of lamb to his lions and cheetahs, an alien world, a kingdom in the clouds, and this world in front of me, a world in which millions fought to survive and not much else. I considered how reasonable it was that someone like Seyoum should want to help improve the lives of these people.

It was painful having to tell Seyoum about the arrests in the capital and the rumors that he too might be arrested again. He accepted the news stoically, but he was plainly worried about his wife and son.

“They will do to me whatever they want. They know I’ve had no contact with any of the people they consider conspirators. Even so, if they arrest me they will threaten Alem-Sihay if I don’t give them answers to their questions. But what answers can I give them? I don’t know anything anymore. And if I did of course I wouldn’t tell them.” Seyoum looked at me with a solemnity I had not seen before. “Maybe you should stop these visits to Alem. They might be watching.”

“She doesn’t think they are,” I answered. Whatever was happening I didn’t want to end the visits. And in fact I wanted to do more for them than play the courier. A vague plan had begun to form in my mind, a plan I was not yet prepared to discuss with Seyoum.

During the next two weeks, I spent a considerable amount of time dwelling on the possibility of spiriting the Sebat family out of Ethiopia and into Kenya. Alem-Sihay had told me that they had friends in Nairobi, Ethiopians who had escaped in the days just after the coup. What if I could drive the three of them to the Kenya border, someplace off the beaten track, where they could meet their friends? Was the idea crazy? Was it something I really wanted to do? There were many problems to overcome. And what would Seyoum and Alem-Sihay think of it? Of course I couldn’t mention anything to them until I had absolutely made up my mind to do it.

When I did finally make up my mind to do it I realized that Malya would have to know all, that he would in fact have to play a small role in the affair. So one evening after sending Demissie home, which is what we always did when Seyoum came for dinner, I told Malya about my plans. He listened with a look of disbelief.

“You will be asking for trouble, my friend,” he answered after I had finished. “But there would be much good karma in it. What would I have to do?”

“Not much. Sometime after the long vacation begins you and I can drive to Addis together in the Land Rover. I’ll give Demissie and Tessema a vacation bonus and tell them not to come back for two weeks. When we leave we’ll lock the gate, so there’ll be no reason for anyone to come to the house. When we get to Addis you can go your own way. After I get some supplies and do whatever else needs to be done, one night Alem-Sihay and her son will drive with me back to Assella so that we arrive here about one AM. I’ll drive the Land Rover into the compound and close the gate, but I won’t lock it. About two AM Seyoum will come, we’ll all get into the vehicle and start for Kenya. All you have to do is stay away from Assella until after we’ve left, preferably several days. That way, if you are asked you can say truthfully that you were in the capital when Seyoum disappeared. You can tell them that I had given you a ride to the city and I was going on to Axum and Gondar, and then maybe do some camping along the Rift Valley lakes. When I come back two weeks later that’s what I’ll tell them.” This was the outline of my plan, which of course needed a lot of refinement.

“What will you do when you get to the Kenya border?” asked Malya, who had worn an expression of puzzlement during my recitation. “Will there be people waiting? You won’t be able to cross except out in the bush somewhere.”

“Yes, I know. There are lots of details to work out.” I was beginning to list those details, and they were adding up to a large assortment of big and small problems.

“What about gas?” Malya inquired.

“I’m going to get ten five gallon jerry cans.”

“What about Balambaras?” Malya had begun to make his own list of the little details.

“Well, I thought you could leave him at the Mission until you come back. Elias would take care of him, don’t you think?”

As we went over these matters Malya became more interested, more intellectually involved. At this point it was still only talk. I thought about the Ethiopian revolutionaries and how they must have started their conspiracy that ended with the coup. The thought occurred to me that my plot might end up like theirs. And Seyoum and his wife and son would be the ones to suffer.

A few evenings later Seyoum came for dinner, and I delivered the proposition to him, begging him to listen to my plan before saying anything. I described it to him, much as I had done for Malya, with some additional things that had occurred to me. At the end of it I posed the two questions that bothered me most. “How can we get help from your friends in Nairobi? Is there any way? And also, can you get out of your house that night without arousing Bellehu?”

Malya and I both watched Seyoum as he sat there quietly, the wheels turning in his enormous head. After a considerable period of rumination he spoke.

“I know better than most how easily things can go wrong with a plot.” He stared at me, searching into my eyes. “Do you really want to do this? It could be dangerous.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” I replied, “and yes I want to do it. If we do it right you’ll be together in Kenya and they will only have their suspicions of my

involvement, no real evidence. The main question is can we get help from your friends in Nairobi?"

We talked about Alem-Sihay and how she would react. I thought she would not balk at the opportunity to be reunited with her husband and free of the threat that hung over them. Seyoum confirmed my opinion.

"Judging by her recent letters," he said, "I have no doubt that she would be willing to make the attempt. She wants Mengistu to have a father."

We talked until ten o'clock, Seyoum's "curfew" time, discussing how to coordinate the acts and scenes of the upcoming drama. It would have to take place after school was closed for the long vacation. It should be done on a Saturday night, preferably during the major holiday coming up at about the right time. It would be the dry season, making it possible to drive on the primitive roads and vehicle tracks. Seyoum would get a bottle of arak in the market and invite Bellehu to have a few drinks. He'd make sure that Bellehu slept soundly. The servants were never there at night, so it would be easy to slip away unnoticed. When Seyoum was discovered missing Sunday the telephone office would be closed and Bellehu would have to find Ato Gudemsa, the man who ran it, and convince him to open the place up. Being Sunday and a holiday, Bellehu's superior in Addis Ababa might not be available. It could be quite some time before the authorities were alerted. And then what would they do? First they would check on Alem-Sihay and find her not at home. But she could be visiting friends or relatives for the holiday. All in all, we figured it would take a day or more for them to organize anything like a search. They might post police on the main roads near the Kenya border, and that was where we would have to be cautious. I had purchased a very good map of Ethiopia, showing all the roads and tracks, and we studied it carefully. When it was time for Seyoum to leave the three of us shook hands with the serious heartiness of conspirators. Then suddenly Seyoum wrapped his arms around me and said, almost tearfully, "You have given me the greatest gift of all – real hope."

After that night I was somehow a different person. Knowing that I was involved in a plot, and that it was actually going to happen, made me giddy and somehow more alive, a sensation likely shared by people preparing to go into battle. At such moments it is natural to imagine the best possible scenarios for ourselves, and I was envisioning a smooth, if roundabout, trip to Kenya and back, with all going according to plan. I knew, of course, that the reality of it would likely be something else. I was conducting a jail break, and it had to be done without leaving any traces.

Part 2. Escape

In 1963 Kenya was about to receive its independence from the UK, and the word uhuru was frequently on the lips of its people. I realized that Seyoum and Alem-Sihay would be giving up much to live there. They would both be exiles. However, like the people of Kenya, they would be free to create their own future. If I could just get them there.

My giddiness had been replaced by a resoluteness tempered with uncertainty. It was all a matter of good planning, I kept telling myself. In any case, once we have decided on a course of action we are no longer free. Most of my conscious hours, and some of my unconscious ones as well, were consumed with thoughts of our escapade. One of the things I understood very well was that the Land Rover had to be in the best possible condition. Accordingly, on the next long weekend I drove to Addis Ababa and left my vehicle with the Italian mechanic I had been to once before, telling him I was planning a long drive to Gondar and Axum and needed to have the Land Rover in tip-top shape. I also asked him to find me twelve jerry cans. This adventure was going to cost more than I could afford, and I wondered wryly if my teaching job would still be there when it was all over.

During the drive from Assella I had been considering what Alem-Sihay's response would be to the plans we were making. When she greeted me I immediately handed her a letter from Seyoum and suggested she read it before we talked. As she ran her eyes down the pages I could see her expression change from alarm to curiosity to hope. After finishing the letter she looked up at me shaking her head.

"You cannot take this risk for us," she said.

"Don't worry," I answered. "If they catch me I have a U.S. passport, and anyway what's wrong with going on safari with a couple of friends?"

Alem-Sihay tried to laugh. "You always see the bright side, don't you?"

"I see no reason why it shouldn't turn out that way. You'll be together and you'll be free. And I will have had a very exhilarating experience." I gave her some time to think but I knew she saw our scheme as an avenue to happiness. "Essentially," I continued, "it's just an exercise in planning. But we have to have help from Kenya. I was wondering if the Harrisons might be willing to do something?"

Alem-Sihay said she thought the Harrisons were coming to Addis Ababa the next weekend. They had been in Kenya the summer before, and she thought they were planning to go back. We decided to wait until we had spoken with them before making any further decisions. As I was leaving I asked Alem-Sihay if she thought it was possible she was being watched.

"I have a good eye for such things," she replied, "and I don't believe anyone is watching me. Not yet." Then she reached out and cupped my face in her hands and kissed me on the forehead. "I don't know what to say to you," she whispered.

When I went back to pick up my vehicle the mechanic assured me he had tuned it up, replaced filters and brake shoes, checked out the winch, etcetera, and it was ready for travel. He had also obtained the twelve jerry cans. The next weekend I made a quick trip back to the capital to meet with the Harrisons at Alem-Sihay's apartment. They were enthusiastic about the plan and wanted to help any way they could. They had intended, in any case, to fly to Nairobi after school was out. They would meet with the Ethiopians and together they would figure out a way to rendezvous with us at the border. We examined my large map and I showed them a place where a vehicle track came close to the border. The map indicated an intermittent river, which would be dry, crossing the border

from the vehicle track in Ethiopia to an undeveloped road on the Kenya side, near a village called Malka Meri. It looked to be about a ten mile walk, unless we could drive on the riverbed. There were lots of unknowns about this place, of course. There are many things maps don't reveal. Maybe once in Kenya Owen and Evelyn could find out more about it, or if there was a better place to cross. Another problem was communicating. There were no phone numbers for the Ethiopians in Nairobi. It was decided that I could go to the telephone office here in Addis Ababa at a certain time on a certain day and tell them I was expecting a call on the hour, a common enough practice. The location of the rendezvous would be confirmed over the phone. There was also the question of the second vehicle. Would the Ethiopians have a car? Owen didn't know, but he said they would rent a Land Rover as soon as they got to Nairobi. We discussed things until most of our questions had been resolved in some way. Before returning to Assella I stopped at the big market and bought two spears, because I couldn't afford a gun. There was no telling what we might encounter on that long walk across the border. It would be isolated bush country, full of wild animals. This was one of those little details.

Soon the school year came to an end. My 11th grade students, some of whom were budding revolutionaries, all graduated to 12th grade. Some had hopes of going on to the university in Addis Ababa. Malya had taken Balambaras up to the Mission and returned on foot and in a state of euphoria.

"May has got her leave! She and I can go with you to Addis." Visions of nights of love and laughter were clearly dancing merrily around in his head.

"Good," I said. "I'm glad things are working out for you two, and I know you'll make the most of your time together. Just remember, she can't know anything about what we're doing."

We had already decided on the Saturday of the upcoming major holiday. I had purchased a bottle of arak for Seyoum to share with Bellehu that night. Seyoum had brought two books to the house, very old Ge'ez illuminated manuscripts bound in leather. He was prepared to travel light but he didn't want to leave without these rare books his father had given him. These I kept hidden so Demissie wouldn't see them and start asking himself questions. I was making jerky and gathering food and water. We were to leave on Wednesday for Addis Ababa. On Friday I would talk with Owen Harrison in Nairobi, and then, if all was well on the Kenya end, we would be off the next day.

On the day before we were to leave for Addis Ababa I gave Demissie and Tessema a little extra money and suggested they spend some time with their families, and come back in two weeks. They bowed and left, grateful for the money and the time off. That evening we had our last dinner with Seyoum, a strangely solemn affair, although we spoke optimistically of Kenya. Seyoum and Alem-Sihay were young and well educated. They would be all right.

"I would live with Alem and Mensistu at the North Pole if it had to be that way," said Seyoum.

Knowing they would not see each other again, Malya and Seyoum embraced, and Malya wished him happiness. After Seyoum had left Malya remarked that things would be pretty dull around here without him.

“Oh?” I said. “You don’t think we can find ourselves another exile hiding out in the neighborhood?”

The next morning our adventure began in earnest. When I drove to the Swedish Mission to pick up May Britt the mistress of the Mission, Marta Bergstrom, was there to see us off on our holidays. “Actually,” said May Britt, once we were in the Land Rover, “I think Marta’s worried about what I’m going to do on holiday.” She laughed, then sighed. “I love the Mission, but it can be oppressive at times.” Before leaving the grounds we stopped for a moment to gaze at the great tree, “Mother-of-all-life,” so dubbed by the Gallas who worshipped it.

When we got to the house to collect Malya I looked around to make sure everything was ready for Saturday night, then we locked the gate and took off for Addis Ababa. During the drive we talked almost exclusively about my upcoming journey to the fabled cities of Axum and Gondar. May Britt was especially interested in the rock churches of Lalaibela, and wanted to see them one day herself. I let them off at the Guenet Hotel and wished them a happy vacation, as if they were an old married couple. Malya shook my hand. “Have a wonderful trip,” he said. “I’ll see you in about two weeks.” He looked at me in a peculiar way, as if he wanted to say more. “Good luck!” he concluded.

The next morning, as I was shopping at Menelik Square, I ran into the two lovebirds, who were sitting in a cafe, leaning against one another and totally absorbed in each other. When they finally looked up and saw me standing beside the table their faces were aglow and I felt joy suddenly to see them again, on the morning after, so to speak.

“You make me feel like I’m in Paris,” I said. But I declined their offer to sit and have a coffee.

It was not until evening that I got to Alem-Sihay’s apartment. She had been thinking all afternoon, she told me, about her life in Addis Ababa, and finding it hard to believe that she might never see the place again, or the people she knew there. And one of the hardest things was not being able to tell anyone what was about to happen to her. Yet she seemed full of determination, generated no doubt by her desire to be with Seyoum. Her main concern, she said, was for Mengistu and how he would handle such an arduous trip. After a short visit I left so that she could conclude whatever she had to do before leaving her home.

The following day was the day of the call from Nairobi. I arrived at the telephone office half an hour ahead of time and sat nervously waiting for the clerk to summon me. At exactly two PM the call came, and when I heard Owen Harrison’s voice on the line I felt immediately uplifted and energized. He was speaking very optimistically about their preparations, and the place where we were to meet. He and the others had decided that the dry riverbed we had looked at on the map would in fact be the best place to cross. They had rented two Land Rovers and they were going on safari to the Northern Frontier District, he and Evelyn and three Ethiopian friends. They had a bright orange tent and they would set up their camp on Sunday afternoon along the east side of the riverbed, somewhere between the border and the unimproved road on the Kenya side. They would wait for us until noon on Friday. If we were not there by then they

would have to leave. We should keep looking for the orange tent on our left as we walked south. For now they were staying at the Equator Inn just outside Nairobi. I asked if he knew anything about the terrain where we would meet. No, he said, but he knew it was bush country and we would be more likely to see wild animals than people. I asked him to bring a couple of jerry cans of gas, just in case.

Leaving the telephone office I realized that yes it was actually happening, that the next day we would be off on our journey of unknowns. As much as possible, without giving anything away, I had been inquiring about roads in southern Ethiopia, and I had learned a few things about the main roads but very little about the vehicle tracks we would have to use for the last part of the trip.

I didn't go to Alem-Sihay's apartment until late Saturday evening. She had seen her mother and sister earlier and found it very difficult not to tell them what she was about to do. She had given them a sealed envelope and told them to hide it and not read it unless something happened to her.

At ten o'clock we left the apartment building, looking around for police spies as we did. She carried Mengistu in her arms, and I carried her bag. As we left the capital and started across the Rift Valley Alem-Sihay remained quiet.

"It feels so strange to leave everything behind," she remarked eventually, "to begin a new life, not even knowing, really, if it will happen."

"You will have a new life. And someday you'll come back to Ethiopia."

A couple of hours later, as we neared Assella, I mentioned that she would soon be with Seyoum.

"It's all I can think about," she replied. I began to savor the image of the three of them together.

It was the first hour of Sunday when we arrived in Assella. The town was dark and quiet, and as soon as we neared the house I turned off the headlights and crept up to the gate. Once inside the compound we got out of the vehicle and unlocked the door. I didn't want to light any lanterns, however there was some moonlight coming in through the windows, and I had a good flashlight.

"When will Seyoum come?" Alem-Sihay wanted to know.

"We agreed on two. He has a watch and I expect he'll be on time."

I began finding things and loading them into the Land Rover. There were two benches along the sides in the back, and I had decided to put the ten jerry cans of gas on one of the benches, along with two jerry cans of fresh water, securing them all with a rope under the handles. There would not be a lot of room, but we all understood it was not to be a luxury tour.

As I was putting things into the rear of the vehicle I heard a sound at the gate, and when I looked up there in the moonlight stood Seyoum.

"I heard your motor, so I came."

"They're inside," I told him. "I'll stay out here so you can be alone for a while."

Seyoum entered the house and a few seconds later I heard their cries and exclamations. They spoke in Amharic but the emotion in their voices made it easy to imagine what they were saying. This, I thought, should be the final scene of the drama, not the beginning of Act III. At least they were together now. That much had been accomplished.

The leaves of the eucalyptus trees and false bananas glistened in the moonlight, which also provided a view of the shed where Demissie and Tessema slept sometimes, and the covered stall next to it where we kept Balambaras. Would I be seeing this place again in two weeks?

After a while Seyoum came out and told me they were ready to go whenever I was. They would want to be together, so I had piled some things on the passenger seat to make more space in the back. Knowing it would be a long and bumpy trip, I had thrown some blankets and cushions in the rear. When the three of them climbed in Mengistu was crying a little and Alem-Sihay was doing her best to soothe him. I had bought a few small toys and some hard candy for Mengistu to have during the trip, and these I now handed to his mother.

Once we were out of the compound and on the road Seyoum began to talk about Bellehu. "I hope they won't be too hard on him." I left a message telling him I was going for a walk and might not be back until late today. So maybe he won't try to call his superior until Monday sometime. That's what I hope."

"Surely they can't blame him for your disappearance," I said. "You weren't on a chain."

The road to Shashemani was good and it was possible to drive fairly fast on it. At night, however, there was considerable risk of animals on the road, or crossing the road, and I didn't want our flight to freedom aborted by a collision with a four hundred pound warthog. So I drove cautiously, aware that here we all were, on our way, and we could ill afford to let anything go wrong. At the same time, I knew that we had many miles to go, that we would be traveling on unknown roads in unknown territory, that the last hundred miles would be very slow going and that we had to reach our rendezvous before Friday noon.

We encountered only one vehicle and no animals until we had almost reached Shashemani, when we had to stop for a minute to let a large aardvark cross the road. At Shashemani we turned onto a highway going south. The sun was coming up, and I hoped that when it went down we would be off the main roads. At Wendo we turned southeast onto a secondary road. Seyoum and Alem-Sihay remained in the back. They had a lot to talk about. Mengistu proved to be a good traveler, and appeared in fact to be enjoying himself, perhaps because he was with his father again. My sense of responsibility for this family grew by the mile, and I felt as alert and concentrated on the task as I possibly could be.

All went well on this part of the trip, and we reached Negele just before sundown. None of us, excepting Mengistu, had slept, so we decided to camp for the night near the town. There was a filling station in Negele, and while Seyoum and Alem-Sihay set up camp I drove back to get gas. Dr. Bergstrom had told me that his Land Rover did not get good mileage on the crude tracks he used in Arrussi Province, the same kind of tracks we would be driving on. I had used quite a lot of gas already, and this was the last chance to get some, so it was a risk we had to take. When I returned they had set up the tent. Mosquitoes were out, and drove us inside the tent, which was protected with netting. A lantern provided illumination for our meal. I poured some tej into three tin cups and offered a toast.

"To your reunion."

Alem-Sihay showed me the St. Christopher medal her sister had given her. "I never told her a thing, but she knew somehow I was going on a journey."

Seyoum brought up the subject that had at one time consumed me with curiosity. "Do you remember the note you wrote with your dinner invitation some months ago? The one with the quote of Petrarca? Let's see. . . ."

"I practice no art," I interjected, "except to love utterly, to trust utterly, to hide nothing, to feign nothing, and, in a word to pour out everything into my friend's ear just as it comes from heart."

"Yes, that's it. And then you asked if I could do that. I told you then I was unable. It seemed to me that such forthrightness was a luxury for artists only. It made me bitter to realize I had been so conditioned. Now, though, I'm ready to tell you just what happened. I owe you a lot more than the truth. Girmanie Neway and I were childhood friends, and we had remained close over the years. When he was. . ."

"Wait! Wait! I interrupted. "It's true that at one time I wanted very much to know all of it. Since then I've learned things from various people about the coup, and more importantly I have gotten to know you. And knowing you has answered my questions. Whatever happened, I'm sure you had no part in the killing. And I know you had always insisted on a bloodless revolution. In any case, I no longer need to hear the story."

"Thank you," said Seyoum after a few moments. "It is hard to talk about." Then he looked at me and grinned. "You know, I find it quite delicious being rescued by an anarchist."

"Anarchist or not," I replied, "I expect you to become president or prime minister or whatever of Ethiopia some day. . . .and then you can name a room in the palace after me."

Seyoum grunted, then laughed. "This is beginning to sound like an opera. Actually, I may be getting out of politics."

"Don't you think Seyoum would make a great teacher?" asked Alem-Sihay hopefully.

"First rate," I concurred.

"My father was a teacher," Seyoum said, "both before and after he joined the clergy." Seyoum paused. "But he also died to free his country." Seyoum paused again. "Do you understand?"

"I believe so," I answered. "You'll have decisions to make, but I believe in you and that you will make the right ones." I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to talk about a rosy future, but I wanted to feel it, I wanted to feel in my bones that everything would turn out well.

We had decided to start at sunrise. That would give us time for a good sleep. I left the tent to spend the night in the Land Rover, giving my friends their first chance in more than two years to sleep together.

We woke up just as it was beginning to get light, and as quickly as possible broke down our camp and took off on what promised to be a day of hard driving, and who knew what else? We traveled south over various kinds of terrain, sometimes at a fair speed, often at a slow speed. In the early afternoon we had to cross a shallow but wide river on a bridge made of rocks dropped into the water so as to construct a kind of raised roadway. I hated to think what these sharp

rocks were doing to my tires. I had brought two spares, but would that be enough? Late in the day just after passing the turnoff to Dembeldoro, we saw a gerenuk grazing an acacia tree. This animal, also called a giraffe gazelle, reminded me of the gazelle-like creatures I had seen in depictions of the Garden of Eden, and for a moment it seemed ridiculous to keep driving, since we were in paradise.

It was essential that we not miss the turnoff to start the last leg of our trip, so we stopped before dark and camped much as we had the previous night. Knowing that the next day would begin the most crucial part of our journey, we retired early hoping to get a good sleep in spite of the heat which had become somewhat oppressive, even at night. We were now only about three degrees above the Equator, and we had dropped quite a lot in elevation.

As soon as we left our camp site at sunrise I began looking for our turnoff on the left, which I knew would only be a track. When it did come into view after a few miles my heart sank a little. Seyoum was sitting in front for this part of the trip, and informed me that we would be traveling on a very old caravan track.

“We have more than a hundred miles of this to go,” I told him.

“You’re not supposed to think about distance when you’re on a caravan track,” he replied.

“What about time?” I asked, thinking that on a road like this our days remaining did not seem so very many. At least we should be safe now from roadblocks.

There were serious ruts and eroded places where we had to move at a crawl. After a few miles we were forced to stop and use our shovels to fill in a hole running across the path. A short distance later we had our first mishap. Two kudus bounded out of the bush directly in front of us, and I had to brake on a sandy patch of the track. The Land Rover slid off the road rear end down in the ditch. Alem-Sihay let out a little scream as we jolted to a stop. Mengistu had bumped his head and he was howling, but Alem-Sihay assured us it was not bad. Fortunately the winch on the front end was within striking distance of a tree across the way, and we let the engine pull us back onto the path.

We pushed on, grinding and lurching over this peculiar road in the heat of the day. I had brought a bunch of bananas, and although the windows were all open we were moving so slowly now, and the bananas had become so ripe, their aroma was constantly present, and I knew that in the future whenever I smelled a banana it would remind me of this episode in my life.

As we crossed a few miles of savannah spotted with acacia trees we saw a lone reticulated giraffe munching away in the branches. Mensistu was brought up front where he could see better. I wondered how much of all this, if any, he would remember.

A short distance later we encountered a camel caravan and had to pull over to let them pass. The bells and gourds and pots hanging from the sides of the camels made an exotic noise as they brushed against the Land Rover. After they had passed and we were on the way again I mentioned to Seyoum that we had traveled almost the entire length, and now we were traversing the width, of Sidamo Province where the seeds of the revolution had been sown.

“Life is full of irony,” said Seyoum. “There’s probably a design to it all, if only we could see it.”

In the late afternoon a coffee truck came growling towards us, and I had to back up a ways to pull off. By night fall we had gone an undetermined distance. The mileage meter said sixty miles, but most of that had been up and down, so I knew it was considerably less.

While having our meal, we spoke about how all of this had come to seem fated by the gods who had planted us across the street from each other in Assella for the purpose of this adventure.

“It’s what I was saying earlier,” Seyoum observed. “About hidden designs in our lives.”

“Seyoum’s father believed in a destiny determined by faith and will,” Alem-Sihay said. “Ironically Seyoum, the modern man, sees the hand of the ancient gods in everything.” She smiled and kissed her husband tenderly on the cheek.

We started early again and had only traveled a couple of miles when we came around a clump of trees and discovered a lion standing just ahead of us in the middle of the track. She was aware of our presence, no doubt long before we were aware of hers, but she seemed to take no notice of us, to the extent that eventually she yawned and lay down in the dirt. Our hearts sank a bit as we all silently speculated on how long we would have to wait for her majesty to finish her nap. Mengistu climbed into the front to get a look at his first lion. Just as I was about to risk blowing the horn she got up and started walking casually down the path away from us. We waited until she was out of sight before we proceeded, and we never saw her again.

A hundred miles on a caravan track in the African outback can be a long way. The constant bumping and swaying, the heat, and the anxiety caused by the unknowns ahead, even if you are not worried about the police, will take their toll. Twice we had to stop to repair the road. I knew that sometime during the afternoon we should reach a village called Comodo, and not many miles after that the river bed we would be using as a road to Kenya.

About mid-afternoon our second, and more serious, accident occurred. I was going very slowly over a stretch of the track that was slightly raised and appeared to be hard-packed when suddenly the dirt gave way, and without even a chance to react we were head first down in the gully. It had seemed to happen very slowly and there was no jolt as before, although our situation this time was much worse. The winch was buried in the dirt, and anyway there was no anchor for the cable. We looked at each other in dismay.

After examining everything we concluded that our only chance was to get help. The ground was too hard to dig our way out, and there was no room for people to push from the front. We would have to be pulled back onto the road with a rope or cable attached to the rear axle.

The prospect of help was not very good. We had encountered only one vehicle. In any case, there was nothing we could do but wait and hope. Just before sunset a camel caravan going west came along, and I asked Seyoum if he thought they might help us. He replied that nomads were not much inclined to help people like ourselves, nor would it do to try to pull the Land Rover out of its

predicament with camels. The animals were not temperamentally suited to such work. As the caravan passed, the nomads looked at us without expression.

Our dinner that evening was quiet. There wasn't much to be happy about. "Well," I finally said, "if this voyage is meant to succeed then something good will happen tomorrow. I don't know what else to say." I felt heartsick about what had happened. The thought of failing now was tearing me apart.

We were all up before sunrise, anticipating a nerve-wracking day. Our best hope was a coffee truck, probably coming from the east. Each hour we sat by the track waiting for help seemed like a day. All morning we waited, but saw nothing except a few gazelles and some wildebeests. As noon came I couldn't help remarking to myself that we had exactly one day to get to our destination. I didn't want to think about what Seyoum and Alem-Sihay must be feeling. They would be the ones to suffer most if our luck didn't change soon.

The hours dragged on. Not even a caravan. Then, about mid-afternoon we heard a motor and looked up to see a Land Rover approaching from the west. My first reaction was one of jubilation. Then it occurred to me that it might be the police looking for us. It seemed each of us was thinking the same thing because we all stood speechless and frozen, a group of statues watching our salvation or our doom approach. When the Land Rover reached us it stopped and four men got out. The driver and one other were Ethiopians, but the other two looked European. My spirits lifted, thinking it was unlikely there would be Europeans in the Ethiopian police. Soon we learned that the two Europeans were French naturalists, and one of the Ethiopians was also a naturalist, cooperating with the French on a survey of animal populations and migrations in southern Ethiopia along the Kenya border. Seyoum spoke to them in French and told them, from what I could understand, that we were teachers from Addis Ababa on safari to view animals, and that we were supposed to meet some friends tomorrow morning up the road a ways. They could of course see the difficulty we were in. They too had a front-end winch, and after we had hooked the cable to the rear axle everyone stood or hung on the back end of the naturalists' vehicle for traction, and inch by inch my Land Rover made its way backwards up onto the path.

After we had thanked them they said they were going to put up camp, and invited us to have dinner with them. Seyoum explained that we would have to leave very soon or else we would miss our friends. They asked us about the animals we had seen, and expressed a particular interest in the reticulated giraffe, which was fairly rare in the area where we had seen it.

We said our goodbyes and started out again for the river. We only had about three hours of daylight left, and we had not yet come to Comodo. We were all haggard and worried and aware that the hardest part was yet to come. "Think of it this way," I said. "The miracle did happen and we were rescued. We may be pressed for time, but fate is still with us."

We discussed the pros and cons of driving at night. Here was where the unknowns came into play. How long would the walk across the border take? Would we be able to drive on the river bed? It was almost sundown when we arrived in the small village of Comodo, and I kept on driving as fast as I safely could, knowing that after dark this road was extremely treacherous.

“I don’t think you should drive on this track at night,” said Seyoum. “It’s bad enough in the daytime.”

“The problem,” I answered, “is that we don’t really know how far it is to the river, and we don’t know how long the walk will take, and we have to be there by noon tomorrow.”

After darkness fell I continued driving for a ways, until I realized the wisdom of Seyoum’s objections. “I have to agree,” I said. “This road can’t be driven at night, we’ll have to continue at sunrise.”

Once again we camped and had a meal, all of us feeling some combination of hope, fear and frustration.

“We can’t be far away,” I said optimistically. “And we can probably drive on the river bed.”

I slept very little and when I climbed out of the Land Rover just before sunrise the others were already up. Only Mengistu had gotten a good night’s sleep. While in the darkness we quietly had our breakfast of bananas and pepperoni, we listened to the sounds of the animals in the bush around us and understood that we were now sailors on a sea filled with wild creatures. At the first sign of light we began driving.

If my attention had been focused before, it was wonderfully focused now. While I tried to examine every rock and shadow in the track without losing speed, Seyoum kept an eye out for animals. After an hour of driving we encountered an eroded place and had to stop. The only remedy was to fill in the trench. Alem-Sihay and Mengistu got out and helped us find things to throw into the space that needed to be filled. Rocks and pieces of wood were scarce, and the earth was too hard for digging, so, aware that we had no time to lose, we began to throw in our cushions and blankets; and then, seeing that we needed more, the tent and three empty jerry cans were added to the pile. After the Land Rover had managed to grind its way over the filled-in abyss in compound low we quickly retrieved some of our things and continued bumping and swaying on down the track. I had begun to feel a touch of panic setting in. It was looking doubtful that we could get to our rendezvous by noon. The track seemed endless and the same in its consistently erratic way, and I began to feel lost on a road to nowhere.

About ten o’clock we finally arrived at the river, which was dry, as expected, and looked to be suitable for driving on. Very soon, though, we encountered soft spots and large rocks, and decided it was time to abandon the vehicle and continue on foot. After winching the Land Rover into the bush we unloaded what we were going to carry. I had a backpack I had purchased in Switzerland before coming to Africa, and into this I loaded Alem-Sihay’s bag, two canteens of water and some food. Seyoum had his duffel, which contained the two rare books among the other things. He and I each carried a spear.

“What exactly did Owen tell you on the telephone?” Seyoum wanted to know.

“He said they would wait until Friday noon, and then they would have to leave.”

“If I know Owen and Evelyn, they’ll give us more time.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said. “We’ll need it.”

When noon came we had only gone about two miles, I estimated. We all knew we had missed the deadline, and once again our fate was out of our hands. All we could do was trudge on bravely. Mengistu was having a hard time now, and Seyoum and Alem-Sihay took turns carrying him. The going was slow and there were difficult places to negotiate. I kept almost expecting a lion to jump out of the bush or a rhino to charge us from the other side of the riverbed. The sun beat down hard on us, and I regretted having forgotten to bring umbrellas. It was a detail I had overlooked.

In the early afternoon as we came around a bend we spotted a herd of elephants just ahead of us. We crouched down and tried to keep Mengistu still as we watched them sand-bathing and hoped they would soon move along. In spite of our situation, everyone became fascinated with their gentle antics and the way they behaved with each other. They were a happy group of creatures, enjoying nature and each other's company.

"We have something to learn from the elephants, I think," Seyoum observed.

"And they have nothing to learn from us," I added.

We watched them for about twenty minutes before I brought up the option of going into the bush and circling around the herd.

"Walking that far through the bush would take a long time," said Seyoum. "We should wait a while."

As we sat watching, Mengistu asking endless questions, the elephants, having finished their baths, started off in what seemed to be a prearranged line of order, and lumbered up the riverbank into the foliage. We could move again.

The heat was debilitating now, but all we could do was keep walking. We didn't know how far we had come or how far we had to go to reach the place where our friends would be camped if they hadn't already left, as Owen had said they would have to do. I began wondering what we would do if they weren't there. It was a possibility, even a likelihood, and its prospects were frightening. We all sensed the urgency of our plight, knowing that if they were still at the campsite every moment counted. Yet it was impossible to walk any faster, with Mengistu to handle, and the sandy soil underfoot.

Around mid-afternoon, when we had walked for five or six hours Alem-Sihay gave me a look of desperation "What will we do?" she questioned, her voice shaking.

"We'll keep walking," Seyoum answered.

"Yes," I concurred. "And we need to conserve water."

I figured that by now we had crossed the border and we would sooner or later come to the unimproved road in Kenya, not far from the village of Malka Meri. I was fairly certain we had walked nearly the full distance indicated on the map, although since we had not been walking in a straight line it was hard to say. I began to reproach myself bitterly for not giving us more time. Five days I realized, had been too optimistic. Whatever happened, I was prepared to take desperate measure, if necessary, to get my friends to safety. What those measure would be I had no idea.

We were strung out along the riverbed, Seyoum out in front while I lingered close to Alem-Sihay and Mengistu, who was feeling some ill effects from the ordeal. Then. . . Seyoum shouted.

“There it is! There it is! The orange tent!”

We all began to run, and in a minute I could see it too. “There it is!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. I looked at Alem-Sihay, and the expression on her face made all the hardships and dangers worthwhile. Very soon we saw two figures near the tent. They shouted and ran down the embankment toward us. Then two more figures appeared. I recognized the tall silhouette of Owen Harrison. Now everyone was shouting and running. When we all came together there on the sand beneath the bright orange tent I couldn’t help laughing at the thought that, just as the scent of banana would always remind me of this experience, so would the color orange.

Besides Owen and Evelyn Harrison there were two Ethiopians, old friends, Alemayhu Astaw and Worku Habte-Mariam. Worku’s wife, Almaz, was pregnant and didn’t want to climb down the embankment but she stood on the edge of it and waved at us. Everyone hugged everyone, and I said, “I knew the gods were still with us.”

“They told us at noon to stay another day,” said Evelyn, who looked happy for the first time since I had met her.

A little later, sitting by the orange tent, we discussed some kind of ceremony to commemorate the occasion, and Alemayhu, who had seen us carrying the spears, suggested a ceremony involving our spears. It was decided that I would keep one of the spears and Seyoum and Alem-Sihay would keep the other. I would scratch my initials or something into the shaft of their spear and they would do the same with mine. Worku, who was a poet, would make up a few words and we would have the ceremony before I left. It had been a long day, a day of worry, anxiety and despair, ending in exultation; we were exhausted but filled with a profound sense of relief.

The next day I remained at the campsite. There was much to talk about, and that was how we spent the day. Among other things, Owen informed me that they had brought three jerry cans of gas for my return trip. I would need assistance getting them back to my vehicle, and everyone except Alem-Sihay and Almaz volunteered. Seyoum was insistent.

“Do you think,” I said, “after what it took to get you here I’m going to walk back across the border with you? Are you crazy?”

Early the next morning we had our “ceremony of the spears.” Worku said a few very poetic words, and Seyoum and I clanked the two spears together. Our leave taking was poignant, and joyful overall, even though we knew we would probably never see each other again. Alem-Sihay held me tightly in her arms for a while. Seyoum said he didn’t think Haile Selassie would choose to badger me very much over this. As long as he had no evidence there was little he could do, especially since I was a foreign citizen. I replied that the success of our exploit had given me the strength to get through any interrogations. And I was not going to appear to them a guilty man.

As Owen, Alemayhu, Worku and I climbed down the riverbank I raised my spear in a farewell salute, and we were off, back to Ethiopia. They had rigged up

a way to carry the jerry cans tied to a pole we could rest on our shoulders, but it would still be another arduous trek.

I was walking with Worku, who had been a member of the Revolutionary Council, as had Seyoum. "Were you in the palace when the shooting started?" I asked him.

"Yes," he answered, "Seyoum and I were both there when Girmamie lost his mind and began firing his gun. Seyoum tried to stop him, and Girmamie knocked him to the floor and kept on shooting. Seyoum was devastated. He tried to kill himself. Did you know that? When he saw what Girmamie had done, all those people shot, the screams of the wounded, all the blood, Seyoum picked up a pistol lying on the floor and tried to shoot himself in the head, but the gun was empty."

Despite my claims to the contrary when Seyoum had offered at last to describe his direct involvement in the coup, I had remained curious. And now I knew. I understood why it was so painful for him to talk about it. His lifelong friend, Girmanie Neway, a good man by all accounts, who wanted to build schools and roads and give land to the poor of Sidamo, had snapped when it became apparent that the coup was failing. What a nightmare it must have been for Seyoum. Now, at least, he would have a chance to start a new life and make a contribution to the world.

"Well," I said to Worku, "the coup may have failed, but you started a revolution. Because of what you did change has become possible. Inevitable, I would say."

In the early afternoon we reached the tire tracks in the sand near where my Land Rover was hiding, and they helped me get it down from the trees into the river bed. Before starting off Owen had a few words for me.

"I hope you know how everyone feels about what you've done. As you're aware, it's not over for you. I'd go back the same way you came, and if you get to Shashemani without being stopped you should be all right."

"They will question me," I said, "but I'll stick to my story and they won't be able to prove otherwise. It's like the sign in The Globe pub in London. . .do you know the place? The sign says: THOSE WHO HAVE TRAVELED IN EXOTIC LANDS MAY TELL STORIES WITHOUT FEAR OF CONTRADICTION."

They laughed, and Owen said that yes he had seen this sign in The Globe. I shook hands with each of them, and began my return trip.

There was no particular need to hurry. I had plenty of food and water and enough gas to get to Negele. So I took my time, and felt the exhilaration and wonder of being alone in the African bush. Not being a camel, my Land Rover had endured so many jolts I feared it would collapse at any moment into a heap of metal. It held together, though, all the way to Negele where the roads north became smoother.

Six days after leaving my friends I was back in Assella, having been gone for over two weeks. Tessema and Demissie were both at the house and bowed while looking at me in a rather strange way. Malya was also there, and came out to greet me. I sent Demissie, who understood English fairly well, to the market so Malya and I could talk. After I had told him about our journey and its ultimate success he told me about his interview with Haile Selassie's police.

“They were here when we got back a few days ago. May didn’t know anything and I stuck to the story. They asked a lot of questions about you. You’re supposed to see Ato Amdi right away.” When I asked him if they knew anything Malya replied that they had told him nothing.

The next morning I walked to school and went into the office of Ato Amdi Selassie Gienberi, the principal. We bowed to each other, then he informed me that some men from Addis Ababa wanted to talk to me, and that I should come back at two. I pretended to be upset and worried about Seyoum. Everyone knew we were friends.

“Do they have any idea what happened to him?” I asked in as innocent and sincere a voice as I could muster. Ato Amdi replied that they had not told him anything except that Seyoum’s wife was also missing from Addis Ababa. It was probable they had questioned Demissie. He was of course at the house much of the time and may have noticed things. I didn’t believe, however, that even if Demissie knew anything or suspected anything that he would give his suspicions to the police. Demissie had always regarded Seyoum with awe, partly no doubt because Seyoum’s father was a great hero to the people of the country. . .people like Demissie.

When I returned in the afternoon two men in suits were waiting for me in Ato Amdi’s office. We all bowed, as is the custom, and then they began asking their questions. I had anticipated most of them. At one point I told them I thought Seyoum had been despondent and maybe depressed lately. I knew they must have read Seyoum’s note to Bellhu. They asked me to describe my trip to Axum and Gondar, which I did. That and camping at Lake Abaya. I had just learned, upon my return, of Seyoum’s disappearance. He was a friend, and whatever had happened to him I hoped he was all right.

“How long have you known Seyoum Sebat’s wife?” asked one of the men.

“I’ve never met his wife,” I replied.

“You were seen going into her apartment.”

This I emphatically denied. It was possible but not likely. Finally the investigators told me they wanted to see my Land Rover. We drove to the house and they began looking through the vehicle. I had foreseen this and removed any evidence. But I had left the spear, the one Seyoum had inscribed, and when one of the policemen picked it up and began to read the symbols a shudder went through me. The man seemed to be confused, however, by what he was looking at, and gave it up.

The investigation eventually fizzled out, and I was allowed to keep my job teaching English at Ras Dargay School in the capital of Arrussi Province, although I was the subject of town gossip for a while. When the new school year began, my 11th grade students of the year before became my 12th grade students. They had all heard the rumors, and on the first day of class one of them stood up and said, very politely, “Excuse me, sir, but would you please tell us what happened to Seyoum Sebat?” If my student suspected the rumors were true he must have known I would be forced to lie. I decided that they were all probably just curious to see my reaction when the question was asked.

“Wherever he is, I hope he’s happy,” I said. Then I told them I would have no more to say on the subject.

One day I took the spear to school and showed it to the Amharic instructor, asking him if he could translate the characters etched into the shaft. He scrutinized it for several minutes, and finally declared that the letters were Ge'ez, not Amharic. Having been a member of the clergy, he knew Ge'ez, but he kept saying that it didn't make sense. Then it occurred to him that it might be a phonetic spelling of something.

"What would it sound like?" I asked him.

"It sounds like. . .ew. . .hoo. . .roo."

"Uhuru?"

"Uhuru." He thought a moment. "Isn't that the Swahili word for freedom?"

"Yes," I answered. "It's the one Swahili word I know."

FINIS