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Traces of Sandalwood

Translated from the Spanish by
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ADDIS ABABA, 1974

Daybreak came quickly. As soon as the first faint rays of dawn appeared, the night immediately drew back its dark veil. Solomon sat on the windowsill gazing at one of the facades of the Entoto Mariam church, imagining the people inside the surrounding wall, all dressed in their white cotton clothing, crouching by the wall or leaning against tree trunks. There were always sick people around the church. Waiting. Most of them hoping that death would come soon. The smell of eucalyptus hung in the air. In the distance, far from the octagonal-shaped Orthodox Church, the shape of the city could just be made out through the dense fog. The hills around Addis Ababa rose up, three thousand metres high, cloaked in a leafy forest of eucalyptus trees. During the night, hyenas had been scrounging around for food next to the houses. They invaded the flooded, mud-filled streets trawling for bones, the remains of chicken carcasses, a stray lamb escaped from a pen or some old dog too crippled to fend them off.

‘Come on Solomon! Get up! Get dressed and come and eat something, you’re going to be late for school!’

‘Has Dad already left?’

‘Yes, he and Aster have both gone. It’s just you left! Come on, up you get!’

Maskarem bustled around the house listening to the radio which was always on. The repetitive beat of military marches sounded out. They seemed to be on the radio a lot these days. Maskarem always had to make sure that there were embers burning in the small stone oven that their father had built, so

that they could cook *injera** whenever they needed it. In one corner, on the floor between some large stones, was the fire that they used for heating water and cooking. Since their mother had died two years ago, Maskarem stayed at home while the others went out to work or to school. It was a small single storey house sufficient for the four people who lived in it.

At last, Solomon did as he was told by his older sister, got dressed and gobbled down a quick breakfast of *injera* with some *shiro wat* left over from the day before, using his fingers to tear off large pieces. He grabbed the cloth bag containing his notebooks and pen and ran out of the house, down toward the road to Shiro Meda, the neighbourhood which nestled at the foot of the Entoto hills, some five hundred metres below. Sometimes he would cut through the forest, leaping like a little goat so that he didn't slip. If he took the main road, he would run as fast as he possibly could. The road sloped steeply, with many sharp bends. There was very little traffic but there were a lot of people walking up and down it. There were also many donkeys carrying clay pots and plastic drums full of water, fastened tightly to their saddlebags with ropes. At this time of day, before it got too hot, many women were carrying bundles of firewood on their heads or tied to their backs, either going to sell it or taking it home. Others carried jars full of fresh milk. The smell of burning eucalyptus was all around.

When Solomon reached Sintayehu's house he didn't need to call for him. As soon as he drew near, his friend came dashing out clutching his schoolbag. His mother was busying herself with buckets of water and waved goodbye to him from the window. For most women, the morning was the time for water.

* Words in italics are explained in the glossary at the end of the book.

They either had to go and fetch it or wait for someone to bring it before they could start their cooking or cleaning. In that particular neighbourhood only a handful of the houses had running water. When Sintayehu caught up with him, Solomon slowed down and they walked side by side to school, which was still some distance away. They were both eight years old and in the same class at school. They both had brown skin and very short, curly dark hair.

‘So have you asked your dad yet which day we can go?’

‘No, not yet,’ replied Solomon.

‘What on earth are you waiting for? My dad says they’re going to kick the emperor out soon. So if you don’t hurry up we won’t get to see the lions!’

‘What do you mean they’re going to kick out the emperor? My dad’s one of his cooks!’

‘I heard my dad talking about it a few days ago with my uncle and some of their friends who came to the house. I didn’t really understand what they were going on about but they sounded really angry. I heard them saying that they’ve had enough of Ras Tafari and the time has come to throw him out.’

‘Why are you calling him Ras Tafari when his name is Haile Selassie?’

A flock of goats grazed casually at the side of the wide road, nibbling the green grass, quite indifferent to the cars and buses rumbling past.

‘Right now he’s the king of kings; the lion of Judah; God’s chosen one; but my father says that his name is Tafari Mekonen, that he’s just a normal guy and he can’t even read or write!’

‘No way! You’re always telling silly stories!’

‘Well, believe what you like. But if my dad says that the

emperor never went to school then it's true!' replied Sintayehu, leaving Solomon lost for words. 'So can we feed them?' he insisted.

'The palace lions? Are you crazy? Only the emperor can do that!'

'Yeah, but maybe your dad can ask them to let us do it. Or at least let us see them in the cages in the garden!'

They reached the school. Dozens of boys just like them and little girls with their hair in plaits were making their way inside the building. Solomon and Sintayehu could hear a large group of people shouting, mostly young men. They were yelling slogans against the emperor. It was yet another demonstration by university students, moving slowly up the avenue and bringing the traffic to a standstill. The cars, small vans that served as collective taxis and buses were all beeping their horns. Demonstrations like this one happened often. If it wasn't students then it was farmers clamouring for their rights. Every time, more and more groups of different people came together wanting the same thing.

'Meret le arashu! Land to the tiller!'

'Down with the feudal regime!'

'Meret le arashu!'

'Give us back our land!'

'End the tyranny!'

The crowd repeated the same cries over and over. Solomon and Sintayehu watched them with curiosity and without the faintest idea what was going on.

Some of the men doing the shouting were red in the face with anger and looked like they might kill the next person who got in their way. There were some soldiers amongst the students too.

Everywhere you went lately, there seemed to be more soldiers than ever.

‘Come on, everyone inside! Hurry up!’ a teacher told them.

‘Do as you’re told, or there’ll be trouble!’ The school guard gripped the gate railings, ready to close it once all the children were inside. Then it was just him standing by the railings and the flagpole with the Ethiopian flag rippling in the morning breeze.

The school day usually started with all the boys and girls lining up in the playground to sing the national anthem while the headmaster raised the three-coloured flag. But when there were protests like that morning, the children went straight into the classrooms. There was no lining up, no national anthem, nothing. They took their seats and the teachers immediately went round closing the windows overlooking the street. It was hard to concentrate, both for the students and the teachers. There were days when the noise outside made any other activity other than copying out of textbooks absolutely impossible. Text after text, copied diligently into their notebooks, while the teacher watched what was going on in the street with interest.

‘An end to hunger!’ shouted the protesters, their voices rising above the din of car and taxi horns.

‘Meret le arashu!’

Other times, the protesters were taxi drivers, complaining about the price of petrol. Without taxis, Addis Ababa was a ghost town. But it was even worse if the Ambessa bus workers decided to join the protest too, demanding a pay rise that never came. Then it was complete and utter chaos.

‘Which land are they talking about?’ Solomon asked Sintayehu.

‘Which land do you think? Ours of course!’

Solomon definitely didn't understand what was going on; why so many people were shouting in the streets; why everyone seemed so on edge.

'Quiet!' said the teacher.

Solomon knew that things were happening that he didn't understand and no-one would explain to him. He didn't play much. He went to school early in the morning, made his way back up through the woods for his lunch, went down to the city again for his afternoon classes, slower and quite tired when they finished. He was a good pupil just as he had promised his mother he would be, before she died. She had barely been to school. She had spent her childhood in the mountains of Tikil Dingai, between Gondar and Dansha. The mountains were known for their "well-placed rocks" which were unusual shapes. When she became a city woman, although they lived in the Entoto hills, her main concern was that her children should study. At last year's prize-giving ceremony for the school's best pupils, Solomon had won his class prize. More than one child received lashings and punishments from the teachers, using all kinds of whips. Solomon had never been punished either at school or at home. He was possibly the only one who had never been punished. He did his homework every day at the wooden table in their house and helped out as much as he could. He had no reason not to. Before he went to primary school, he went to a small school run by Orthodox priests, next door to the church. There he had learned to read and write, monotonously repeating the syllabic alphabet out loud. *Ha, hu, hi* ... It seemed more like a singing recital class than anything else. Anyone who made a mistake or fell behind was hit with a wooden stick or a whip. Striped whip marks on their skin were a common occurrence.

Ma, mu, mi ... The parents didn't complain; quite the opposite in fact. They would often beat their children even more for having angered the teachers.

They were going to the Entoto Mariam Church as they did every Sunday morning. Solomon's sisters wore long white dresses and their hair covered with a *netela*, a white cotton cloth with a single blue-coloured border around the edge. Small silver crosses strung on black wool hung round their necks. As well as the cross, Maskarem also wore one of her mother's necklaces, made from some pieces of old silver from her northern homeland.

'*Salam, Biniam!*' said Solomon, seeing his friend on the steps of the church.

'How are you?' asked Maskarem as she came up the steps behind him. Without saying anything else, she discreetly slipped him a few *birrs*. Biniam stuffed them into his pocket immediately, looking down at the floor.

'Thank you, I'm fine.'

Biniam was slightly older than Solomon and lived alone on the streets. They had known each other a long time, since before Biniam's parents had become ill and died, one after the other. He had some relatives in a town in the north, near Lake Tana, but all of his close relatives were dead. They used to play together, making shoes out of empty cans so they could see the world from a few inches higher, but now Biniam just did what he could to survive. He shined shoes on the city's streets, carrying his father's old wooden box full of brushes and polishes and an empty paint can that he used as a stool when his customers sat down on a low wall.

'Do you want to come with me this afternoon? I have to take some sheep and goats out to graze.'

‘Okay! Where are you going?’

‘Not far. There’s fresh grass everywhere. I have to collect Getasseu’s sheep from near your house so I’ll come and call for you after that. Then we can go and get the Denberus’ cow and two goats from their neighbours. When it gets dark I have to take them all back to the stables.’

‘Do you graze them every day?’

‘Yes, I do now. They don’t pay me very much but I prefer being out around Entoto with the herd than going down to Shiro Meda with my shoe polish box.’

‘I think I’d prefer to stay round here too.’

The men and the women entered the church through different doors. Before taking their shoes off and going inside they spent a few minutes standing in front of the walls of the main facade; they kissed it and then kissed the ground. The doors were painted with brightly coloured angels, dressed in red, their almond-shaped eyes lined in black. The people would not leave the church until at least two hours later, sometimes more. Biniam always said that the thing he liked most about going to church was that it was the only place where he felt calm and protected. The church was filled with the strong smell of incense and sandalwood that a monk was burning in a copper bowl full of smouldering charcoal. A huge painting of Saint George, the patron saint of Ethiopia, riding a white horse with a sword in his hand, dominated one of the walls. Biniam also felt at home in Solomon’s house, where he spent many hours and sometimes stayed the night, sleeping in a corner to keep out of the way.

‘Come round for dinner. My father has cooked some *doro wat* and you know he makes really good *injera*,’ Solomon said to him, before he started singing.