ANNALS OF POLITICAL TERROR

BURYING THE MARTYRS

by Mary Anne Weaver

OUTSIDE Akaki Prison, in central Addis Ababa, one rainy July dawn, some thirty women stood huddled under umbrellas, waiting to be searched by a prison guard. A dog moved among them and sniffed at their feet. Most of the women were members of the Ethiopian royal family or of the nobility. All were dressed in black, and some wore veils. They wore no jewelry except tiny gold crosses hanging discreetly on gold chains.

The last time the women saw the prison, they had been prisoners themselves—held hostage by the Marxist military dictatorship that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. For thirteen years, members of the Emperor's family—including Princess Tenagne Worq, his only surviving daughter; her four daughters; and the Emperor's daughter-in-law—had shared a ten-by-twelve-foot concrete prison cell. Next to them, separated only by a wall, a hundred or so women of his imperial court slept on mattresses on a damp concrete floor. They had been charged with no crime, and were offered no promise of release. Even today, no one knows why they were arrested.

I joined the line as it slowly began to move. A small group of beggars appeared from a bus stop across the street, jostling and pushing, jabbing stumps of arms close to the women's faces. After the women had been searched, they entered the prison complex through a red metal gate. Hammer-and-sickles and tattered red flags hung from barbed wire on top of the prison walls. The women walked arm in arm across a muddy field that smelled of open sewers. A billboard proclaimed "Long Live the International Proletariat." Male prisoners stared out from a recreation yard. The women kept silent and looked straight ahead

A stony path led through a complex of squat, tin-roofed stucco buildings that had long ago been painted in bleak shades of ochre, gray, and green. The royal party paused outside a corrugated-iron gate with two huge padlocks. Inside was the crumbling barracks where the women of the imperial court had been held. Female guards lounged in the courtyard, holding clubs. From the barred windows, faces began to appear—the faces of women prisoners, their eyes darting right and left. We approached a lofty pale-blue structure with peeling paint. It resembled a Victorian watchtower, with spires and parapets, but it was actually a prison within a prison, built by Mussolini's occupation forces more than fifty years ago—a maze of catacombs and underground cages known as the End of the World.

Princess Sara Gizau, Haile Selassie's daughter-in-law, stopped to look more closely. She was once one of the most beautiful women in the Emperor's court—tall, slender, and erect, with dark, flashing eyes and hair often tied in a ponytail. Her late husband, Prince Makonnen, was the second of the Emperor's three sons, and was his favorite, and she had always hoped that their son Prince Beeide Mariam would one day assume the throne. He was doted on by the Emperor, everyone told me, and was one of his favorite grandsons. Then, at the age of fifteen, he was sent to the End of the World. His arrest warrant had been signed by Haile Selassie himself. From her cell, in the women's section of the prison, Princess Sara had been unable to see the End of the World. She had only heard that three of her five young sons were being held there in solitary confinement. She was not permitted to see them for eight years.

"*Woizero Rahel!*" a voice shouted in greeting, and we turned around. A thin, hunched woman, her eyes partly blinded by cataracts, approached one of the women and embraced her. "She made coffee for us in prison," the woman, Rahel Mesfin, explained to me. "She also carried messages for us, hidden in her bra."

Rahel had become, in a way, my eyes and ears as she led me by the hand into the closed circle of royal and noble women, to which outsiders had rarely had access before. She was the daughter of Ras Mesfin Sileshi, who was the equivalent of a duke in the Emperor's court. A strikingly attractive woman in her late forties, with deep, wide-set eyes, she had been imprisoned for nearly eight years, with two of her sisters and her mother, Lady Yeshimmabet Guma, who is now seventy-six.

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Rahel had returned to Addis from the United States for the first time since her release, accompanying her mother. Lady Yeshimmabet now stood next to me, holding my arm. In age, position, and stature, she was the ranking woman present from the old imperial court.

A few nights before, she had shown me faded, tinted photographs of her husband in his ceremonial dress. He was an immensely handsome and immensely wealthy man, and he had passed through the pages of modern Ethiopian history exercising control with a firm, sometimes feared, hand: as a patriot who fought the Italian occupiers, as a lieutenant general, as a governor, and as a feudal landlord whose holdings were vast.

Women came forward and bowed and kissed Lady Yeshimmabet's cheeks or her hand, among them a woman of exceptional grace. She was Princess Rebecca Asrate Kassa, a great-granddaughter of the late Empress, and she came from a long imperial line. Many scholars have considered her grandfather, the venerable Ras Kassa, a more legitimate heir to the throne than Emperor Haile Selassie was. But Haile Selassie was far better versed in court politics and intrigue, and Ras Kassa, a deeply religious man, quietly stepped aside. Her father, Prince Asrate Kassa, was considered a potential contender for the throne, and, after the Emperor, was for a time the most powerful man in the kingdom.

The procession stopped briefly at an area encircled by green stakes and barbed wire. "That's the visitors' area," Princess Rebecca said. "But, of course, we weren't permitted visitors when we were here."

In a tiny courtyard outside the prison chapel, a crowd of perhaps two hundred people were waiting—friends, relatives, former prisoners, servants, wardens, guards. A cross tacked to the chapel's roof swayed gently in the breeze. A faded icon of Christ was taped to a nearby tree. For a few minutes, the royal women seemed to hesitate: to go into the chapel, where a prayer vigil had just begun, was, in a sense, to confront their ghosts.

In November of 1974, fifty-six male members of Haile Selassie's court—including Rahel's father, Princess Rebecca's father, and seven of their relatives—were summarily executed inside the prison, without charges or trial, and were buried on its grounds. Three young soldiers who refused to join the firing squad were also killed. For eighteen years, the women had known that their loved ones were dead, but they hadn't known where or how they died. No one had told them—not their jailers, not their lawyers, and not members of the ruling military junta, which was known as the Dergue.

The leader of the Dergue, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, was a five-foot-three-inch ordnance officer known as the Black Stalin of Africa: he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of his countrymen. But the fifty-six noblemen from the imperial court, executed inside Akaki, had been the first. They ranged in age from thirty-two to seventy, and included most of the ranking male members of the court: four princes and eighteen generals; dukes; ministers and former premiers; a grandson of Haile Selassie and one of his sons-in-law. Nearly all their arrest warrants had been signed by the Emperor himself.

Now the women had returned to Addis to bury their dead. An official funeral for sixty-five noblemen—nine of whom had been executed outside Akaki—and the three soldiers would take place in Trinity Cathedral the following day, July 27th. The bodies had been discovered only a few months before—in some cases, only a few weeks before—by Ethiopia's new, transitional government, made up largely of a guerrilla army from the north, which had overthrown the Mengistu junta in the summer of 1991.

As the women filed into the chapel, I walked across the prison grounds with Rahel's younger sister, Tiruayer, who is forty-three. When the revolution began, she had been a student at Bowling Green State University and had returned home, fearing for her father's life. After her release from prison, she was the only one of Ras Mesfin's daughters to remain in Addis, instead of going into exile. Now, pointing to a grassy meadow, she said, "That was the recreational area during the time of our imprisonment." We approached a beige building that housed the prison's electric chair. Beyond it, looming above us just outside the prison wall, in an affluent suburban neighborhood, was the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity, or O.A.U.

Late one night nearly twenty years ago, two prison trucks carrying the men of the Emperor's court had stopped where we now stood, on a muddy track in front of the building containing the electric chair. The prisoners were taken out of the trucks ten at a time. Then, chained together by their wrists and arms in groups of four, they were lined up

HIS IS THE SPOT WHERE OUR PEOPLE-CHAINED STANDING-MET THEIR DEATH EYES OPEN FACING THEIR EXECUTIONERS

The royal funeral in Addis Ababa last July (opposite), and the firing-squad wall in Akaki Prison, where fifty-six men from Haile Selassie's court were the first of many thousands to die under Colonel Mengistu's rule.

against the wall. Their executioners, who were masked, stood in a trench and fired. Each prisoner was shot at least six times. It is said that someone took pictures of the executions from the top floor of the O.A.U. (The whole area is illuminated by powerful stadium lights mounted on concrete pylons.) Six Dergue officers sat in a parked car, on a knoll in the recreational field. They drank whiskey, and communicated with the executioners by hand-held radios. After the executions, the bodies were dragged over stone and rubble and piled one on top of another in a hastily bulldozed pit. They were then covered with lime.

"I remember once, when we were in prison, we used to point to a trumpet flower in this very field and wonder if this is where they were," Tiruayer said. "When we came back to exhume the bodies, it seemed so unreal. At first, we saw a bone coming out, then shoes, and more bones. It was at that moment that I finally believed that my father had been killed." She turned her head away momentarily. "My mother always hoped that he'd worn his cross when he died, or his chipped glasses, so that we could identify him if his body was ever found."

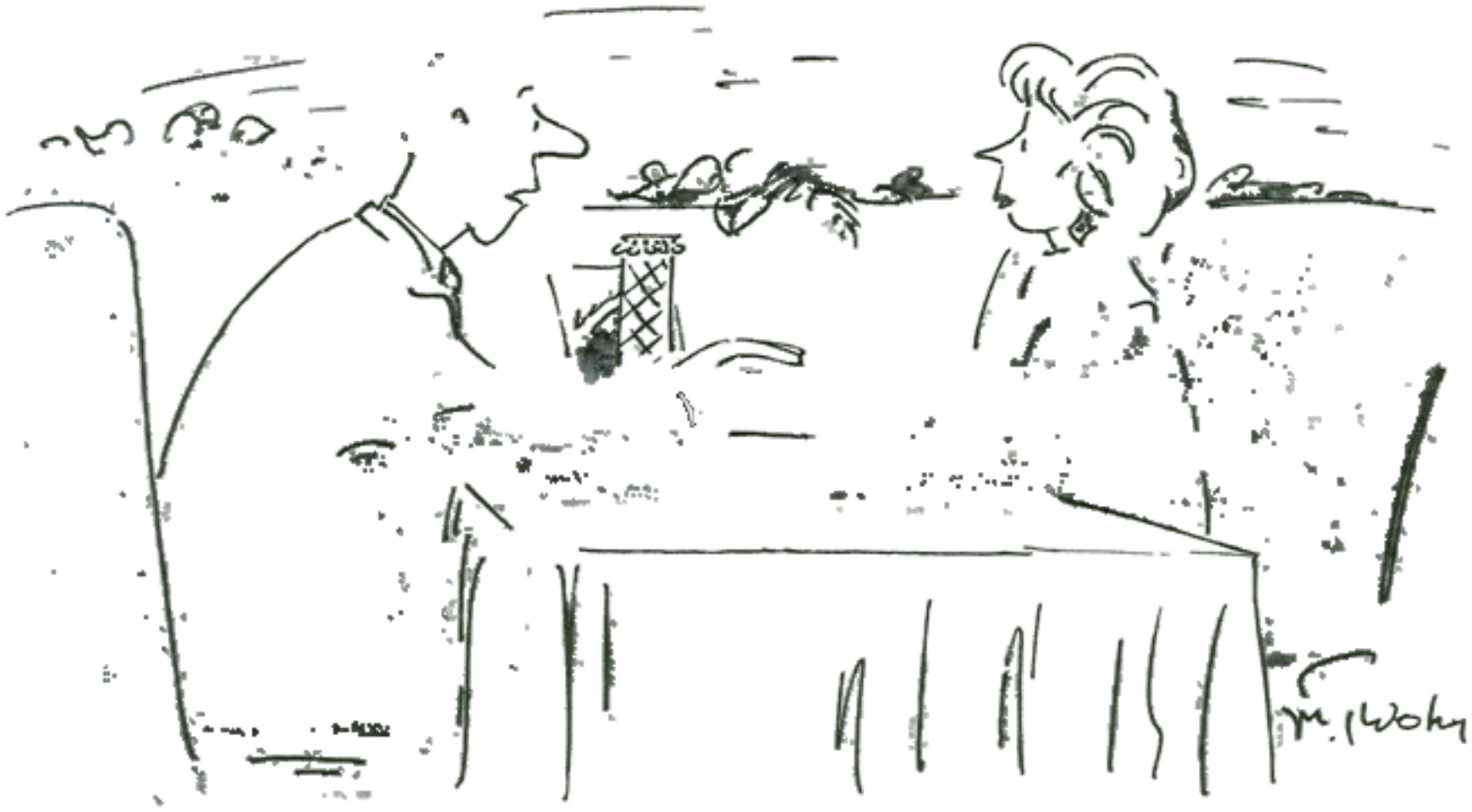
The place where the bodies were found is now a memorial site. Fig trees have been planted there, and, a few feet beyond, a field of trumpet flowers. "Just in case they demolish the monument," Tiruayer said, "the trees and the flowers will always tell us where they died."

There was a bit of a stir as several priests, with crowns on their heads, shuffled toward us across the field, accompanied by bearers who held crimson parasols, trimmed with sequins and golden tassels, above the priests' heads. The mourners followed, some three hundred or so—mostly women, who walked ten or twelve abreast. The priests' gold and purple vestments and their bright parasols contrasted sharply with the sea of mourning black. Some of the women wept, others ululated, but most only stared. In a ceremony of blessing, the priests began chanting, and puffs of incense filled the air.

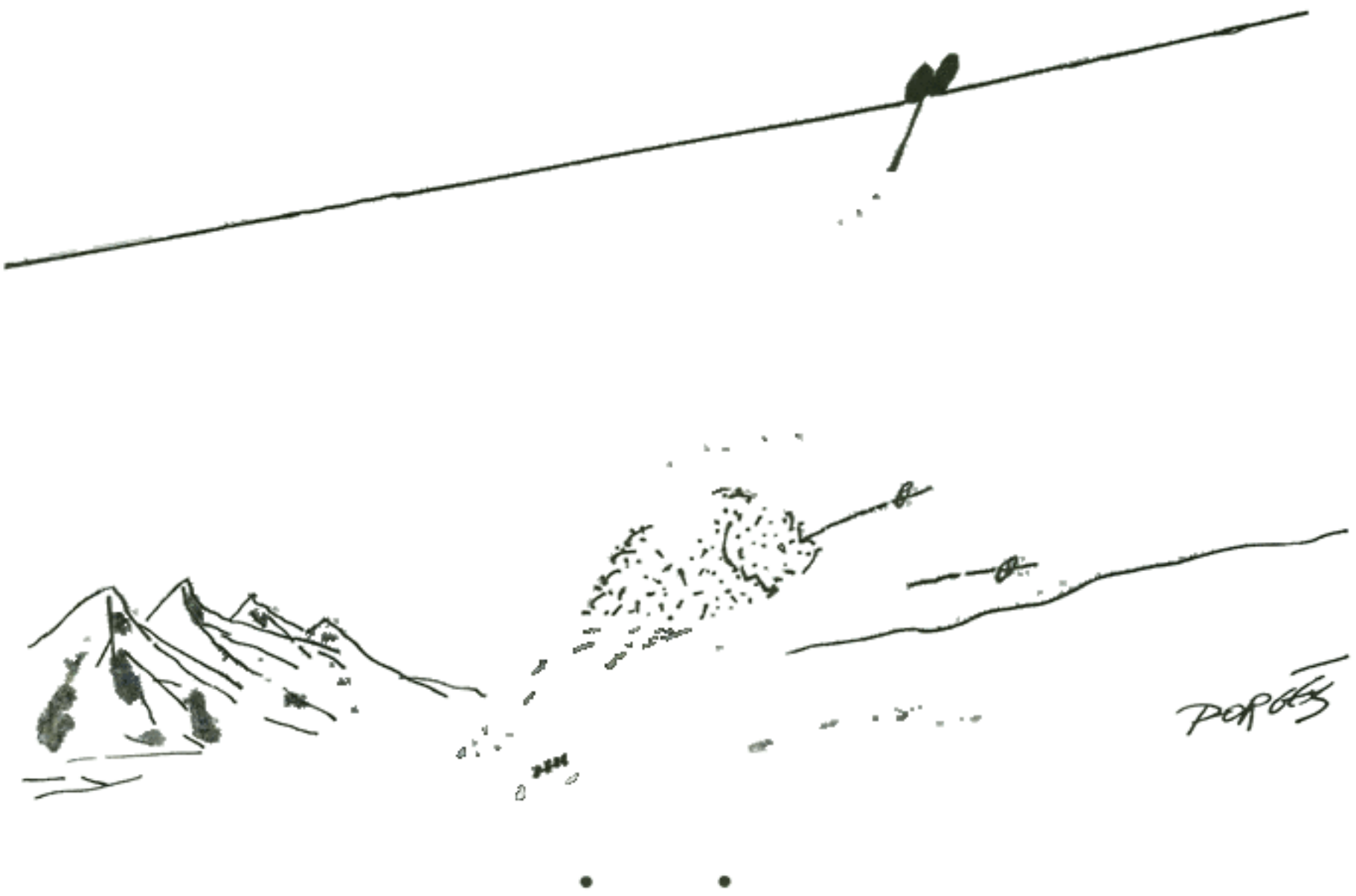
When the ceremony was over, Rahel, Princess Rebecca, and I walked back toward the entrance gate. As we neared the center of the prison, we heard cheers, then shouts. It was Sunday, the prison's visiting day, and the thieves and murderers who lived there now stood in the enclosed area—the area that the princesses had never been permitted to enter—shouting to their families over the heads of their guards.

THE central part of Haile Selassie's empire—the old Kingdom of Abyssinia—is a high plateau, towering some ten thousand feet above sea level, and marked by isolated valleys and deep volcanic rifts. A light-skinned, thin-lipped ethnic group known as the Amharas dominated the highlands—and the courts of the empire—for hundreds of years. They were in the minority, but they presided over a disparate collection of what were, in effect, principalities: desperately poor regions populated by some eighty ethnic and linguistic groups, all consisting mostly of peasants, living amid their goats and cattle in conical mud-and-thatch huts known as *tukuls*. The kingdom's mountain fastness and its altitude had to a large extent guaranteed its isolation, and for centuries it remained an impregnable feudal realm, largely cut off from the world. According to legend, it was founded in the tenth century B.C. by Emperor Menelik I, the offspring of the legendary seduction of the Queen of Sheba by King Solomon. The first kingdom for which there is documentary evidence, however, is that of the court of Aksum, in Tigre Province, in the north, which probably dates from the first century A.D. and is generally considered to be Ethiopia's historical core. Tigre is also home to the guerrilla army that now rules in Addis Ababa. Like the Amharas, the Tigreans have clung with special force to the history that defines their identity: their glittering, ancient seat of power and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is one of the oldest branches of Christianity.

Historically, both groups were barriers against the spread of Islam: since the fourth century A.D., Christianity has flourished in Ethiopia's central highlands. Islamic incursions were primarily along the Red Sea coast, in the northern province of Eritrea, and into the more accessible regions of the south, most notably among the Oromos—Ethiopia's largest tribe—and nomadic Somalian groups. Until recent years, Christians and Muslims coexisted relatively happily, but during Haile Selassie's reign the demographics began to change. Mus-



"Love comes and goes, Janet, but this is true co-dependency!"



lims now make up some fifty per cent of the population—half of which is under the age of twenty-one and knows little of the Emperor and his old imperial court.

On the basis of his lineage from the House of David—he was generally considered to be the two hundred and twenty-fifth in line—Haile Selassie assumed the throne in 1930, after serving as regent for fifteen years, and almost immediately set about bringing his backward, feudal nation into the modern age. He built schools, railways, and roads, and promulgated a constitution. And, of course, he will always be remembered for his impassioned appearance before the League of Nations in 1936, when he appealed in vain for Allied assistance to drive Mussolini's army of occupation out of Ethiopia.

In the later years of his reign, however, there was growing discord over the gap between the immense wealth of the feudal aristocracy and the extreme poverty of the rest of Ethiopia. By the beginning of 1974, the aging Emperor, whose once formidable mental powers had begun to slip, found himself on a collision course with students at Haile Selassie University and with the lower ranks of the armed forces—particularly of the Army.

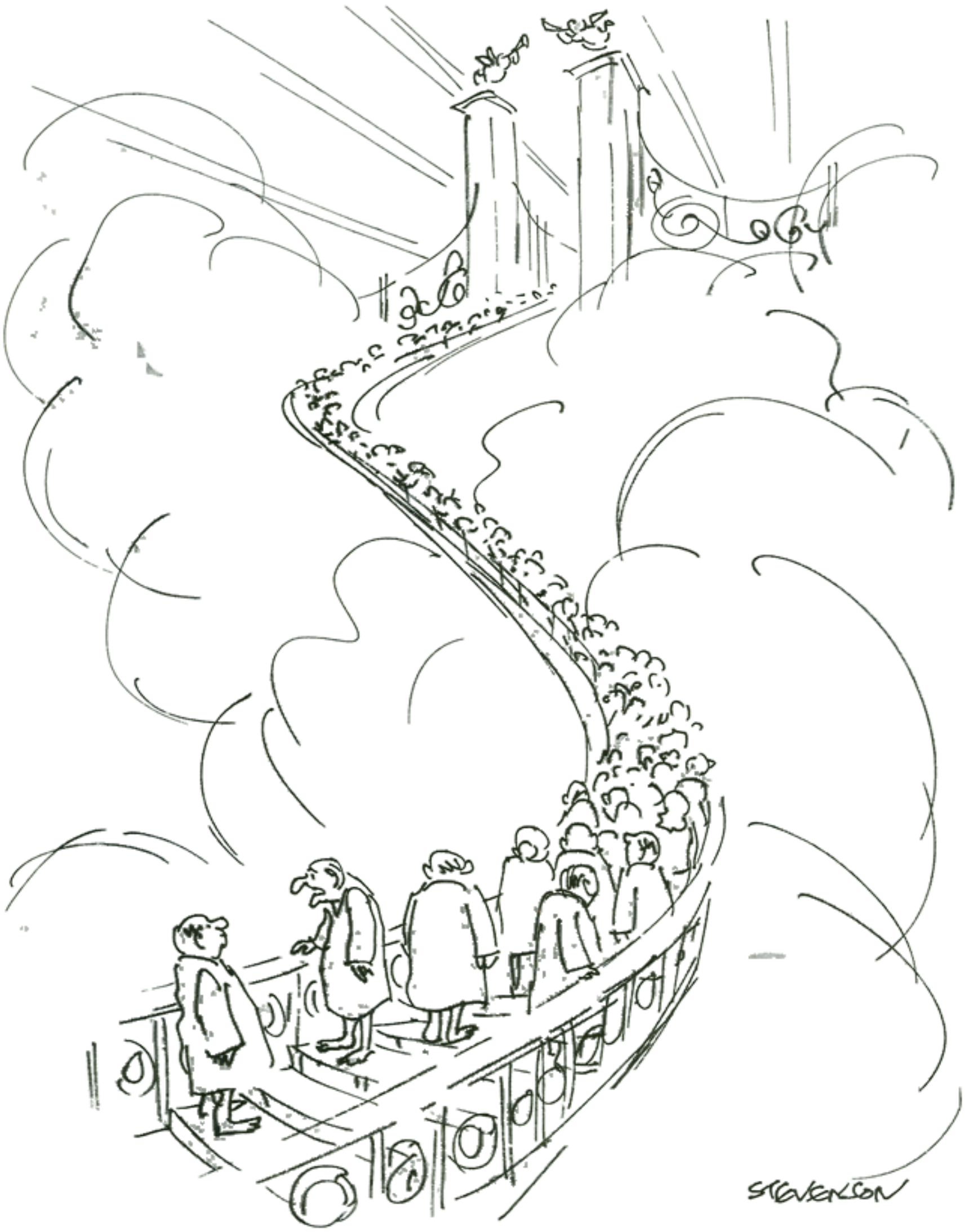
For a generation, the greatest problems in Ethiopia had been land tenure and reform, and they became rallying cries. In 1973, a famine in Wollo and other northern provinces cost at least a hundred thousand lives, and the government's mishandling of it sent thousands of Ethiopians into the streets. Their protests coincided with the quadrupling of oil prices after the October war in the Middle East; inflation spiralled, and there were shortages of everything. It was the stuff of revolution. The days when Haile Selassie could rule Ethiopia through an imperial court, reminiscent of that of Louis XIV, were clearly gone.

Students and teachers, joined by railway workers, dockers, and taxi-drivers—even officials of the Emperor's own institutions, which he regarded as little more than imperial toys—clamored for reform, demonstrated, and went on strike. In the Army, mutiny followed mutiny, and in June of 1974 rebellious junior officers and noncommissioned men established a national committee representing the kingdom's three services: it was called the Armed Forces Coördinating Committee, and was known as the Dergue (Amharic for "committee"). It was always a shadowy organization, and its membership changed dramatically over the years. At the start, it numbered some hundred and twenty; its highest ranks were held by majors, but it consisted mostly of enlisted men. Power shifted quickly to a complete unknown—Major Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The revolution was initially bloodless. It began as if in slow motion, and proceeded cautiously. The empire's most powerful men—members of the royal family, the nobility, the hierarchy of the armed forces, Parliament, and the courts—were rounded up. Haile Selassie's daughter and granddaughters and the noblewomen of his imperial court watched, bewildered and confused, as their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons were taken away. Then, one by one—permitted to take only a single blanket and suitcase each—they, too, were imprisoned. For more than a decade, a radio was their only contact with the outside world.

In September of 1974, the Emperor himself, still proud and hawk-faced, was whisked from the Grand Palace in a Volkswagen and imprisoned in a three-room mud hut. He was subsequently returned to the palace, where he spent the last year of his life sharing a small apartment with his valet of many years. They were two old men wandering the empty halls of an abandoned palace, Haile Selassie dressed in his field marshal's uniform and carrying his marshal's baton. Some hundred and fifty members of his imperial court—including those who were subsequently executed at Akaki—were imprisoned just below, in the damp, unventilated basement of the Grand Banquet Hall.

Ras Mesfin's former estate, in the northern suburbs of Addis, was only a thirty-minute drive from my ho-



"They say the computer is down."

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tel, and I accompanied Rahel there one afternoon. Like all such property the estate had been confiscated by the Dergue, then handed over to Cuban soldiers, and later to peasants, who lived there now. We entered through the first of two sculptured iron gates, then lurched and jolted down what was once a private drive, careering around boulders and dislodged asphalt blocks, toward a decaying plantation-style home, which had belonged to the man who was considered to be the second richest in the Emperor's court. It reminded me a little of the Kennedy family compound in Hyannis Port, but perhaps that was because Ras Mesfin's family struck me as being in many respects the Ethiopian counterpart of the Kennedy clan—they possessed the same spirit, and had enjoyed the same power and wealth. The Duke had thirteen sons and daughters. They were taught to swim, shoot, and ride; they played football on Sundays; and they seemed capable of withstanding almost any personal tragedy. The family was now presided over by Ras Mesfin's widow, Lady Yeshimmabet Guma, a woman of formidable strength.

I followed Rahel around the compound as she pointed out the sights. At times, her exuberance seemed extraordinary. She had been a social worker at the time of her arrest, and had entered and left Akaki Prison with her sense of humor intact.

Some four hundred and fifty people, including servants and guards, had been living here, she told me, when armed troops came to arrest her father, in June of 1974. Ras Mesfin had been one of only two members of the old imperial court to resist: as two hundred and fifty soldiers, five armored personnel carriers, and forty jeeps, with machine guns mounted on them, ground through the gates, his sons and his private army fanned out across the estate; his servants, armed with AK-47s, scampered up into the trees. For twenty-four hours, they held off a division of the Dergue, until the patriarch of the family slipped away. He left the estate through a back gate and spent the next two weeks living underground, with an old servant, in a simple Addis neighborhood. Only his sons and Haile Selassie knew where he was: he kept in touch with the Emperor by phone. Then, one evening, the Emperor summoned him to the Grand Palace.

"We thought the Emperor was finally going to resist the Dergue," Rahel's brother Yohannes told me later, recalling that night. "My father and a number of other generals had repeatedly asked the Emperor to do something, but he had always responded 'Wait.' Everyone was totally confused He had

the entire hierarchy of the armed forces behind him, and the imperial bodyguard, but he simply sat silent—did nothing—as, one by one, his officers and ministers were carted off.

"Two of my brothers and I went with my father to the palace that evening, and at the time the imperial bodyguard was still with the Emperor, and it was very strong. The moment we entered the palace gates, however, we knew that something was wrong. Tanks were scattered about the courtyard, and all protocol had disappeared. Ministers were in the reception area crying. Someone told us that one of the Emperor's grandsons—Rear Admiral Iskender Desta, the commander of the Navy—was about to be placed under arrest. Another grandson, who was much younger, rushed up to my father and cried, 'What's happening? Grandpa is senile!'

"The Emperor was waiting for us on the second floor, and, as a sign of respect, my brothers and I left our weapons downstairs. My father, however, retained his Second World War revolver, and the four of us walked up the marble stairs. We found the Emperor standing in the center of his drawing room, wearing all of his medals and his field marshal's uniform. He smiled weakly at my father, and then they embraced. No one else was present except the commander of the imperial bodyguard.

" 'What are we waiting for?' my father asked the Emperor. 'There is no one whom you have brought up who would not die for you.'

"The Emperor responded, 'You must surrender for there to be peace.'

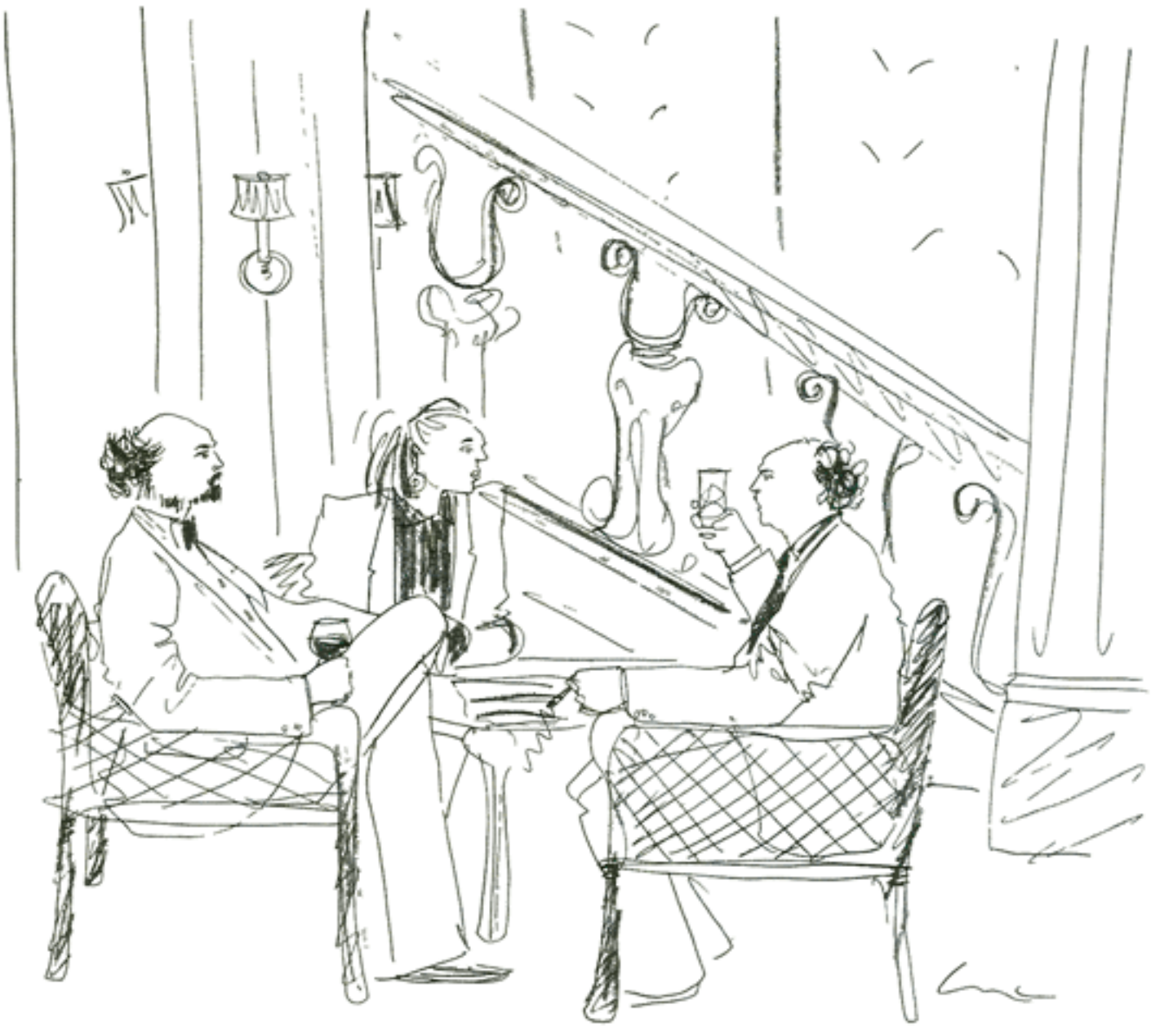
"The audience lasted for some twenty minutes, but except for this one remark the Emperor stood mute, a strange expression on his face.

"My father said, 'History is my witness. I give my hand to the King.' And he handed him his revolver. The Emperor looked blank. Then my father was taken by the chief of the imperial bodyguard and was driven away in a Mercedes flying the Emperor's flag. Before he got into the car, he said to me, 'I don't want your mother ever to see me in prison.' And she never did. In fact, she never saw him again"

As the Emperor remained under house arrest in the Grand Palace, patrols from the Dergue arrived each day and, little by little, carted off antique tapestries and Oriental rugs, boxes of jewelry, crystal chandeliers, jewelled crowns and sceptres, and whatever cash they could find. They read proclamations, charging the Emperor with the illegal appropriation of hundreds of millions of dollars—half a billion, according to some accounts—in his nearly sixty years on the throne. The allegations have never been fully tested or proved, and, despite an investigation of nearly twenty years, the money—if it exists—has never been found. In August of 1975, eleven months after he was dethroned, the man believed by many of his subjects to be immortal was dead. Presumably, his captors had smothered him with a pillow doused in ether as he slept. His body was discovered only ten months ago—on the grounds of the Grand Palace, buried three metres beneath Colonel Mengistu's desk.

As I wandered around Addis late one afternoon—passing burned-out tanks abandoned along the roads, and chatting with groups of exceedingly young and rather bedraggled-looking Tigrean rebels who now rule the empire—the layers of the 1974 revolution seemed sometimes distinct, sometimes blurred Statues of Mengistu were still standing in some parks, and his portraits were still hanging in some shops, but his vast showcase project, Revolution Square, was largely deserted, except for some homeless men and some shoeshine boys playing kickball. It was here that the Lilliputian Mengistu (he always wore platform shoes) would harangue the people in rambling speeches of five hours or more, his high-pitched voice shrieking, his clenched fist raised in a black-power salute. But, for all the trappings of power with which he surrounded himself, not much is actually known about Mengistu's life. Even those who knew him told me that he never talked about himself.

He was thirty-two—or perhaps thirty-five—and a major in the Third Army Division when the revolution took place His mother worked as a servant for a noble family, and he may have been the illegitimate son of an influential member of the court, or he may have been the legitimate son of an enlisted man—his official biographies do not agree on where he was born or into which tribe. He shows little trace of the aquiline features of the Amhara élite. Twice—in 1963 and in 1969—he was sent to the United States for mili-



"Isn't it about time for a salvo from Alan Greenspan?"

tary training, and the story is often told that he was beaten up once, or perhaps twice, by a mob of white youths in Maryland. This could have been the reason, or a skillfully manipulated excuse, for his subsequent hatred of all things American.

He held power for seventeen years during which he organized innumerable massacres. There were countercoups and palace shoot-outs, atrocities and firing squads. From 1976 to 1978, in a campaign known as the Red Terror, the Dergue executed thousands of political opponents, and neighborhood vigilantes shot down children in the streets.

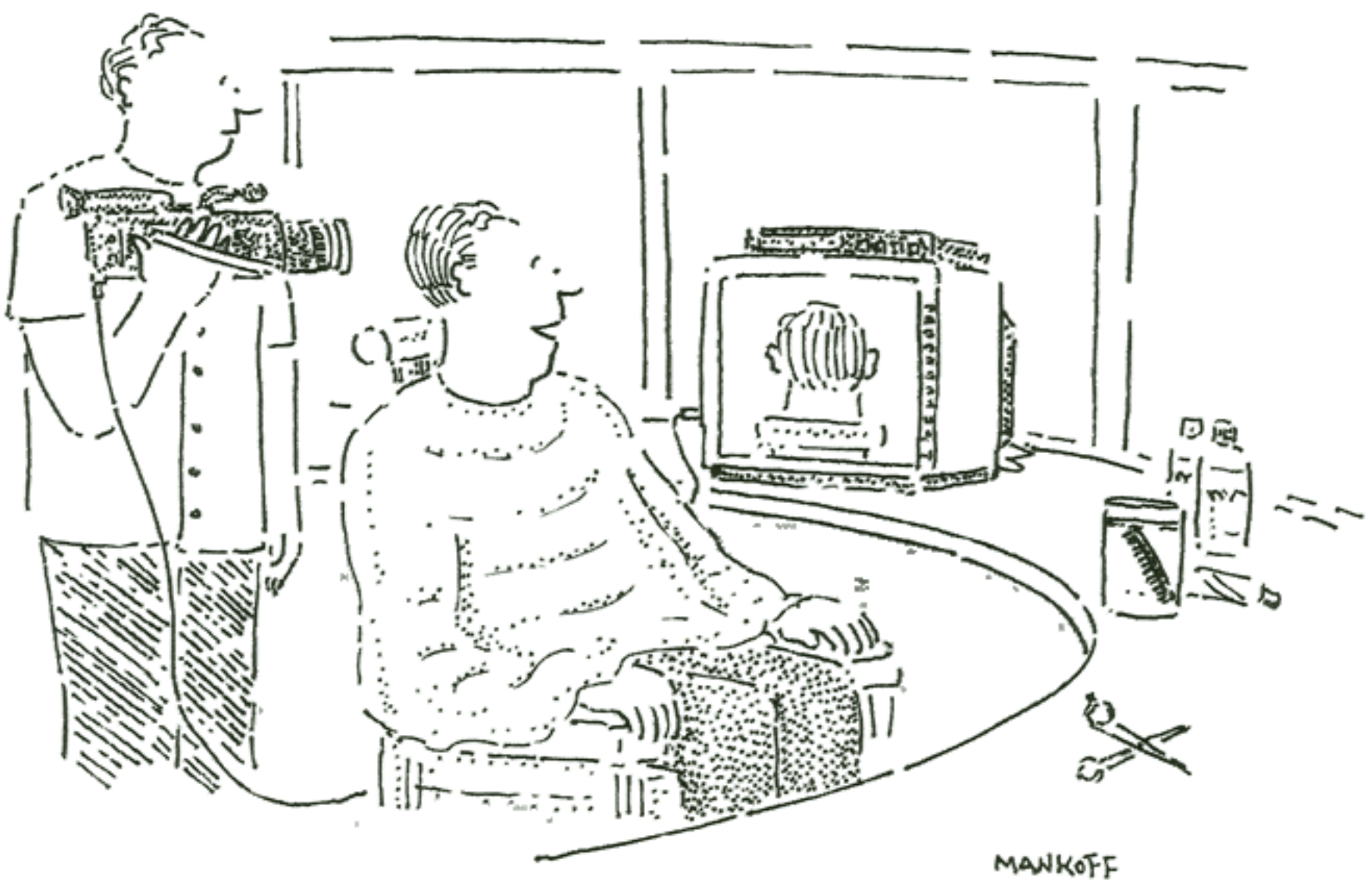
Addis became a city of rumor and fear, where few ventured out after dusk. By midafternoon, the crackle of gunfire could already be heard. A hundred or so people died every night, and the residents of Addis abandoned their city to packs of dogs, and to vultures, which had become a common sight, perched on the walls of the Grand Palace.

Ethiopians describe Mengistu variously as a monster and as a patriot, as a nationalist gone mad and as a product of the imperial system, where power was the only currency. Some say that he was not totally evil, and that he could be gracious, even humorous, at times. He had a disconcerting twitch in his cheek, everyone agrees, and his eyes dilated in a most unusual way But, even now, no one seems to have a real measure of the man. He certainly lacked a clearcut ideology: he once fashioned himself after Stalin, then after Mao Zedong, and, in one fanciful moment, after the rulers of Albania. He appeared to become increasingly deranged as the years went by, and he shored up his power with Soviet military backing, homegrown Marxism, and medieval cruelty. He sent sixty thousand students on the *zamacha*—forced marches into the countryside, where they were ordered to teach reading, writing, and "rural regeneration" to the peasantry. Some of the peasants had no wish to be regenerated, and some of the students, including sons of the noblewomen, never returned. He nationalized everything in the country, transforming vast, unproductive private estates into vast, unproductive state farms. Farmers who stored food from a good harvest were charged with hoarding, and were shot. Merchants who bought food in areas where there was a surplus for sale in districts suffering from drought were charged with profiteering, and they, too, were shot. Mengistu was known to possess an iron will. In 1974, a secessionist guerrilla army from Eritrea kidnapped his wife and children, attempting to win concessions on autonomy from the Dergue, and he is said to have responded to their demands by saying, "Kill them if you want"

THE Grand Palace is a great jumble of buildings in the center of Addis, dominating one of its seven hills; high walls encircle it, shielding most of it from public view. One afternoon, when Princess Rebecca, Rahel, and I drove by—we were not permitted to stop—all we could see was the towering tops of cedars and lacy gray eucalyptus trees, an occasional cracked driveway or broken marble bust, and, from time to time, a spacious lawn, where the Emperor's pet lions used to roam. The lofty iron gates had long ago been shorn of their imperial designs and now, like much of official Addis, were graced with the hammer-and-sickle, and, here and there, with faded revolutionary flags. Tanks and jeeps with guns mounted on them were visible in the courtyard, but it was difficult to tell if they were in offensive or defensive positions. They appeared to have simply been dropped there, in no obvious pattern. Mengistu, like the Emperor, had reigned from the palace, and had taken particular delight in spending as much time as possible ensconced in Haile Selassie's hand-carved red velvet throne, dangling his tiny feet.

Rahel and Rebecca grimaced slightly at the thought. They were cousins and had been friends since childhood; they had played together in the palace's gilded halls. They had attended the best universities and schools. They had then spent nearly a decade together in Akaki Prison, on opposite sides of a wall.

"It wasn't so bad at the beginning," Princess Rebecca said later, as she told me the story of her imprisonment. We were sitting in the drawing room of one of her friends, where other women of the court were drawing up guest lists for the royal funeral. "During the first



"Fine—now pan around to the front"

year, we were under house arrest, and we were all held together, mostly at Princess Sara's house. There were about twenty of us. They had come for us at six o'clock in the morning, three hours before the Emperor was placed under arrest. They said it was for our own protection; and this was the line they took—with every single human-rights organization—until we were released. For me, that happened exactly nine years later—nine years to the day. On our release papers—and you must realize how important these papers were; we needed them, since we had to account for eight, nine, fourteen years of our lives—the reason for our imprisonment was that we were 'suspected of being a stumbling block to the revolution.' That was our crime. In other words, it was preventive detention—we were hostages of the Dergue."

"Well, one more minute and the goddam year of the woman will be over "

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She stopped to light a cigarette, and studied the room. She had spent a quarter of her life in prison—she was now thirty-nine, and had been arrested at twenty-one, after returning home from University College, London, where she had been studying international relations. The revolution had begun in Addis earlier that year, and she had feared that her father would be imprisoned soon, so, against his very determined wishes, she had come back. Within five months, her father, Prince Asrate Kassa, was dead.

I asked Princess Rebecca how she had learned of his death

She didn't answer immediately Then she said, "We knew that something was wrong. Three days earlier, they had come to Princess Sara's and taken the radios and the television away. The morning after the executions, some of our guards, thinking we were still asleep, turned on their radio in the kitchen, and my little brother, who was upstairs, opened his window and listened in He heard the official announcement on Ethiopia Radio. I'll never forget his screams—'They've killed them all! They've killed them all!' For a long time, he wasn't able to say anything else.

"The soldiers rushed into the library, where we had gathered, and told us that it wasn't true—that the men were going to be put on trial. We were bewildered. We didn't know what to believe. For the next twenty-four hours, although the rest of the country knew, we were left in total uncertainty. Then, the following morning, six Dergue officers arrived. We have ways in Ethiopia of relaying bad news—we try to cushion the blow. But they made the announcement as though they were on the radio. They gave us the names of only seven, who they thought were our relatives; there were, in fact, sixteen. We tried to appeal to them—to their sense of compassion, if you like. We said we should at least go and bury them—thinking that they would return the bodies to the families. We said we would go under armed guard We were told, quite rudely, that there would be no funeral, nor would they allow us to go to our families and mourn. Then they raised their AK-47s and pointed them at our heads. We were ordered to stop crying. 'It's anti-revolutionary to cry,' they said."

Everyone in the drawing room was silent, then Rebecca went on, "It was at that moment that the bad part began. I think they wanted to kill us, too. It's as simple as that." The princesses learned some time later that their lives were saved only by the intervention of the British Prime Minister, James Callaghan, the United Nations, and the British Royal Family. "It was in early September of 1975, exactly a week after the Emperor was killed, that they came to Princess Sara's house and told the women to pack. We were by then eleven people. The young princes had already been taken—we didn't know where. So we packed small suitcases, and then waited all day. Finally, at five that evening, a bus arrived. Even the driver didn't know where we were going; he had been told to follow a car. As

we boarded the bus, a cadre told us that we couldn't take our suitcases after all. 'Where we are taking you, you don't need anything,' he said. I was certain that that was the end."

The eleven princesses were driven in an Army bus from Princess Sara's palace to Akaki Prison and were marched to the open field just beyond the building with the electric chair—the field where Rebecca's father and Princess Tenagne Worq's son had been executed nine months before. For four hours, the princesses remained in the open field. They had no suitcases, only the clothes they wore; they spread their cardigans on the ground so that they could sit. Meanwhile, Callaghan and the United Nations negotiated for their lives.

Among the prisoners were the Emperor's octogenarian cousin, Princess Yashasha Worq, and his strong-willed sixty-two-year-old daughter, Princess Tenagne Worq, who had wielded enormous influence behind the throne. Both women had led highly protected lives inside the imperial court, moving with calm assurance through its unchanging world of gold braid and curtsies, concubines and tiger shoots, ascetics, priests, and ancestral oaths. Also among the prisoners were Princess Rebecca's mother, Princess Zuriash, and Princess Tenagne Worq's daughters—Aida, Seble, Sofie, and Hiruth. They had all attended Clarendon School, in North Wales, and two had gone on to Cambridge and Oxford; when they returned home, they had become schoolmistresses or had done charitable work. There was also Princess Igegayehu, the daughter of the Emperor's only surviving son. She would die behind Akaki's walls.

"From time to time, male prisoners approached us," Princess Rebecca said. "Some of them were quite sympathetic. The eleven of us were sitting on our cardigan sweaters in the dark, in an open field, waiting to be shot, and the prisoners were asking us if there was anything they could do. There were others who jeered at us from afar, but most of them came out of curiosity. We were like a bloody zoo!

"It seemed endless. Then, finally, at ten o'clock, a car drove up, and a Dergue member got out. 'Put them in with the women,' he told our guards. We thus had the distinction of becoming the first female political prisoners under the Dergue. What a mess it was. What *you* saw at Akaki was luxury compared with what it was then. In those days, it was impossible to walk—there were just stones and boulders and wet, slippery mud. I grabbed hold of Princess Yashasha Worq—she must have been over eighty, but she was feisty and would never tell us her age—and we stumbled along until we reached the gate. Then they searched us. You can t imagine what they wouldn't allow: cigarettes, my glasses, mirrors, chewing gum. They made us hand over our jewelry: Princess Yashasha Worq flatly refused. I was terrified that they were going to shoot her But she was determined, and she finally won.

"Then they took us to the women's quarters. In the dark, it looked like a mausoleum, the way the moonlight struck its roof. The first thing that hit us was the stench. Then the weirdness—all these women in dirty blue uniforms, with shaved heads. At first, there was an awful silence—no one said a word. Then one of the prisoners took off her blanket and tentatively offered it to my mother Then others offered us their extra mattresses, or shared their meagre food. Some of them got down on their hands and knees and tried to clean the hole in the ground—the Turkish toilet, it was called. It was the first kindness we had seen all day, and we were overwhelmed.

"Nevertheless, this was also our first contact with hard-core criminals. We were desperately exhausted, and so wanted to sleep, but we had a family council and decided we had to have guards. We really thought we'd be murdered in our sleep. Princess Sara found a tin can, and that was our warning signal. If anything happened during the night, the princess on guard duty was to beat on this can. How we were to defend ourselves against these criminals, God only knows. But we were absolutely determined that we were not going to be murdered in our sleep."

As Princess Rebecca spoke, a servant sat on a straw mat in a far corner of the drawing room, surrounded by rose petals and ferns. She lit sticks of incense—to keep the evil spirits away, Rebecca and Rahel explained. Then she began the ceremony of roasting coffee beans. It was the traditional ceremony of welcome, which had been practiced in Ethiopia for hundreds of years. Even in prison, the noblewomen performed it when they could. And to maintain their sanity, Rahel told me, they danced—and danced.

Eventually, the princesses were separated from the murderers and thieves, and were held in a tiny room, the former prison clinic, just on the other side of the wall. They had no furniture except mattresses, which relatives had brought them from home. The mattresses were their dining table and exercise area, as well as the place where they slept. Their world had shrunk to a space of ten feet by twelve. The cell had no running water, and they bathed, when they could, from large barrels, in the open air, behind the prison block They had only one toilet—another hole in the ground—and only one light, a bare ceiling bulb, which was never extinguished. If the Dergue had a purpose in mind, it was apparently to humiliate Haile Selassie's family.

From the other side of the wall, the princesses began to hear familiar voices. With each passing day, more and more women of the Emperor's court arrived. But the princesses were not permitted to speak to them. They were totally isolated, for months, for years.

"Once a year, every year, they would take us to the administrative office," Rebecca said. "One at a time. They asked us only one question for all those years: 'Where is the Emperor's money?' They were obsessed by it."

What most surprised Rebecca was that the daily routine—making morning coffee, battling fleas or killing rats, disinfecting the cell, lining its floor and walls with newspapers and wringing the moisture out, marching across the compound once a day, under the watchful eyes of their guards—became the most reassuring part of the princesses' prison lives.

Early each summer, the royal women

began to hope that they would be included in the annual amnesty, marking the anniversary of the Dergue. "That was the worst time," Princess Rebecca said. "You pinned all your hopes on that particular day, and there was no way to know. The releases were totally arbitrary—there was no logic to what they did." The years went by, and the princesses' names were never on the list.

Finally, in 1979, four years after arriving at Akaki, Princess Yashasha Worq became the first member of the Emperor's family to be released. At first, she refused to go; it somehow seemed a betrayal for her to leave the others behind. But they persuaded her, and—still wearing her jewelry—she marched out through the prison gate.

Then, in 1983, Princess Rebecca and her sister Mimi were released. Rebecca still doesn't know why. "The anniversary had passed," she said. "And I had made up my mind that we would never be released as long as Mengistu was still alive. I was always the strongest of our group, but that Sunday I fell apart. I couldn't stop crying. I knew I would *rot* in prison. Nine years is a hell of a long time. I was ill, and was in the clinic in my pajamas, as a matter of fact, and I went to my mother to say good night before they locked us up. I heard commotion. Everyone was shouting—the murderers, the thieves, the guards. 'You've got your papers, Rebecca! You can go home!' "

LADY YESHIMMABET GUMA is an elegant woman with almond skin and spirited dark eyes Her gray hair is cut short, framing her face; despite her years, she still moves with grace. In 1934, the writer Byron Khun De Prorok visited her native province of Wollega, where both her grandfather and her first husband were powerful Oromo tribal chiefs, and later described her, in "Dead Men Do Tell Tales," as "one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Her beauty was matched only by the beauty of her emerald ring."

Now she wore no jewelry except two simple wedding bands—hers and Ras Mesfin's—and a gold cross, and she always dressed in black.

She greeted me warmly when I arrived at her daughter Tiruayer's home, a modest stone and clapboard bungalow. It was the only house the family had been given when the Dergue confiscated Ras Mesfin's twenty or so homes and estates, even though, technically, each family member was permitted to retain one house. But now Lady Yeshimmabet and all her children who had returned from exile for the royal funeral were staying with Tiruayer—they had nowhere else to go. A slightly faded photograph of Ras Mesfin and Lady Yeshimmabet, in formal attire, hung on a wall of the drawing room; it had been taken on the eve of Haile Selassie's twenty-fifth coronation ball. A few other family photographs were placed on a mantel, but nearly everything else was gone. All the clothes, toys, pictures, school prizes, and mementos of Lady Yeshimmabet's thirteen children had been taken away by the Dergue.

Visitors came to pay their respects as we talked, and Lady Yeshimmabet received them from an overstuffed armchair at the head of the room. Her

BROUGHT FROM BEYOND

The magpie and the bowerbird its odd
predilection unheard of by Marco Polo
when he came upon, high in Badakhshan,
that blue stone's

embedded glint of pyrites, like the dance
of light on water, or of angels
(the surface tension of the Absolute)
on nothing,

turned, by processes already ancient,
into pigment: ultramarine, brought from
beyond the water it's the seeming
color of,

and of the berries, blooms, and pebbles
finickingly garnishing an avian
shrine or bower with the rarest hue
in nature,

whatever nature is: the magpie's eye for
glitter from the clenched fist of
the Mesozoic folding: the creek sands,
the mine shaft,

the siftings and burnishings, the ingot,
the pagan artifact: to propagate
the faith, to find the metal, unearth it,
hoard it up,

to, by the gilding of basilicas,
transmute it: O magpie, O bowerbird,
O Marco Polo and Coronado, where do
these things, these

fabrications come from—the holy places,
ark and altarpiece, the aureoles,
the seraphim—and underneath it all
the howling?

—AMY CLAMPITT

face, unlined and youthful, belied her seventy-six years, and she seemed unaccountably serene. A small electric heater glowed at her feet

"The first time I was imprisoned, in July of 1975, I was held at the Third Police Station with other ministers' wives," Lady Yeshimmabet said. "It was an absolutely ghastly place. There were eight people—myself, the wife of the chief of police, and six thieves—in a room that measured perhaps two metres by two. It had corrugated-metal walls and a mud floor. You cannot imagine the masses of worms that were crawling over that floor. It was the rainy season, and there were holes in the walls. The rain came in, carrying an acrid urine smell—the toilet, which was our only convenience, was just outside our cell. There were no bathing facilities. I didn't bathe for nearly a month. The odor. The flies. The bugs. The worms. That was the day I hated I was born. My faith helped me. I've always been very religious, and I said to God, 'You've shown me the best. Now you are clearly showing me the worst.' "

"Would you mind a visitor? That frown intrigues me."

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"Were you ever told why you were arrested?" I asked.

"A young major called me in one morning. I felt rather saddened for him, he was so young, and he told me that I had been arrested because the next day they were going to confiscate my house, and they thought I would commit suicide. At first, I thought he was joking, and I smiled. Then I shouted at him—something that is very out of character for me. 'You killed my husband! You imprisoned my daughters! You've sent assassination squads after my sons! And you think I would kill myself because you took a house!' Then I calmed down, and told him that my house had been nationalized a year before, when my husband was killed. They took everything—the houses, the estates, the farms. We had no income, nothing at all.

"Then I was silent. So was the major. He wrote down my answer and said nothing more. He told me at the end that he had been ordered to torture me, and had refused. For the next twenty days, they never asked me anything else."

I asked Lady Yeshimmabet about the three and a half years she had spent in Akaki Prison, surrounded by criminals.

"I was never overwhelmed by being an aristocrat," she replied. "I was like a tourist, passing through life. I knew there would be change, and I was prepared. But I never thought they would be as cruel as that. Quite honestly, I didn't even know where I was being taken until we got to Akaki's gate, and the driver opened his window and shouted out 'I have prisoners for you!' It was the first moment I knew I was under arrest. At least, this time I was with three of my daughters. The first time, I was alone in this horrible little cell, but there I learned the rules. Manicure scissors were most definitely not permitted in prison, so the first thing I did before they confiscated my scissors was cut my nails."

Rahel, Tiruayer, and I left their mother and went into the kitchen, where Ras Mesfin's gold ceremonial crown, which he had received from Haile Selassie during his investiture as a duke, and his many medals were arranged on a black velvet drape They had been retrieved from various hiding places, and had just been polished for the royal funeral. He had been the most highly decorated man in the country, receiving the Empire's top civilian and military awards. Now his achievements were in his daughter's kitchen, sparkling reminders laid out on a Formica tabletop.

The conversation turned to the past, and I asked Rahel and Tiruayer about their imprisonment.

Rahel had been thirty-two and Tiruayer twenty-six when the soldiers came and arrested them, along with a third sister and Lady Yeshimmabet, in February of 1976. They and the other women of Haile Selassie's court were taken to the same squat barracks where the princesses were held, but they were herded into the room on the other side of the wall. What they were about to encounter was even more squalid than the princesses' world.

"I will never forget the first time we walked through that door," Tiruayer said. "All I could think of was a story from my childhood, 'The Devil's Dome.' The room was filled with criminals—

The Old Neighborhood

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thieves, murderers, the insane—and filth was everywhere. There were flies, fleas, rats, and bugs crawling across the floor, then up and down the walls. But the prisoners—they hadn't bathed in years—were the filthiest of all. Some of them were screaming—they were ready to fight at any time. Others were singing their sadness away. When they looked at us, it was with dead, hollow eyes. There were two barrels for water—one for drinking and one for washing—and one of the prisoners made herself responsible for doling the water out. She was a murderess, sentenced to twenty years. There's a certain hierarchy in prison, and the murderers are at the top of the pyramid."

Tiruayer rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You can't imagine how deplorable hygiene was," she went on. "I remember one day the room had a three-foot pile of fruit peels on the floor. One of the thieves was on garbage detail, and she didn't move. I said to myself, 'I have two arms and two legs, and I cannot see myself rotting—rotting like a pile of fruit.' So I rolled up my jeans. Everyone was watching. I did it slowly, testing myself as well. They continued watching; nobody moved. A few days later, the head murderess announced, 'We have decided to appoint Tiruayer the sanitation officer of the room.'"

The hundred or so noblewomen who shared the cell had arrived at the crumbling prison barracks dressed in mourning black; nearly all their husbands or fathers had been executed or imprisoned or would later disappear. The women's only possessions were their mattresses, which were brought from home, and shopping bags in which they stored their world—clothes, food, face creams, plates. Over the years, more and more bags, from Harrods and Selfridges, hung from nails on the barracks walls.

Like the princesses on the other side of the wall, the women of Haile Selassie's court were charged with no crime and were offered no promise of release. Some of them thought each night that they'd be released the following day; others were convinced that they'd been brought to Akaki to be killed.

And then there were the other prisoners. Mebrat, usually a gentle Eritrean woman, who had been accused of being a secessionist and was beaten into madness by the Dergue, would suddenly attack the noblewomen, and they would have to scream for their guards. Zerge would regale them with perfectly logical reasons for refusing to wash, then appall them with stories of how she had used rat poison to murder her stepson. A woman named Bogeye would spend hours cutting black thread out of her clothes—and out of anyone else's she could find. No one discovered why.

And there was Sallameh. At the mention of his name, Rahel and Tiruayer began to laugh. Sallameh was the prison censor. "He was really an odd little man, and he bore an uncanny resemblance to the Emperor," Rahel said. "He was actually quite self-conscious about it, and from time to time he would line us up and announce, 'Although many people think I look like Haile Selassie, I want to assure you there is no relationship.' We'd look at him, totally bewildered, and then he would raise a clenched fist."

Slowly, imperceptibly—no one was certain how or when it began—the women of Haile Selassie's court began running the prison themselves. They set up committees to take charge of health, sanitation, education, and sports, and, with their own funds, they built toilets and showers, and had their barracks connected to the municipal water line. They demanded to have their own stoves, and relatives brought them food. Their life came to resemble that in a big, brawling, dirty boarding school.

During the day, Lady Yeshimmabet instructed the thieves and murderers on how to bathe—with mixed results—and Rahel and Tiruayer taught in the prison school, which the women of the court had built. Each year, officials from the Ministry of Education came to administer exams. The highest marks in the na-

tion were scored by the prisoners. They came from all provinces and from all tribes. Some were the children of nobles, others were from excruciatingly poor hamlets in the countryside. Some were members of the proliferating liberation fronts; others belonged to political parties, which the Dergue had banned. Many were apolitical—some as young as ten. You didn't have to join a political movement to be imprisoned under Mengistu. To be young was a crime.

During the evenings, the women of Haile Selassie's court would sing or dance, or they would draw up elaborate charts: How much water did they need to wash their hands? To drink? Where could they walk without seeing a guard? What did they need? Afterward, they would make coffee, and sit with the murderers and thieves.

"Then," Tiruayer said, "the *other* students arrived, and our calm little world was turned into a battleground overnight." The students were Marxists, primarily from two groups: one had opposed Mengistu since the takeover by the Dergue; the other had served him during the Red Terror campaign but then had fallen out. When the students were not quarrelling with the noblewomen, they were quarrelling among themselves. Class warfare became a fact of prison life.

"The antipathy between us was total," Tiruayer went on. "They were Marxists. We were feudals." The students settled in on the left side of the room, with their knapsacks and sleeping bags. On the wall they hung their revolutionary flags. The noblewomen held their ground on the other side of the room, their shopping bags from Harrods hanging in stark defiance on the wall.

The verbal battles were constant. The thieves and the murderers looked on in bafflement. Then, without announcement, they pulled their mattresses and their knots of dirty clothes across the barracks floor, to the right side of the room. The women of the court were back in power once more.

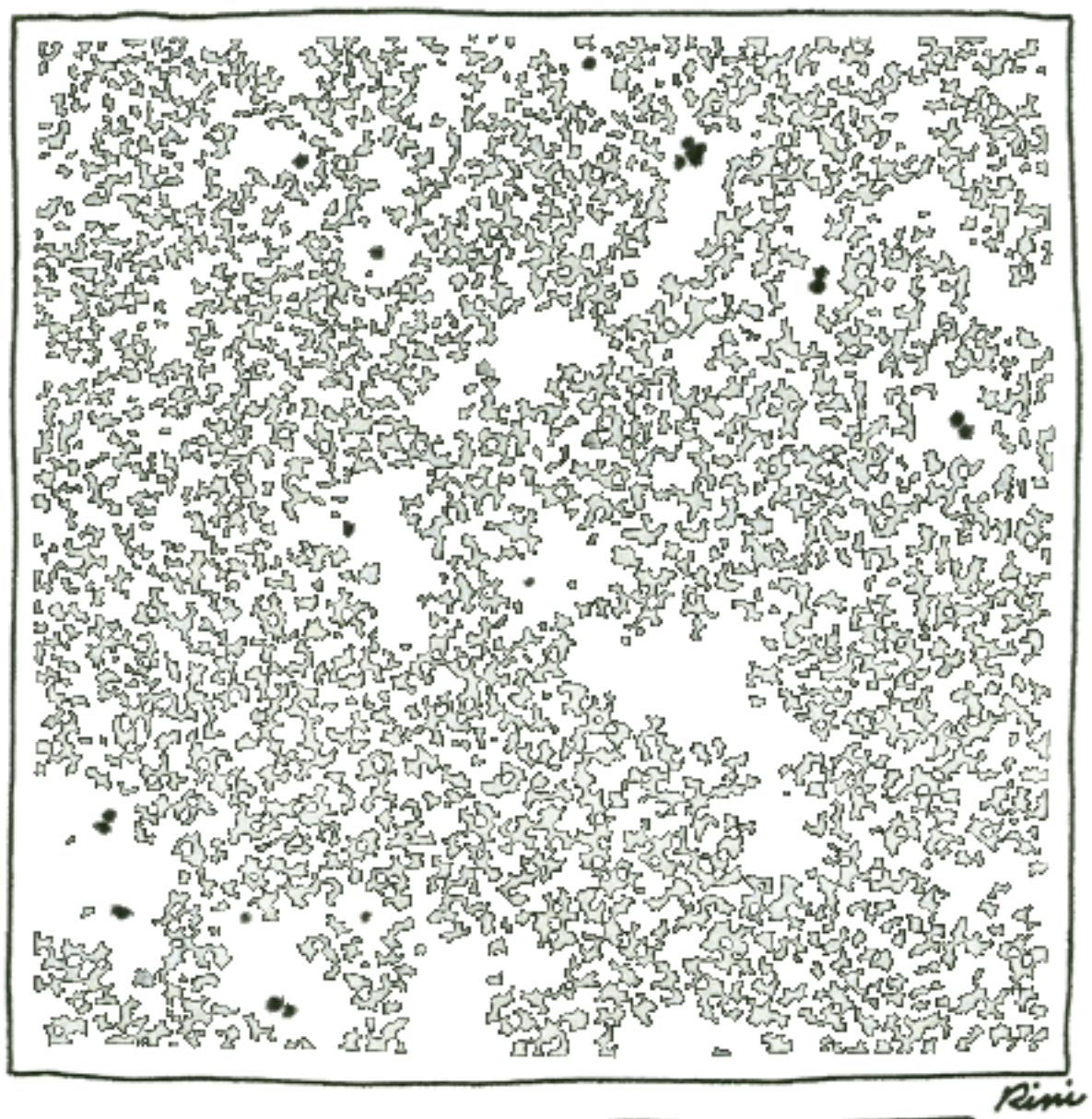
Rahel, when I pressed her, told me that her worst moment had come in the middle of one night. "I'll never forget it," she said. "We were about two hundred that night, and I got up to use the toilet. Everyone was asleep on the floor, and I had to tiptoe around them. Mebrat, the Eritrean, was by then chained to the wall, and was chanting to herself. Another madwoman was rocking back and forth. I looked around and thought, Are we *really* living like this? For three seconds, I lost my mind. It was the thought—the thought of staying there forever."

After seven years and seven months, Rahel and Tiruayer were released. Like Princess Rebecca, they don't know why.

NEARLY every province revolted during Mengistu's rule. There were major military operations in Eritrea—the strategic northern province at the gateway to the Red Sea—and in Ogaden, in the southeast; a war with neighboring Somalia; and a proliferation of liberation fronts. The Eritreans, the Tigreans, the Oromos, the Afars—they all wanted out. In 1977, the Soviets arrived, to prop up Mengistu; they were followed quickly by fifteen thousand Cuban troops, and then by the Israelis, who supplied Mengistu with cluster bombs. Other powers, great and small—the Americans, the Saudis, and the Egyptians, to name a few—rushed to the scene, in support of various guerrilla groups. What had begun as a genuine social revolution, by an idealistic junior officer corps, had gone badly awry. Ethiopia had become a pivotal battleground of the Cold War, and Mengistu had destroyed one of the most promising countries on the African continent.

Then, in the fall of 1989, the Tigre People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F.)—a previously little-known Marxist group that had been fighting first from the university against the government of Haile Selassie and then from the Tigrean highlands against the Dergue—launched a devastating new offensive in the north. The following year, when it suddenly seemed plausible that the T.P.L.F., in alliance with Eritrean guerrillas, could topple the Mengistu regime, two T.P.L.F. founders, Meles Zenawi and Seyoum Mesfin, visited Washington. The United States had been Ethiopia's major arms supplier when Haile Selassie reigned but had adopted an exceedingly low profile during the time of the Dergue. Meles and Seyoum came to assure the Bush Administration that they were no longer hardline followers of Marx. (One Administration official was so relieved that after the two leaders returned to the Tigrean hills he sent them boxes of books by writers ranging from Tocqueville to Gorbachev, presumably in an attempt to insure that they remained on the right path.)

In early 1991, when the Administration approached Mengistu in an attempt to negotiate freedom for Ethiopian Jews it found itself embroiled in Mengistu's collapse, and in peace talks with a group of rebels whom it once



Rini

DISCONNECT THE DOTS

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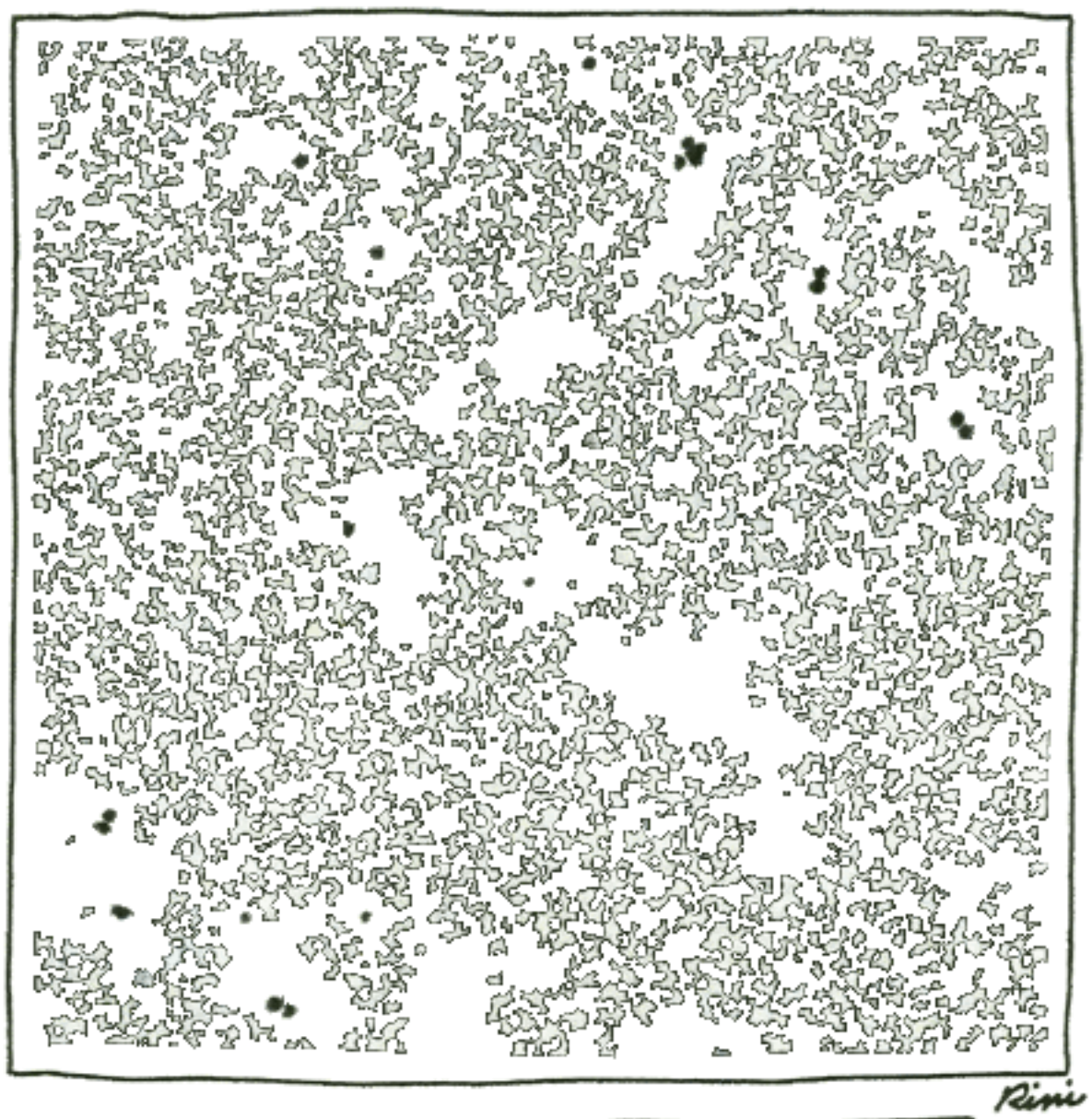

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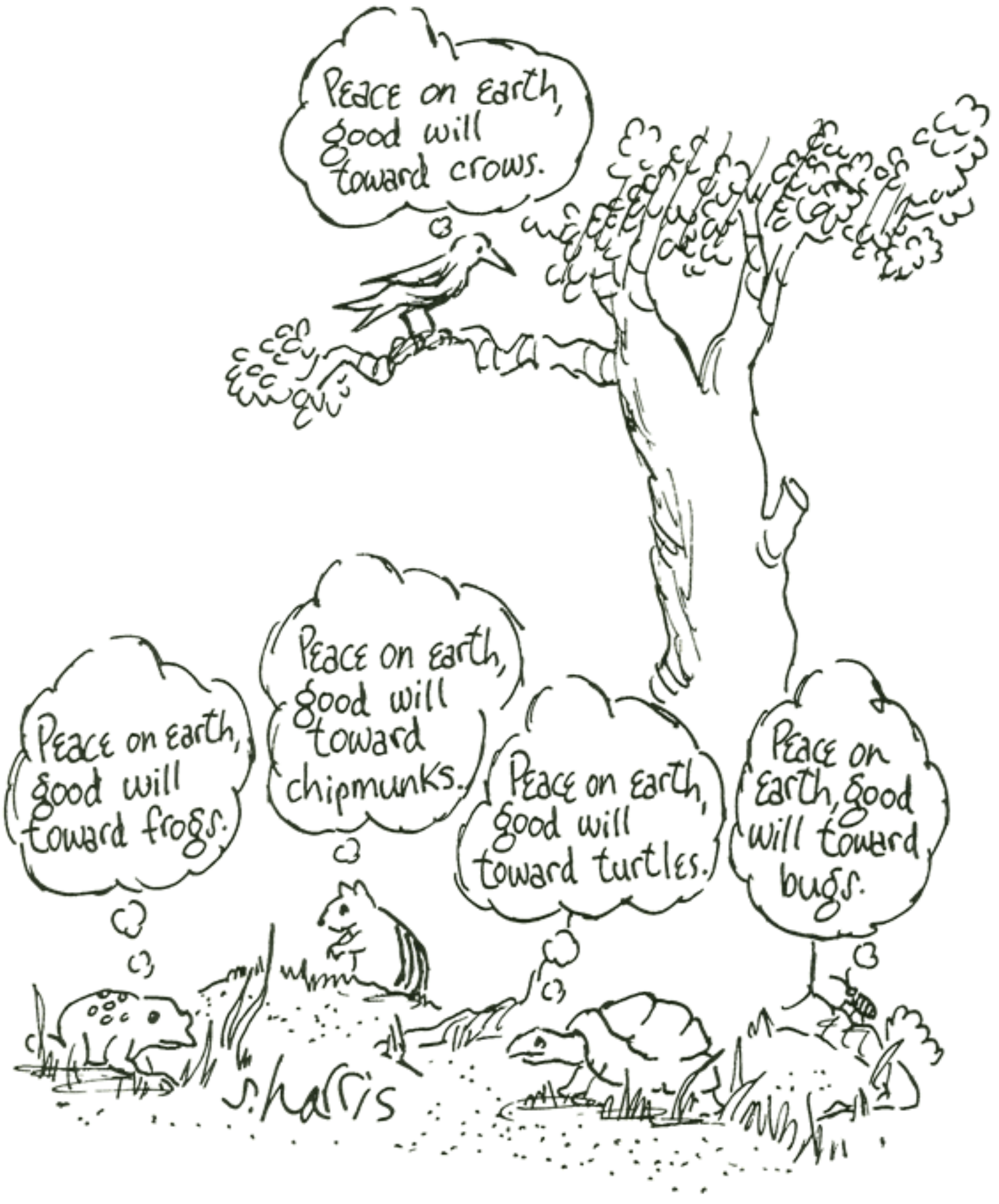
distrusted (and now admits it doesn't know very well). Nevertheless, that May, for the first time anyone could recall, an American Administration paved the way for a Marxist guerrilla group to assume power; it was also the first time that an armed liberation movement, having won, decided to share power in a transitional government with other political and guerrilla groups—there were thirty in all.

As the Tigrean forces waited on the outskirts of Addis and their leaders negotiated the power-sharing arrangement in talks brokered by the United States, Mengistu boarded a plane and went into exile in Zimbabwe, where he remains.

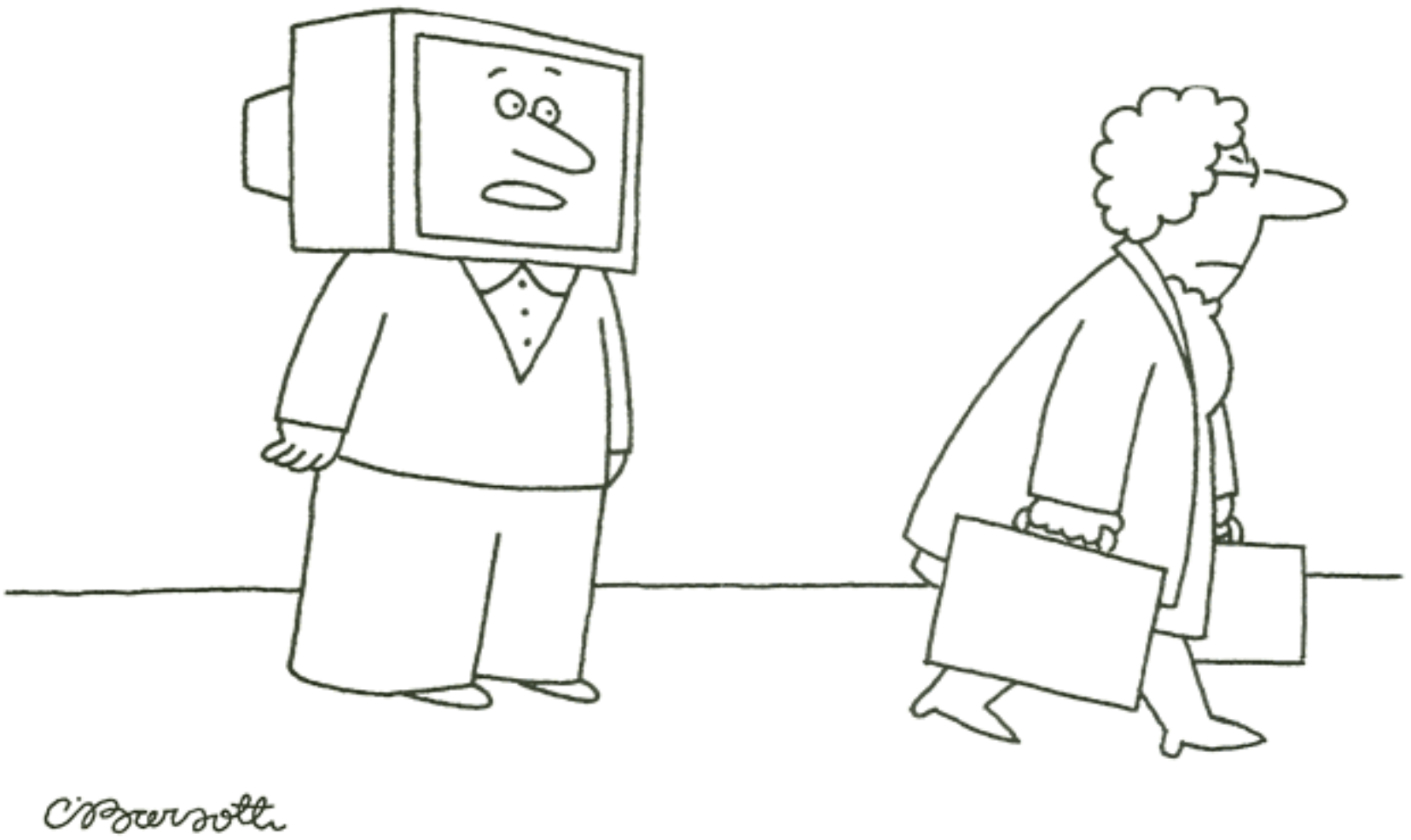
He left behind a divided and shattered country: the uneasy alliance that had been cobbled together only in the last century, with the establishment of the modern Ethiopian state, was badly frayed. Today, there is growing concern that, like the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia—and neighboring Somalia—Haile Selassie's old kingdom could simply fall apart. The dynamics of history and geography, prejudice and fear have coalesced dangerously around religion, language, and race. The guerrilla army that overthrew Mengistu and now rules as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, with Meles Zenawi as President, is still holding the old empire together—but only just. The most highly charged issue in Ethiopia is ethnic politics. In a sense, everything else springs from it: the inability of the new Tigrean government to find acceptance among the old Amhara élite; its inability to establish control over much of the countryside; its hesitation, and seeming ambivalence, in dealing with some of the more explosive aspects of Mengistu's legacy, including the contentious issues of returning nationalized land and of trying members of the Dergue, who terrorized the old empire for nearly two decades.

There have been continual rumors, born of the general uncertainty: rumors that the Oromo Liberation Front (O.L.F.), which claims to represent Ethiopia's largest tribe, and had been the junior partner in the coalition government until it withdrew, in June, had taken control of a number of southern towns; rumors that the Tigrean guerrillas had driven the Oromos out; rumors that the Afar Liberation Front was receiving a rather substantial amount of money and weapons from the Arab states; rumors of total confusion in the eastern province of Hararge. A Western ambassador who visited the area last summer told me that eight armed groups claim the region as their own. Each has it own colors, revolutionary banners, and flags. Dire Dawa, the province's largest city, has become a flag-makers' paradise.

In a suburb of Addis, I visited a tent city of Amhara refugees. They said that they had been evicted from Eritrea, on the Red Sea. In May of 1991, after a thirty-year independence war—waged first against Haile Selassie and then against the Dergue—the hundred thousand fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front had taken control of the province. They are now confident of full independence when a formal referendum is held in April of next year. To all intents and purposes, Eritrea had achieved de-facto independence when the Dergue collapsed. Many Ethiopians were already asking if the departure of their most geopolitically important slice of land would be a precedent for national disintegration or a warning against it.



ADDIS KATAMA, in the suburbs of Addis, is a sprawling, lower-class neighborhood of some hundred thousand people, where simple houses, built of boards and chaff, line a labyrinth of open sewers and muddy lanes. Its residents, mostly laborers and shopkeepers, once found solace in their anonymity. Then the Katama (or "town"), as it is



"But, Marge, five hundred channels. Won't that make a difference?"

usually called, became one of Mengistu's most vicious battlegrounds.

I found scars of his Red Terror campaign everywhere I went: on stucco walls and metal sheeting pockmarked with bullet holes; in young men who had been tortured into madness; in old women who had been raped.

From the moment you arrive in the Katama, the problems facing Ethiopia overwhelm you: the shattered economy; the empty treasury; the impoverishment. Famine still threatens some areas, and much of the old kingdom's infrastructure has collapsed or been taken apart. There is no army, navy, air force, or police. Half the factories are closed. Much of the farmland has eroded.

And there are thousands and thousands of missing—Ethiopia's "disappeared ones." Nearly everyone I met offered a tragic story or issued an appeal: Find my son. Find my father. Give me back my land. Why isn't the United States helping us? They ask this question over and over again.

I had come to the Katama with four members of a citizens' group that was attempting to find the bodies of the thousands who had disappeared during the Red Terror campaign, and bring those responsible for the atrocities to trial. Hiruy Negatu, the secretary of the group, was still searching for a brother, and Kidane Mariam, a board member, for a son. They told me that during the Red Terror's most savage moments at least fifty-four thousand people had been killed in Addis Ababa alone. I had asked them to bring me to the Katama because I hoped to get a sense there of what it had been like to live under Mengistu on the outside. Nearly everyone I had met thus far either had been a guerrilla, fighting in the hills in Eritrea or Tigre, or had been imprisoned during Mengistu's regime; and I had been told that in many respects the safest place to be was in prison. I was also curious about what people were thinking now, since the Katama was one of scores of such urban neighborhoods where the revolution against Haile Selassie began to take shape, spearheaded by a group of Marxist intellectuals under the banner of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (E.P.R.P.). When the Emperor was overthrown, the Party launched a violent campaign—known as the White Terror—against the Mengistu regime, believing that a true revolution could not be led by a military junta of enlisted men.

The E.P.R.P. set up underground cells throughout Addis—a number of them in the Katama—and also in the countryside. Daily executions followed. Mengistu responded with his Red Terror campaign. His primary instrument was the Kebele—a local revolutionary unit, whose members were heavily armed. They were recruited from their own neighborhoods, and they set up their own jails, where prisoners spent their time playing cards and waiting for death.

Some three thousand authorized killers roamed the Katama, and bodies began littering the narrow lanes. Hundreds of teen-agers—and children as young as six—disappeared overnight. In one tiny alley, I learned about a boy named Wube. I hadn't gone in search of him; I had simply stumbled onto what was remembered of his life.

Wube's home was barely distinguishable from the other pastel-colored houses of stucco or mud that lined the alleyway. Here and there, the houses were interrupted by grocery stores, fruit stalls, or music shops. The neighborhood was part of Kebele No. 21. We entered the house through a narrow door and found Wube's parents, Mihrete and Elfinesh, and his three sisters sitting in the living room.

Elfinesh spoke no English, and while her husband welcomed us she went to a small mantel, above a charcoal stove, and retrieved two photographs. Incense burned on the mantel, and an icon of Christ hung above it on the wall. She came to me and, without uttering a word, handed me the picture frames. Schoolboys in starched white shirts stared earnestly from the photographs.

Wube had been in the eighth grade, and his brother Bekele in the eleventh, when the Kebele vigilantes came, in 1977, and took the boys away.

"They were collecting all the young people in the village," Mihrete, a sixty-year-old merchant, said. "My sons tried to hide, but it was impossible. The revolutionary squads were from the neighborhood—one member lives just next door. They came, as they always did, in the evening, just after dark. They

took the little one to the Kebele, and they tortured him in every possible way. Then they killed him and dumped his body on the side of the road, so that we could see him—so that the rest of the neighborhood could see him, too. He was meant to be an example to all of us."

Elfinesh, interrupting her husband, spoke to me, through an interpreter. Sitting wrapped in a blanket on a bed in the living room, her head covered with a scarf, she held Wube's picture and cried softly, rocking back and forth. "We're not certain," she said. "We *think* it was Wube's body. We knew from a neighbor that he had been tortured the night before, so the following morning, when we heard that there were bodies along the road, we went to look for him. There were about twenty bodies, piled in a stack, outside the Kebele office, but we were not permitted to approach them. We could only see them from across the road, and their faces had been covered with bags. I tried, I tried so hard, to identify my sons by their clothes—maybe a shirt, maybe a shoe."

She paused for a moment, and then went on, "As we were standing there, someone came out of the Kebele office, carrying signs that read 'Let Red Terror Be Promoted.' Then he nailed them into the backs of our boys.

"I stood for twenty-four hours with the other mothers. Then, in the morning, a garbage truck arrived, and the driver scooped up the bodies with a shovel and loaded them into the back of his truck. We followed him, running and screaming. Someone from the Kebele fired shots over our heads. He ordered us not to cry and not to mourn. It was anti-revolutionary to cry, he said."

Each time the discovery of a new mass grave is announced on Ethiopia Radio, or tacked to the door of one of the neighborhood shops, Elfinesh begins roaming Addis's streets, going to various sites to check the bodies. She remembers exactly what Wube and Bekele were wearing that night.

"We tried to buy our boys' bodies back from the Kebele," Wube's father said. "For a year or so, they were selling the bodies to the families for two hundred or three hundred birr"—a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars. "We didn't have much money, but everyone chipped in. When we went to the Kebele, however, they told us that Wube and Bekele were no longer there. Then they ordered me to pay twenty-five birr, for the bullets they used to kill my sons."

After a few minutes, Mihrete said, "We still know very little about my older son. We only heard that he was imprisoned by the Army, and then his mother finally found him in an Army engineering camp. She took food to him daily, and then, one day, they told her not to bring food anymore."

I asked Wube's father if he knew where his son's torturers were now.

"One lives next door," he answered. "Another is just down the road. I see them every day. Every day, I see the men who killed my boys. We have been silent for fourteen years. Then this new government came. They told us that there would be trials, that we could confront the torturers of our children, as accusers, face to face. We have identified ten torturers from this block alone But a year has passed, and nothing has happened. And if they are not tried, if they are not punished, it can all happen again."

Did he believe that the trials would take place?

"They had better," he replied. "We want justice, not revenge, but if there are no trials there will be families avenging their dead—and then there could be a national bloodbath."

As we said our goodbyes, Wube's mother came to me, still holding his photograph. "He was only in the eighth grade," she said.

WHEN we left Wube's home, we traced his path to the Kebele office where he'd been held, and met Teklu Gizau, a thirty-seven-year-old engineer, who had been appointed the new chairman of the district by the transitional government. He himself had been tortured here, with seven neighbors and friends, including Wube, in 1977. Then they had all been taken to the courtyard to be shot Teklu had escaped, but Wube had been too little to run.

There had been such prisons in every village, in every district, in every Kebele, and many of the men and the women who had killed in Mengistu's name still lived in their old neighborhoods; others were at large. I was incredulous when I was told that most of them are still heavily armed.

We left the Katama and drove to Yeke, a prosperous middle-class neighborhood, where some of the bodies—after they were taken away from the Katama, and many other such neighborhoods, by municipal garbage collectors—had been buried in mass graves.

"We haven't finished digging yet," Teklu Debebe, who was the president of the citizens' committee, told me when we reached the crest of a hill. Mounds of red earth, perhaps twenty feet high, dotted the hills and a nearby field. Bulldozers sat idle as their operators waited for the rainy season to end. "This used to be an Army firing range," Teklu said. "People from the area told us that many of the prisoners were lined up against those trees and used for firing practice. Then they were thrown into mass graves. We've exhumed about twelve hundred bodies thus far. One family found both their father and their brother here—they identified their father by the gold fillings in his teeth and their brother by his clothes. But there have been very, very few identifications. Most of the remains are of persons unknown."

Some three thousand bodies are believed to be buried in Yeke's hills, and there are thousands of other such places all over Ethiopia.

I asked Teklu where the remains were now, and he said that they were being held in a number of places, waiting for the government to provide land

for a burial site. The families had requested that all be buried together, as they had died.

Teklu drove me to a weather-beaten building that had once been a garage. Inside were twenty-five large wooden coffins. They contained the skeletons of approximately twenty-five hundred women and men. Teklu opened one of the coffins, and I saw shoes, skulls, bones. There was a piece of red-and-yellow homespun cloth that must have been part of a blouse. Lying next to it were the remains of a hand. Caked with dirt but still visible on one of the fingers was a gold wedding band.

THE Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the main bulwark of the imperial Crown; for centuries, this mountain kingdom was an island of Christianity in the midst of Islam. (By the eighteenth century, the Church owned a third of all the property in the empire.) But when Haile Selassie's last Patriarch, Abuna Tewoflos, was executed by Mengistu, and the Emperor himself dethroned, the Church stepped quickly into line behind the Dergue. After Mengistu was overthrown, many in the Church believed that a new Patriarch should be selected, to replace Mengistu's hand-picked choice.

In July of 1992, Abuna Paulos, a stocky black-bearded man of fifty-six, who has a doctorate in theology from Princeton University and a master's degree from Yale, returned to Addis on vacation from Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he headed an Ethiopian Orthodox church. Much to his surprise, he was elected Patriarch. He at once became one of the most powerful men in Ethiopia.

His credentials were considered impeccable by foreign diplomats, but he became ensnarled in controversy with some of his own countrymen. They alleged that his election, by a synod of bishops, was illegal, because Mengistu's last Patriarch—who had judiciously stepped down, for "health reasons"—was still alive. It was widely suspected that the more likely explanation for their displeasure was that Abuna Paulos, like the country's new rulers, was a Tigrean, from the north; he was thus the first non-Amhara to head the Orthodox Church since it severed its ties with the Patriarchate of Alexandria, in 1959. (Until that time, the Ethiopian Patriarch had always been an Egyptian Copt.)

Abuna Paulos greeted me warmly when I called on him one afternoon at the Patriarchate, a rather unprepossessing building next to St. Mary's Church. The complex belied the enormous influence and power that the Church had wielded for sixteen centuries. It had been *the* constant in Ethiopian life, and, until Haile Selassie was dethroned, it had been the official state church. Now, however, it was facing a particularly testing time. The Dergue had nationalized the Church's vast land holdings and sown discord among its priests. It was being challenged by a resurgence of Islam, both from within Ethiopia and from neighboring Sudan, where a fundamentalist regime not unlike that of the Iranian ayatollahs, with which it was closely aligned, was attempting to export its own brand of Islamic militancy.

Dressed in a purple silk robe topped with a black blanket, and wearing a black ecclesiastical cap, the Patriarch received me in his office. He held a gold cross as we talked.

I began our conversation by asking him if there would be Church reform—a growing number of Ethiopians had begun criticizing the Church as archaic and pre-Renaissance.

"There has to be reform if the Church is to survive," he said. "We've got to go beyond preaching on Sunday, and get the Church involved. Over the last seventeen years, every Ethiopian has been damaged or hurt. Look around you—there is nothing but squalor and disease. We've got to set up health centers, orphanages—do social work. There are many young priests at the village level who are extremely eager for reform."

"Worker priests?" I asked him.

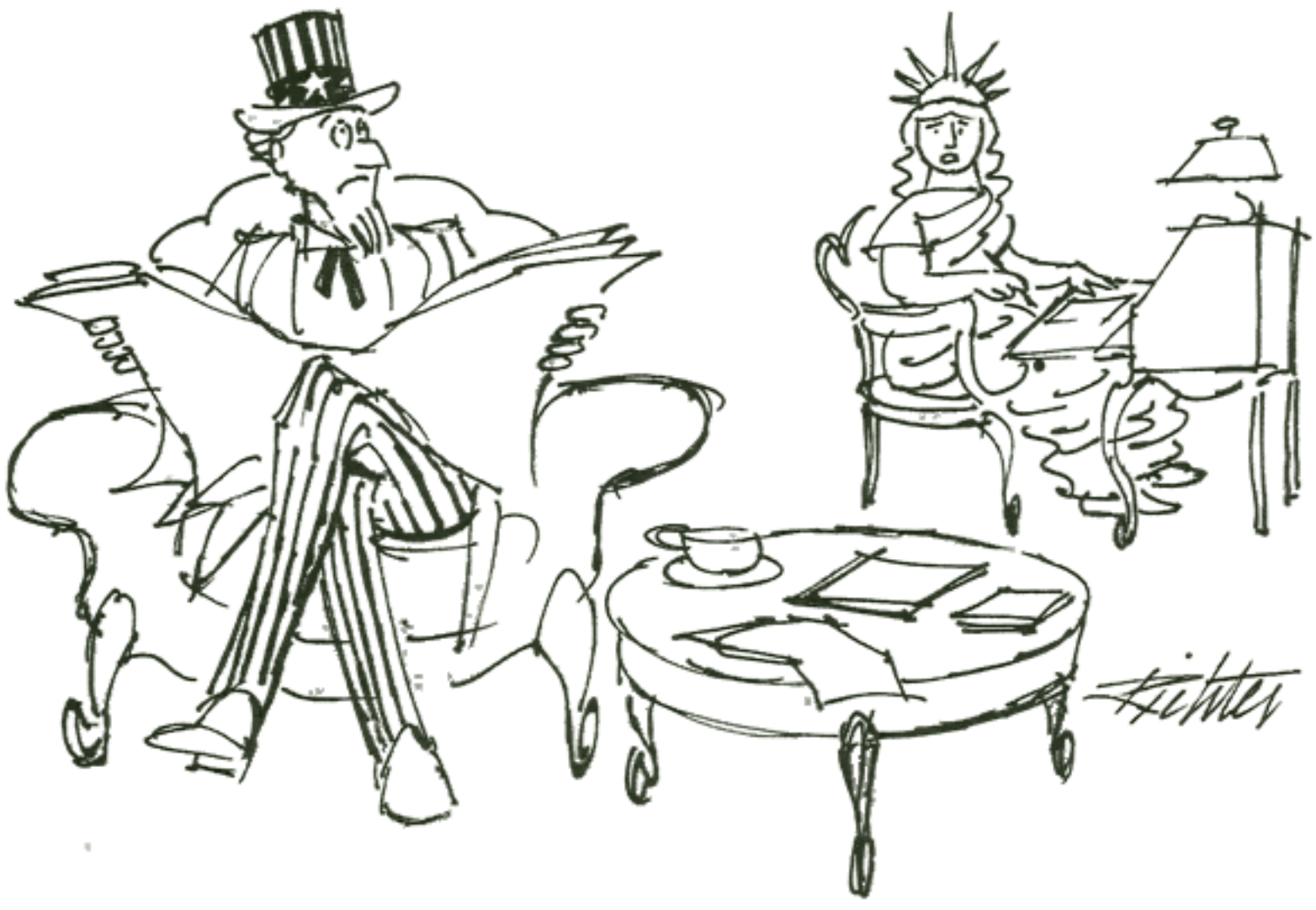
"Precisely," he said.

Did changing not only the image but the priorities of the Church mean that it would cease to be the major source of support for the monarchy, if the monarchy should ever be reinstated?

"Don't embarrass me by asking political questions," the Patriarch said.

It was already clear to many Ethiopians that Abuna Paulos was an exceedingly political man. He reminded me a bit of the late President Archbishop Makarios, of Cyprus: he possessed the same charisma and political agility.

Had the Church not failed the people by its acquiescence to the Mengistu regime?



"Who's our representative?"

"It was not the Church," he answered, seeming slightly ill at ease. Then he added, "It was individual priests."

I asked the Patriarch what, in his opinion, were the most serious things that the Dergue had done to undermine the Church.

"They arrested or shot bishops, and forced others to retire," he replied. "They confiscated all Church property. Holy Trinity Theological College was closed. They shelled and bombed churches all over the north. They arrested the Holy Father, Patriarch Tewoflos, for absolutely no reason—no reason at all." He hesitated for a moment, as though deciding whether to go on. Then he continued, "They beat him, stripped him naked, and dragged him across the ground, like an animal, like a *dog*. Then they strangled him to death. This was the *Holy Father*." His voice rose. "What more humiliation could this godless government inflict on the Church?"

In the nineteen-seventies, as the Bishop of Ecumenical and Social Affairs, Abuna Paulos had been one of Patriarch Tewoflos's key aides, and had been imprisoned himself from 1976 to 1982. So I asked if any international organizations or any governments had done anything to try to halt the atrocities of the Dergue.

It was clear that he was angry and bitter even before he spoke. "Not one," he replied. "The Red Cross helped the victims, and Amnesty International wrote emotional articles, which made you cry, but, after that, did those who read the articles do anything? When we were in prison, did our own *Church* do anything to help? Why didn't the Church stand up and defend us? Why didn't it say, 'This is persecution'?"

He looked away, and then turned back toward me. "Do you *really* understand the enormity of what happened here?" he asked. "We have millions of martyrs. Martyrs are not just those who have been shot with a bullet but those who have been crippled through beatings, those who have lost their memories through electroshock, those who were the victims of bombs. How many bombs—thousands and thousands—fell on villages in the north! Just because these people lived within these borders, they were bombed. Is it better to be shot and die or to lose your limbs and then survive? What about the hundreds of thousands who were put in mass graves? What had they done? The fact that ten or fifteen young people were standing together on a corner—did they have to be shot? What of the parents who saw their children shot in front of them and then were made to dance around the dead bodies? Or the parents who had to pay for the bullet that blew off their son's head? My God, where was the world? Why did no one *care*? And why is Mengistu free? Why has he not been judged? What kind of international morality is there? What kind of international law?"

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I NEXT called on Seyoum Mesfin, the T.P.L.F. leader, who was now the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the transitional government. I spoke with him one morning shortly before he began critical talks with the World Bank, on a seven-hundred-and-seventy-million-dollar program to jump-start Ethiopia's economy. An articulate forty-three-year-old scientist, who favors three-piece suits, Seyoum is a sophisticated insider, equally at home with his guerrilla fighters and with chiefs of state abroad. Like Abuna Paulos and President Meles, he was born in Adowa, in the north of Tigre. For centuries, the Ruling Houses of Tigre and Shoa—the royal line to which Haile Selassie belonged—fought on and off, and were riven by power struggles. The most recent encounter was now being played out.

Although statistics in Ethiopia are often suspect, it is generally agreed that the Tigreans account for some twelve per cent of the population, the Amharas for twenty-five per cent, and the Oromos, the largest ethnic group in the country, for about forty per cent. Critics of the new government, including the respected Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, a professor of geography at Addis Ababa University, charge that the Tigrean leaders have been "ethnicizing" Ethiopian politics, by, for example, redrawing the country's regional boundaries along ethnic lines, and in doing so have been playing Russian roulette. In speaking with the professor earlier, I had asked whether it was probable that Eritrea would gain independence, and he had replied, "The question is not whether Eritrea will go but whether the rest of Ethiopia will remain."

So when I met the Foreign Minister, I asked him if, as the critics charged, his government, by fuelling ethnic politics, was presiding over the disintegration of Ethiopia.

"That's utter nonsense," Seyoum said "And it avoids the key issue of constructing a multiparty, multinational state. It is not this government that created eighty different ethnic and linguistic groups What we've done is to recognize ethnic diversity and to build on it. There is simply no alternative. All other options have been tried, including keeping this country together by military might. It did not work, and cannot work. Under previous governments,

there was excessive centralization of power. We're ready to decentralize—to offer genuine autonomy to the regions. It is the only way to avoid fragmentation, Balkanization. You see what has been happening in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. That is precisely what we are determined to avoid You cannot force a people to remain united; you've got to accommodate their priorities."

"But you've told people they can secede from the country," I said. "Isn't that a rather daring multiparty experiment?"

" 'Unorthodox' is perhaps a better choice of words," Seyoum replied. "But, yes, we have made it very clear in the Charter"—a document, drawn up in July of 1991 by the coalition partners in the transitional government, that defines the government's mandate until it holds national elections, in 1994—"that if any nationalist or ethnic group wants to secede it can do so as long as it's done through a referendum or a plebiscite. There is no need for any group in this country to launch a civil war."

"But what about the Oromo Liberation Front?" I asked. The O.L.F. had been the second-largest party in the government until it withdrew in June, protesting the conduct of that month's regional elections, which it had boycotted, and which were indeed seriously flawed. Battles between the militias of the government and the O.L.F. ensued.

"I'm more optimistic now than I was two months ago," he said. "The security situation is far better. When the O.L.F. left the government, its fighters decamped, and there were serious problems in those areas where its military was on the move. It was a no-war, no-peace situation—mostly in the eastern part of the country, and also in some parts of the west. The O.L.F. troops were trying to demolish the infrastructure of the country—blowing up bridges, firing on trains en route to Djibouti, attacking civilian positions in a number of villages in the vicinity of major towns. But now the most troubled areas—in the central highlands, in the east around Harer, Wollega in the west, and in almost all parts of the south—are free of any organized guerrilla activity."

Then he added, with some emphasis, "I want to make it absolutely clear that it was the O.L.F.'s decision to launch attacks, and we were forced to counterattack. I wish the O.L.F. would understand that the chapter on civil war in this country is closed."

He pressed a buzzer, and a secretary came in carrying a silver tea service and plates of cakes. As we ate and drank, I asked the Foreign Minister, who is considered one of the government's key policymakers, why the elections were marred, according to international observers, by widespread government intimidation, mismanagement, and, in many areas, lack of any real choice, and why the O.L.F. had not been permitted to field its candidates fairly.

"The government is ready to take corrective measures wherever the elections were flawed," Seyoum replied. "Perhaps we had unduly high expectations of our ability to hold democratic elections when none of the institutions were in place. Perhaps we went into them too quickly. But people have got to understand that these elections were the first multiparty elections ever held in this country. The institutions of democracy had never existed here. What's im-

CELEBRATIONS

And for the holidays some old people always come
from far away—
strangers, distant relatives
of your wife or of people you know.
You usually see them
for the last time, and sometimes
for the first, almost like portraits
by Old Masters in a small
exhibition. They want to stay
sprightly and they smile
to you, to a few others,
as though they wished to fix
their photos in the air. Look,
the whites of their eyes jiggle.

Meanwhile the food is getting cold,
vodka in tumblers
is taking on the taste of glass, and they
talk on, pushing toward you the cake
they baked at home. The men
are drowsy, the children sleep

But almost always
someone listens to the end—
a timid, well-bred
young man. Old enough
to drink vodka
with the grownups, he's still
a bit uneasy
with women, he's still single,
and now he nods politely to the words
of a charming old lady, whom he'll wind up
taking to the station
tomorrow
after breakfast.

—PIOTR SOMMER

(*Translated, from the Polish, by the author and M. Kasper.*)

WHY THE DINOSAURS PERISHED

"Thank you for letting us consider the enclosed manuscript. Although it has obvious merit, we are sorry to say that it does not suit our present needs."

• •

portant is that the country is going forward. We are building these institutions from scratch. We are setting up an independent judiciary, establishing a police force, processing a draft constitution. We have a Council of Representatives, or Parliament. We invited two hundred and fifty international observers to monitor the elections This shows our desire to learn. We accept criticism if it's constructive. We cannot achieve everything overnight."

"Would the elections be reheld if the O.L.F. made this a condition for laying down its arms and rejoining the political process?" I asked.

The Minister responded in the affirmative.

In October, the government and the O.L.F. began secret talks, negotiated by the ambassadors of five Western nations, including the United States, in an attempt to bring the O.L.F. back into the government. In many respects, this amorphous, largely Muslim Oromo group held the key to Ethiopia's political stability.

I met the O.L.F.'s deputy leader, Lencho Lata, in Washington shortly before the talks began, and asked him what his conditions were for returning to the government. "A real power-sharing arrangement, and not a dictatorship of Tigreans," he said. "We want new elections and the creation of a multi-ethnic, national Army, as opposed to the T.P.L.F.'s Army, which is policing the country now—and we want that Army withdrawn from the Oromo lands."

"And if the talks fail?"

"It means guerrilla warfare in the south," Lencho replied. "We'll do everything to make it impossible for this government to rule, to control the country, or to raise revenue. We are twenty million Oromos against six million Tigreans, who don't know the region and don't speak the language. The cost will be high—the cost to the economy, and the cost in lives. But we have no doubt that eventually we'll win. We're in no hurry. It may take us five to ten years."

"But what are the O.L.F.'s long-term objectives? What does it want—simply more power in this government? Greater autonomy? An independent Oromia?"

Lencho refused to answer the question directly, saying only—perhaps seriously, perhaps not—"I lead the largest group of people in this country. Would I throw that away to become the President of an independent Oromia when I could become the President of Ethiopia?"

In my conversation with Foreign Minister Seyoum, I asked whether the O.L.F. posed a serious security threat.

"I'm convinced that they want to turn Ethiopia into a Bosnia," he said.

A number of Ethiopians had told me that their greatest fear was that the O.L.F. would recruit the remnants of Mengistu's Army—the largest in black Africa—which had been disbanded, en masse, by the transitional government when it came to power. I asked Seyoum where the former soldiers—some four hundred thousand of them—were now.

"They're all demobilized," he said. "We've integrated most of them into the villages, but some are creating real secu-

rity problems—banditry, primarily—in the central areas, the south, and some parts of the east. It's a problem. But now it's at an acceptable level, more or less. And we control most of the areas, more or less."

He appeared troubled about what could lie ahead.

Seyoum had been one of the main negotiators in the U.S.-sponsored talks, held in May of 1991, in which it was agreed that Eritrea would hold a referendum on independence, supervised by the United Nations, next year. So I asked him what, in his view, the outcome would be, and if Eritrea did opt for independence what this would mean for a landlocked Ethiopia, which would lose its vital ports on the Red Sea.

"The referendum is the only viable option for Eritrea," he said. "The only other option is going to war, and that didn't work for thirty years, and it's not going to work now. If there are still those in Ethiopia who think we have to fight to keep Eritrea in, they are simply not realistic. And if the Eritreans vote for independence it's not the end of the road. There is a lot of interdependence between us in economic and financial matters, and there will be further economic integration, and some form of political coöperation as well. We have also secured access to the Red Sea ports."

Before leaving, I asked the Minister what was being done to guarantee that a reign of terror like Mengistu's would never happen again.

"That's the most important question we face," he replied. "There has been a lot of criticism from human-rights organizations that we've delayed the trials of both the civilian and the military officials of the Dergue. Our most important decision hasn't been whether to try these men or not but how to try them properly, so that lessons can be learned. We want to try them before an independent judiciary, not before kangaroo courts. We're setting up the judicial system now, and an independent prosecutor has been named." He went on to say that he expected the system to be established by the end of the year, and shortly thereafter the trials could begin.

"How many will be tried?" I asked.

"About a thousand are now under arrest," he replied. "Many thousands have been released on bail. Those in prison are only the top civilian and military officials, who had access to policymakers or were policymakers themselves."

"Will Mengistu be extradited from Zimbabwe and tried?"

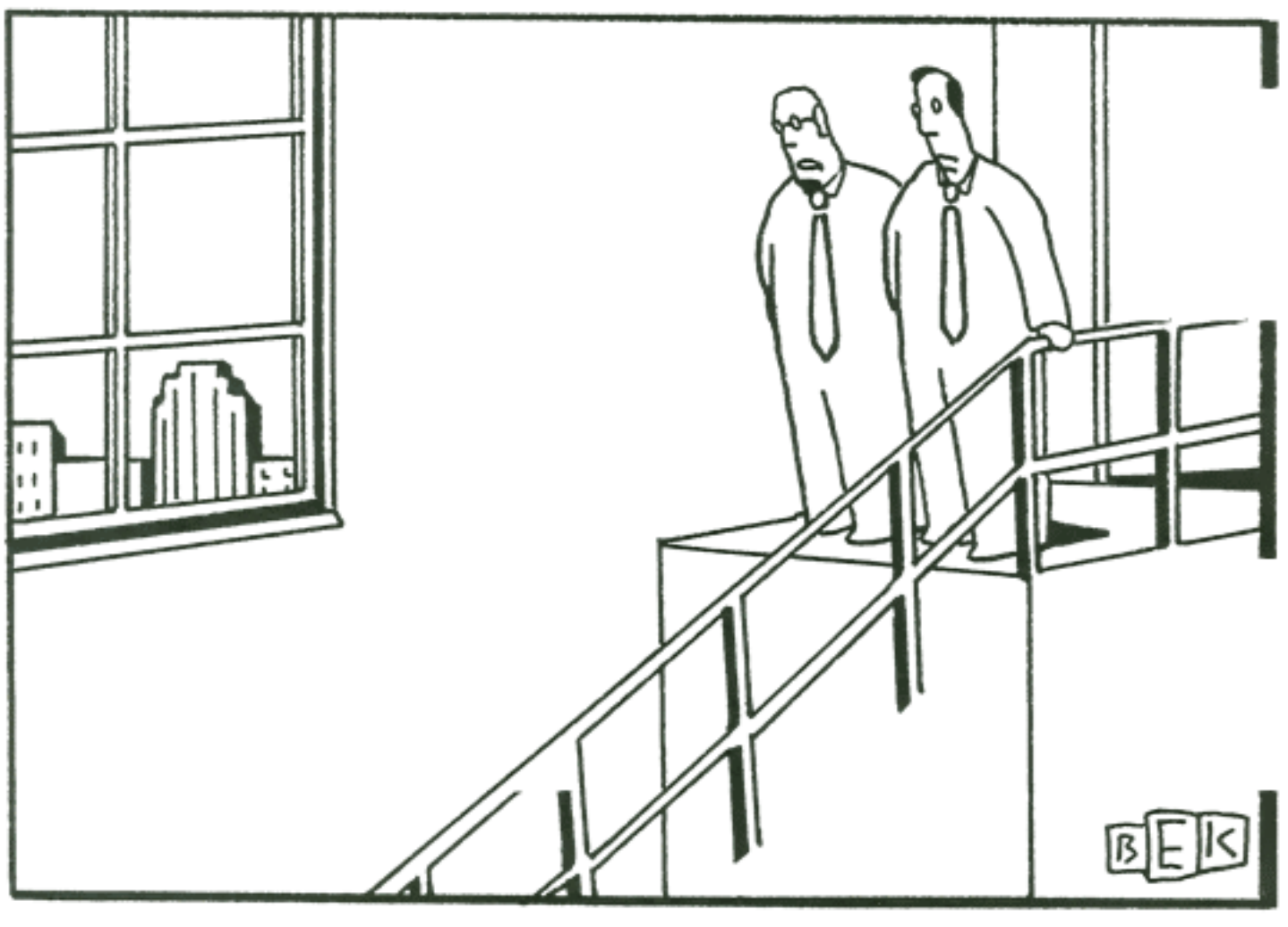
For the only time during our interview, the Minister responded, "No comment."

THE Grand Hall of Trinity Cathedral—once the religious seat of the imperial court—is lofty and light, and the early-morning sun was streaming through its stained-glass windows when Lady Yeshimmabet, Rahel, and I arrived for the noblemen s funeral. A choir of bearded and vested deacons, holding silver crosses and silver-headed rods, recited the Scriptures from behind an iconostasis inlaid with gold. On either side of them, facing away from the hall, were two canopied thrones, which had been covered with black cloth at the time of Haile Selassie's death, seventeen years ago.

The Emperor's remains, which are temporarily stored in a plain wooden coffin in a church basement or the Grand Palace's grounds, were to have been buried four days earlier, on the centenary of his birth. But quarrels within the family of his only surviving son—Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, who proclaimed himself Emperor Amha Selassie I in 1989, despite a massive stroke sixteen years before that left him paralyzed and unable to speak—and between the family and th transitional government, over where the Emperor would be buried, and under what circumstances, led to an indefinite postponement of the burial. It also brought to the surface divisions within the royal family on who was best qualified to succeed to the throne. The royal legacy that Haile Selassie bequeathed to his family was as splintered and shattered as his old kingdom was.

I remembered something that a Western ambassador had told me earlier. When I asked him if Ethiopia's monarchy would ever be restored, he had replied, "I've seen no one in this country, aside from a fledgling monarchist party, who has any nostalgia for the return of the crown. The Emperor had betrayed a lot of people, and was highly discredited in the end. The idea that the Crown Prince—or what *do* they call him?—will come back and sit happily on the throne is sheer nonsense Most Ethiopians view the monarchy as quaint and irrelevant."

Glancing around the cathedral, I saw Princess Sara, who was sitting with her youngest son, Prince Beeide Mariam, who she had hoped would one day assume the throne, until his grandfather signed the arrest warrant that sent him to the End of the World. I saw Princess Seble, who was burying both her only brother—Rear Admiral Iskender Desta,



"So Jones really did take the stairs."

the Emperor's grandson—and her husband, Dejazmatch Kassa Wolde-Mariam, a highly regarded intellectual, and the Emperor's grandson-in-law. Both of their arrest warrants had been signed by the Emperor as well. Princess Rebecca arrived, supporting a ninety-two-year-old aunt. Then I saw Aster Asfaw, the widow of Haile Selassie's chief of staff She had told me an extraordinary story, of how she had trekked for thirteen days through the Ethiopian desert to Djibouti, disguised as a nomad, with her three young children, in order to save their lives. They had been robbed by brigands and smugglers, and had hidden in rocky crevices to avoid Cuban troops. As they moved deeper and deeper into the desert, escorted by a Somali guide, everything became increasingly bleak and stark. The only thing that connected them with Addis were the lights of Mengistu's Army camps, twinkling in the dark.

As the priests chanted in Ge'ez, an extinct ecclesiastical language, and clouds of incense swirled above the altar, I remembered something that Rahel had said a few days before. When their husbands were killed, nearly all the women of Haile Selassie's court had taken Holy Communion vows never to remarry. They were in their forties then, and many were the beauties of the court. Now their faces were lined, and their hair had turned gray. Most of them were well educated and had owned country estates, coffee plantations, or other properties in their own right. But they had been groomed to marry and raise families; it was around their families that their lives had revolved. And then, in a moment, everything stopped. They lost their husbands; their homes and lands were confiscated; they had no income. Then they began losing their children as well; they were force-marched to the provinces on the *zamacha;* they were imprisoned; or they were shot. But the women of the old imperial court were determined that they were not going to be broken. And they weren't.

Abuna Paulos appeared from behind the altar, dressed in a deep-purple robe and defiantly carrying a sceptre that the Dergue had confiscated from him more than a decade ago. He was accompanied by scores of priests in black silk robes, bearers carrying brilliant parasols, and novitiate monks, who moved rhythmically, swaying back and forth, to the beating of large leather drums. As we followed the Patriarch out of the cathedral to the burial site on its grounds, I could have been back in a medieval kingdom, with its ruling triad of king, army, and church; or back in a time when the Tigreans had their own emperors and the Oromos their own kings; or back in Haile Selassie's imperial court. They all fused together, and all seemed equally remote.

Leaving the funeral party, I joined the ambassadorial corps on the balcony of the cathedral, and looked out across the grounds at a crowd of some ten thousand who had come to pay their final respects. I remembered what the Patriarch had said: Every Ethiopian has been damaged or hurt. Hundreds of thousands have died. The fifty-six who had served the Emperor loyally in his imperial court and, as a consequence, had been executed inside Akaki Prison were merely the first.

The route to the burial site was lined with men—the noblemen's grandsons, fellow-prisoners, friends, and staff—who stood shoulder to shoulder, holding the victims' ceremonial crowns, their medals and photographs. Slowly, in cadence, the pallbearers appeared, carrying eight simple pine coffins, each draped with the Ethiopian flag. Behind them came the women in black—indistinguishable forms that became smaller and smaller as they reached the grave site and were engulfed by the swelling crowd.

The government had sent no official delegation to the funeral, but here and there I saw Tigrean guerrillas with their Kalashnikovs, providing security on the perimeters of the crowd. There were fears that Mengistu's armed supporters could attempt to retrieve the bodies even now.

When the ceremony was over, I went in search of Lady Yeshimmabet. She was standing, elegant and erect, under a canopy, waiting for her car. "God is kind to us," she told me. "But it has been so long . . . and so many men, in so few coffins." Her voice trailed off

I found Rahel a few feet away, tears streaming down her cheeks. She took my hand, and as we walked toward our car she said, "After eighteen years, it's no longer anti-revolutionary to cry." ♦

ARTIST AT LARGE

THE BIG APPLE CIRCUS

by Philip Burke