

The Storyteller

## **Chapter 9**

# **The Storyteller**

**It is said that when a man of Oromia dies another library is lost.** (*Ethiopian Proverb*)

His eyes stung with the acrid smoke which scorched the back of his throat as he struggled to rescue the pieces of paper on which the stories were written. Sparks burnt his fingers and caught one sheet, which smouldered and scorched its tale. Then a new page succumbed to a flickering flame which danced over another fable, quickly devouring it in its black mouth and destroying the words, leaving behind nothing but grey ash. He collapsed, wheezing in pain, a life's work disappearing as the inferno swallowed it and came for him.

### *Chapter One*

Young Said stood at the entrance, watching the people entering the community hall. Some, who knew him, nodded. Some even embraced him. Many others ignored him. A few looked at him irritably. He just looked away, pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and waited for the rest of his family. He was still angry.

People from different cultures filed into a room that served as the social meeting place for the residents of this housing estate. The familiar faces welcomed each other and quietly chatted. A cool breeze pulled the dying yellow leaves from the trees and blew them along the mossy flagstones down which a stream of colourful figures slowly walked towards the entrance. The afternoon rays of the sun broke through the clouds in the grey sky, illuminating the red bricks and reflecting on the window panes behind their iron grilles. Its autumnal warmth touched the heads of those queuing in the doorway, some draped in shawls, some covered by hoods or hats.

Said's twin sister, Fatima, was at the back, her head covered by a bright coloured *hijab*. At fifteen she was attractive with dark eyes outlined by thick black lashes. She left her mother to join him and, when she finally reached him, her sad eyes looked solemnly up at her brother.

“Ready?” he asked in his birth language.

She nodded, took his hand, and together they entered through the wide door and walked down a central aisle between rows of occupied seats until they reached two empty seats at the front facing a small raised platform. Vases of yellow flowers: daisies, roses and chrysanthemums, decorated every available space.

A youth who was sat behind Fatima put his hand on her shoulder. Said clenched his fist until Fatima glanced across at him, her eyes pleading. She then turned round to face the youth who squirmed nervously in his seat.

“Are you okay?” he said.

“I'm fine, Daniel. What about you?”

“Not bad.” He looked uncertainly at Said's back then pulled his hood over his shorn head and stared down at his trainers.

Two women, shrouded in their fine white *netela* shawls edged with embroidered silks, were sat next to Fatima. She turned to them and placed her hands on theirs. The older woman's gnarled brown fingers clasped her hand and her weak eyes, reddened from her tears, acknowledged Fatima. The other woman stared ahead, her hands clutching a sheet of paper. She did not visibly respond.

The outside door closed and a tall dark bearded man, smartly dressed in a suit and tie, walked down the aisle between rows of chairs and stepped onto the low stage. The congregation fell silent as he turned to face them, raising his hands and saying,

“*Selam*. Peace. My name is David and, as you all know, I am a councillor in your community.

Welcome to our neighborhood hall and to this meeting, the aim of which is to remember two Ethiopian friends from our community. These two men were well known to most of you, but the life of one has already ended. Their lives were joined by stories. I hope you are sitting comfortably as I am going to tell you their stories, helped by a few of their friends and family.

First let me tell you Ibrahim’s story.”

### **Ibrahim’s Story**

In the south of Ethiopia there is a mountainous region with many groups of small settlements where poor families have farmed the land and looked after their animals for many generations. About sixty years ago a baby was born to one of these families and he was named Abraham. Later he became known as Ibrahim.

He was born at the time when Emperor Haile Selassie I ruled the country. He was believed to be destined to rule the country as a direct descendent of the offspring of King Solomon of the Holy Land and the Queen of Sheba - but that is another story.

Now Abraham was the tenth child of Bayush and her husband, Yosef. However, only four of their children survived the disease and poverty, hardship and famine that the people in this country faced. Abraham grew up to be a fighter and soon followed his two

brothers and big sister into the hills surrounding their home; a single room in a mud-walled hut with a roof of straw. Each day they looked after their family's small herd of sheep, two cattle and donkey, taking them to find grass and water. When he was old enough his father taught him to plough their small plots of land with the cattle and here they would grow *teff*, a grain from which his mother would make *injera* (a kind of flat bread as some of you from that part of Africa probably know). They ate it nearly everyday, sometimes with sauce made from the beans they grew and, very occasionally, from stewed or roasted meat.

Unfortunately a large portion of everything they grew or looked after went to the noblemen who the Emperor had appointed to rule their land. Abraham often heard his father complain about how unfair this tax was but he was afraid to argue with the nobleman's collectors when they demanded payment.

Abraham never went to school but he was inquisitive from an early age. He asked his brothers and his sister many questions. However, as they hadn't been to school, they could neither read nor write. So he learnt by listening. First he listened to his mother singing songs while she made the *injera* which she cooked it over the open fire outside their house. His mother sang in the language of her own parents who had come from the south east of the country, an area called Ogaden where the Somali people lived.

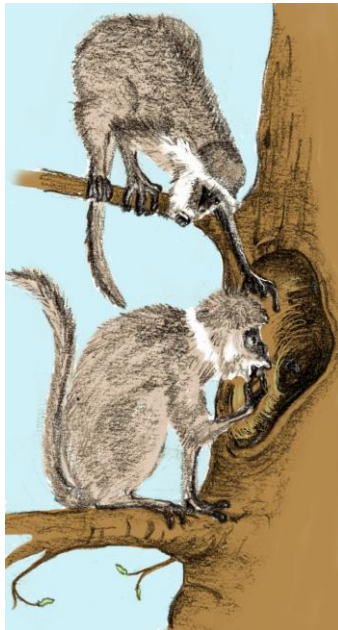
He also heard stories told by his father and his grandfather who spoke the language of their region, Oromia. These stories told Abraham everything he needed to know about what was good or bad and how to find solutions to their many problems. Although many stories and sayings were overheard, some were told to the children as

they sat under a tree at the hottest time of the day, or after they had eaten at the end of the day.

Abraham began to hear and understand more stories as he grew older and started to repeat them to the children of other families. He became known as the storyteller even then and, in addition to retelling the stories he heard in his village, he also invented new stories to suit their circumstances.

After a long drought, when the nobleman's tax collectors had demanded the last of their beans, Abraham told this story to the starving children in his village.

### **The Greedy Monkey**



A greedy monkey lived in a small forest surrounded by land where the farmers grew a few vegetable crops to feed their families. Each night the greedy monkey sent other monkeys to steal the vegetables from these farmers. They would go out

in the dark and return as the sun rose with beans, potatoes, tomatoes and carrots and store them in the hollow of the large tree where the greedy monkey lived.

Every morning the farmers would scratch their heads and ask each other, “Have you seen who is stealing our vegetables? It must be the rats.” At night the dogs would bark when the monkeys arrived. But, when the farmers came out with their candles and torches to catch the thieves, the monkeys hid.

One day the greedy monkey decided to have a great feast to impress all the other animals in the forest. He sent his monkeys down the tree to bring out the stolen food and prepare it. When they looked into the hollow of the tree they could not find anything. They looked at one another in confusion. “Where has all the food gone?” They never found the small hole leading to a long tunnel in the base of the tree.

A large family of rats had discovered this source of food not long after the monkeys started to hide it in the tree trunk. It tasted much better than the grain they used to steal from the farmers, so they stole it and left the stores of *teff* untouched. The chief rat, hearing that the greedy monkey could not put on the great feast he had promised, invited all the animals in the forest to a lavish meal of stolen vegetables. They were impressed. The greedy monkey was angry and threatened the monkeys who had stolen the food. They were afraid to go back and disappeared into the forest.



The children who heard the story must have laughed. They knew that the greedy monkey was the nobleman and the monkeys were his tax-collectors, cowardly men who only served their master to live a comfortable existence, unlike the farmers and their families.

When Abraham was a young man there was an air of discontent in the country and he heard from visitors about the uprisings against the nobles in the north and the east. He realized that there was no advantage to be gained by using force. The families of those who protested against the nobles were punished by the Emperor's own soldiers. So he stayed working on his father's farm.

Then one day a horseman rode into the village and told the elders the news that Emperor Haile Selassie had been arrested and his government overthrown by his own army. For people like Abraham life did not change much at first. Although the nobles no longer ruled over their land, they were still paying taxes. Then news arrived that the Emperor had died and things began to alter in the countryside. Many young men, including Abraham's two older brothers, were told that they had to fight for the new government. Abraham was left at home with his sister and his parents. He had always felt disadvantaged by being unable to read and write so, when the new government organized classes to teach the peasants *Amharic*, the government language, he was eager to start.

A young scholar from the capital, Addis Ababa, arrived in the village with a few books and some writing materials and started a class. Abraham was a good student and attended whenever he could in between farming his father's land and helping the elders with other village matters. Once he had learned to read and write in *Amharic* he started to translate the stories he had gathered in his head from his father's language and also the



songs his mother had sung in her language and wrote them down on any scrap of paper he could find. For a while, life began to improve for Abraham. As one of the few people in the community who could read well, he helped the younger boys to practice their reading and writing. But peace did not last in this disturbed land.

In the capital the government leaders fought for power until one man took control. Colonel Mengistu had no scruples and was responsible for the murder of many others. A period of terror spread across the land and his army forced many men to join their cause and show no resistance to their brutal methods. Abraham never saw his brothers again. What was worse for him, however, was leaving his village, his parents and his sister to fight against the government troops.

He joined a Somalia-backed opposition group. Somalia, as many of you know, is a country south east of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. It was run by a man whose aim was to take over the Somali region of Ethiopia, the Ogaden, with the rest of Somalia. By the summer of 1977 a Somali invasion was underway and large parts of the Ogaden were seized. The battles were cruel and the landmines, left by troops, resulted in many innocent people being injured, mutilated or dead.

Abraham soon realized how wrong it was to fight his own countrymen. He knew that he could not stay with them. Nor could he change sides and fight for Mengistu. His only option was to flee the country. So he headed south for Somalia and became a refugee.

He did not talk much about this time – a period when he changed his faith from being an Orthodox Christian to becoming a Muslim. That was when he changed his name to Ibrahim.

I believe he never married but I heard that he had been in love. He would fall silent when asked questions about his period as a soldier, a deserter and finally a refugee. He would sometimes answer with a proverb or a story such as this one that he must have heard in his homeland.

### **The Dog Fight**



A wise man was wandering through a village when he saw two dogs fighting over a bone that someone had thrown out. Nobody seemed to bother about them but the man called out a warning.

“If you don’t stop those dogs fighting then your sons will fight too.”

The people ignored him. Soon a boy arrived and picked up a stick and started to beat the dog which was biting his scruffy mongrel. The dog yelped. Its owner, another young boy, picked up a stick and ran to hit the other child. They started beat each other with the sticks while the dogs watched. The wise man also watched and warned everyone.

“If you don’t stop those boys fighting then your mothers will fight too.”

Nobody listened to him. Then the mother of one of the boys heard the noise and tried to stop the fight, pulling off the other boy and hitting him. “Stop hitting me!” he cried so loud that his mother heard him. She came running over and started to pull the hair of the other mother.

“If you don’t stop those mothers fighting then their husbands will fight too,” the wise man told the villagers.

It was too late. The screams of the women could be heard by the men working on the land. One of them heard his wife’s cry and left his plough and oxen to run to the village where he saw another woman scratching her and kicking her. He grabbed hold of her and tried to pull her off his wife. Her cries reached her own husband who was returning from the river with his sheep. When he saw the man holding his wife who was kicking and screaming, he rolled up his sleeves and marched over to thump him.

The wise man shook his head and warned, “If you don’t stop those men fighting then their friends and family will fight too.”

Can you guess what happened? Yes, the men fought over their wives and their own supporters started to fight each other, hitting them with their fists, then using weapons and eventually some from each side were unfortunately killed. They stopped fighting to care for the injured and bury the dead. They were all upset and couldn’t agree how to end the war. In the end they went to the wise man.

“If we take a life for every man killed we will lose more men,” they said, adding, “and, if we pay for the dead men by giving up our cattle we will have no cattle for ourselves and we will all be poor. What can we do?”

The wise man sat down with the two groups and their leaders. “There is a solution to your problem but it means giving something up.”

“What is it? Anything!” they cried.

“Both of you own a precious necklace, yes?” he asked.

“Yes!”

“Then you must take that necklace to the river and throw it in with all your anger and hate. Then you must forgive each other.”

“We will do that,” they agreed and so they did. From that day on they lived together in peace. They solved arguments through discussions and never again allowed their dogs to fight.

\*\*\*

By the early 1990s he had arrived here as an asylum seeker. He never returned to his homeland and he eventually gained citizenship here. He worked as a labourer, sometimes sweeping the streets, sometimes cleaning public places and, when he was made unemployed (which happened more than once) he spent his time working as a volunteer while trying to find paid work. He was not an idle man and, given the right education and opportunities, would probably have gained qualifications and a good job.

His last job was caretaker of this centre, a role he performed with his usual pride. I often met him here but I had also known Ibrahim from his early days in Britain when he

was still seeking asylum here. He came to my English class for speakers of other languages. It was a job I used to do before I became a councillor here. Ibrahim put all his effort into learning this language. Because he was so reluctant to talk or write about his past, I encouraged him to tell stories like the one I've just told you. He gladly obliged and entertained our group and myself. I have kept all the stories that he wrote for his homework. Stories helped Ibrahim to make friends and help others including a group of youngsters who he befriended here. Daniel is one of those youngsters and he is going to tell you his own story.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Daniel's story**

Daniel, clutching a scrappy piece of paper, reluctantly got out of his seat and wandered to the lectern, dragging his feet and shrinking into his hoody. He kept it on when he turned to face the audience. He tried to speak but no words came out. He coughed.

“Hello,” he whispered.

“You’ll need to speak a bit louder,” David gently told him. “We don’t have a microphone but I’m sure you have a good strong voice. Tell them who you are and how you got to know Ibrahim,” he added before leaving Daniel and moving to a spare seat on the front row.

Daniel opened up the piece of paper and put it on the stand, looked up again then started to speak in a croaky voice.

My name is Daniel and I’m nearly fifteen. My friend is Yonas but he’s not here. My mum and sister are here. Hi mum! (Daniel looked for her face in the sea of people. When he saw her wave and smile at him he was encouraged and started to talk more confidently.)

I first saw Ibrahim this time last year. I’ve lived here all my life but never took any notice of him before. Well, this time I was with my mates and, well, we were being a bit of a pain.

(A murmur of laughter rippled through the younger members in the audience which made him feel better and he grinned then continued his story.)

I was part of a group of kids and we'd lost our football. It was confiscated. We were bored so we were kicking an empty can down the path in the garden outside. Ibrahim was trying to sweep up leaves and we just ignored him, kicking up the piles he'd made. We were fed up of grown-ups telling us what to do but Ibrahim didn't say anything. He just carried on sweeping the leaves into heaps. He looked at us but didn't show any sign of caring what we were doing. That annoyed us so we wandered off, leaving the can on the floor in the middle of the path.

“Hey boys. You left something!” Ibrahim called after us.

I turned to see him pointing at the can and I remember giggling. We all did. Yonas even shouted, “Keep it!” and we laughed even more. Then Yonas walked out of the garden and we followed him. I glanced back and saw Ibrahim go back to work, bagging up the leaves and rubbish but he didn't touch the can.

Later that evening we came back. It was dark and we didn't notice the can till Yonas, always in front, kicked it and swore. I felt a bit embarrassed. My mum had brought me up to clear up after myself and if she'd seen what we'd done she'd have hit me. I know Yonas must have felt a bit guilty too 'cause he picked up the can and threw it in the bin. We then heard a voice say, “*Amesegenallu,*” and it made us jump. We then realized that Ibrahim had been sat there, in the dark. As Yonas and I were from Ethiopian families, we both understood their word for ‘thank you’. We all left without saying anything, but it made us a bit nervous.

The next time I saw him I was with my mum and he said, “*Selam*” to me. Mum responded and nudged me to reply. When he'd gone she gave me a smack and said I was

rude. (Daniel glanced over at his mum who was sat with his younger sister shaking her head but smiling.)

So after that, when I wasn't with Yonas, I used to nod and even speak to him with the few words I knew in Amharic. One day he invited me back to his small flat to show me a book of Ethiopian history and I was amazed by what I saw. He had shelves of books, a big desk and a typewriter. The walls had photos of Ethiopia which he'd cut out of magazines or bought. Like in our flat, there was a smell of fresh coffee and incense.

Yonas saw me coming out of Ibrahim's flat and asked what I'd been doing there. I told him I'd been looking at the book and he laughed at me. That really hurt as I valued Yonas as a friend. In school he would protect me from other boys in different gangs. (Daniel glanced at Said who was staring at the floorboards.)

Ibrahim was stood in his doorway watching us and he called out to us. "I have forgotten to give you something."

Both Yonas and I wandered back, trying not to look eager but both of us were keen to know what he might offer us. He showed us both into his room and asked us to sit down on the big cushions on the floor. We looked up at him waiting for something to eat or drink, or maybe a book, but his hands were empty. Then he said, "You are very close friends."

We weren't sure if he was asking us a question or what so we kept quiet.

"I'm going to tell you a story about two loyal friends, a story I first heard in Ethiopia."

Ibrahim took a photograph from the wall and then sat down on a little stool with three legs, a bit like the one my little sister has. The picture showed a wide fast flowing



river at the bottom of a deep gorge. Its sandy bank was overshadowed by high trees, very different to those we were familiar with in the local parks.

### **The Crocodile and the Monkey**



“This is the Awash River in Ethiopia where there once lived a huge crocodile and a small monkey. They were great friends and would play together in the river, the monkey riding on the back of the crocodile because he couldn’t swim. In return the monkey would bring his friend bananas from the trees.

Now one day the chief of the crocodiles became very ill. A crocodile doctor visited him and told him that the only cure was a monkey’s heart. The chief knew that the young crocodile was friends to a young monkey so he told him to fetch the heart of his friend.”

\*\*\*

Ibrahim looked at us and asked, “What would you do?”

I looked at Yonas who was still a bit surprised to find himself sitting there listening to a children’s story, like a small boy, then I answered. “I don’t know. Tell him to get stuffed or something.”

Ibrahim smiled. “If the person asking you to do something that would hurt your best friend was someone you respected, a member of your family for example, would you tell them to ‘get stuffed’? What would you do, Yonas?”

Yonas was surprised that Ibrahim even knew his name. “Don’t know. It’s not likely to happen so I don’t really care,” and he started to move.

I was a bit upset as I thought Ibrahim was simply going to ask us to leave and I wanted to hear how the story ended. I had never been told a story since primary school and I couldn’t remember those. I knew that my mum would tell my younger sister stories before she went to sleep but I was never encouraged to stay and listen. I pulled on Yonas’s sleeve and he sat down again without another word. Ibrahim continued his story.

\*\*\*

“Well that young crocodile knew that he had to be loyal to his chief but he was very sad and didn’t want to harm his best friend. He was torn. In the end he decided to tell the monkey but first he said, ‘Come for a ride,’ and the monkey jumped on his back. The crocodile swam into the middle of the river knowing that the monkey would not get off for fear of drowning. ‘My chief is very ill and I’ve got to take a monkey’s heart to him to cure him. I’m sorry to have to ask you, but I must take yours, now.’

The monkey was wise and understood what was happening. He had trusted his friend. Now he devised a plan. ‘You know that we monkeys don’t carry our hearts with us when we go out.’ The crocodile, not the brightest of creatures, shook his head. ‘We always leave them at home so if you will swim with me back to the shore I will go and fetch mine.’ The crocodile agreed and

took the monkey back. When they reached the edge of the river the monkey jumped off and ran to the trees shouting, ‘You tried to trick me, my friend, but now you are the one who is tricked.’ The crocodile looked surprised but then relieved as he didn’t have to kill his friend and so he swam away.”

\*\*\*

Ibrahim looked at us both of us, a smile breaking across his brown face making his dark eyes light up. I smiled back and then looked at Yonas. He wouldn’t make eye contact with Ibrahim but muttered something like, “Stupid story.”

“The first aim of any story is to entertain,” Ibrahim said as he stood up, “but sometimes a story may have a message. Would you trust your friend?” he asked me. I felt a bit nervous ’cause at that moment I really didn’t trust Yonas and he knew it. They both knew it. Before things got uncomfortable Ibrahim handed us both a pencil. “Now go away and bring back a new story.”

I wasn’t going to bother at first. Yonas had said it was a stupid idea. However, I overheard mum telling my younger sister a story later that week and sat outside her bedroom listening. It was really good. Then I went to my room and wrote it down. I wanted to go back to Ibrahim and tell him the story but I didn’t want to go with Yonas. Then I thought about the crocodile and the monkey and realized that I still didn’t trust my best friend so I decided to confront him. Now you know Yonas is a bit older and a bit taller than me (a few youngsters in the audience sniggered) - okay, he’s a lot taller than me. You have to admit it took guts for me to stand up to him but I didn’t want to be forever frightened of upsetting him. So I asked Yonas if he’d found a story.

“What?” he asked, as if he’d never been at Ibrahim’s house and been given a pencil. I repeated the question, then added that I’d got one and I was going to go and tell it to Ibrahim. “Are you dumb or something? Why do you want to bother with that old tramp? He’s probably a pervert.”

That really angered me because he’d been willing to go into his flat when he thought he was going to get something and you couldn’t really call him a tramp ’cause he was always clean and his flat was spotless so I told Yonas I was going anyway and left him standing there. I half expected Yonas coming up behind me and thumping me but he didn’t. He just stood and watched me go.

Later that day I made my way up to Ibrahim’s flat with my story and guess who was already there? (Daniel looked at his friends sitting in the hall and beamed.) Yes, Yonas. So I sat down on the cushion again, next to him, and we showed Ibrahim our stories. Mine was a bit babyish but Yonas had found one in a book of fables he had found in the local library.

Ibrahim recognized it. “That’s one of Aesop’s fables. Now, it is said that he was a slave, possibly from Ethiopia from where he got his name ‘Aethop’. Some of his stories are almost identical to those I was told as a boy. I didn’t realize that until I read Aesop’s Fables in the library. Probably the same book you found. Let me tell you the one I remember most. It was about a greedy dog.”

## The Greedy Dog



A shepherd in the hills near where I lived in Ethiopia had a dog that was a great help. He would take the dog with him when he moved his sheep to new grassland or to drink from the streams. The dog was eager and ran all over the countryside so it was always hungry.

One day it discovered some meat in the shepherd's house and stole it. It ran to the bridge over the river and looked back to see if the shepherd had seen it. Then it looked down into the river and was surprised to see another dog with a piece of meat in its mouth.

Now the other dog's meat looked even bigger and, being greedy, it decided to get it. So it jumped into the river, dropping its own meat in the water. The other dog, however, had disappeared. The dog gave up looking for it and decided to get its own meat. But that too had disappeared downstream. The dog swam to the side of the river and climbed out. It was disappointed but it had learnt a lesson – not to be greedy in future.

Yonas and I both laughed. We'd heard grown ups complain that people were greedy and 'their eyes were bigger than their bellies.' We had both been guilty of taking too much to eat and not being able to finish what was on our plates. My mum hates to see food wasted so she's always going on at me (again he glanced across at her and smiled).

For a while after that Yonas and I went to visit Ibrahim fairly regularly, once a fortnight or so. Sometimes we'd take him stories that we'd heard at home but usually we went to listen to his stories. I'd often tell them to my little sister when I got home. Then things started to go wrong. We still went to see Ibrahim but the visits started to have another purpose. I'm going to ask Said to speak next - but that's only because of my respect for Ibrahim. He's not my friend.

### *Chapter Three*

#### **Said's story**

Daniel went back to his seat as the congregation clapped in appreciation of his talk. He had to stand aside as Said walked past him. They paused briefly to stare at each other but did not speak. David smiled in relief as Said started to speak slowly and carefully to everyone in the hall in his second language.

My English is not very good. My twin sister, Fatima, has helped me to write this as she's the educated one.

We came to live here a few years ago when I was ten. We are from Somalia and we are Muslims. When we first came here we had very little English and needed extra lessons at the school where we were placed. We're the eldest of four children and needed to work hard to prepare for secondary school. Fatima loved school and made friends who helped her to learn the language and the rest of the culture of this strange country. In our community there are many other Muslims, and some are from Somalia, so we don't feel too isolated. My mum was a widow but had re-married a Somali refugee who had gained citizenship so we didn't feel threatened. However, I had quite a lot of abuse at school and even in the neighbourhood where we live.

I found it harder to settle here. I'd left behind good friends in Mogadishu although I couldn't wait to leave that place as we were often afraid. But I found life in this city much harder at first. My earliest memory of school here was of Miss Jones, our Year 6 teacher, standing at the front of the class with me. I was tall for my age but I was nervous

and could not understand what was happening. However, I would not let the other children know that. I vowed I would be strong.

“This is Said.” Miss Jones said, saying my name correctly - Siyeed. Then turning to the board she spelt my name - S A I D.

“That spells said!” one of the other boys shouted out and the rest of the class laughed.

“Yes it is the same spelling but it’s not pronounced the same.”

I did not feel happy in the class. I had no friends. I did not understand the teacher. I wanted to be with my sister who was in another class or with my younger brothers and sisters in the flat where we all lived - but I had to go to school.

At playtime I felt cold, lonely and very unhappy but I followed two boys out of the classroom. By the boy’s toilets a group of three other boys were waiting. The boys from my class called to them, “We’ve got this new boy in our class. His name sounds like Siyeed but is spelt S A I D.”

They laughed and talked to each other but I did not understand them. I just wanted to run back home. In the playground they all turned to face me. At first he thought they were going to say something nice to me. They smiled and grinned as an older boy started to chant words which made no sense. They all laughed aloud. I did not understand what they were laughing at so I started to laugh. Then the boy spoke again.

Suddenly I realised that they were laughing at me so I got upset then angry. Just as the biggest boy started to use those words again I hit him. I didn’t hit him hard but the boy wasn’t expecting it. He fell backwards and landed on the ground. The others stopped and looked at him and back at me. They were not good fighters; they punched



and wrestled with me, trying to force me to the ground but I had learnt to fight back in my own country, although usually with friends. I was not afraid and I was taller than the boys so I hit them hard, catching one boy on the nose. Others in the playground started shouting, "Fight, fight."

A teacher stopped the fight and took me to the head teacher. I felt angry and embarrassed. I wanted to cry but did not want anyone to see me weaken, particularly not my sister who found me outside the head's office. After that I made sure that the boys knew they would not beat me.

(Said looked round the hall at the people who had never before seen that side of him. He knew that most regarded him as a tough and sometimes arrogant youth, used to getting his own way. They seemed to have overlooked or forgotten the problems he had faced as a young boy arriving in a foreign country.)

By the time I joined secondary school I had a small number of friends, all Muslims, and together we helped each other to get by. We formed a gang to protect each other, and to have some fun. I live in the same flats as Yonas and Daniel but we had no reason to fight them until I saw Yonas talking to my sister about six months ago.

I love my sister and wanted to stop her making friends with anyone who wasn't worthy of her. I did not think Yonas was a worthy person. I'd seen him hanging round with his mates and watched him at school messing about. I wanted to stop him talking to my sister so I watched him and saw him going into Ibrahim's flat with Daniel.

I knew Ibrahim because he attended our mosque. I had never spoken to him but my step father was friendly with him. (Said glanced up at the rest of his family sat in the middle of the hall. His step father nodded and his mother smiled at him).

I was jealous of Yonas being his friend too. I never did anything though but one day, as Ibrahim passed me on the stairs, he said something like, “He looks for quarrels; the dog goes to the market.”

I remember stopping and looking at him. He must have known that I didn’t understand what he’d said so he explained the proverb.

“Did you know that in some other countries Muslims hate dogs? Well in my country when a dog went to a place where there were many people, like a marketplace, it was bound to get kicked. So it is with someone who looks for a quarrel. Take care, my friend.”

I replied, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” to which he answered, “I think you do but why not talk about it over some tea. My flat is close and I have some nice biscuits.”

Now I know in this country such an invitation could be misunderstood. I could have got the police onto him or told the newspapers, but I had been brought up in a different culture. First we respected our elders and secondly, we’d grown up in a society that shared food and drink as well as stories. So I accepted his offer.

While he made some tea and brought out some biscuits I looked at the books and objects on his shelves. He had some amazing pieces of African pottery and woodwork that he must have been given as he told me he’d come to this country with nothing but the clothes he wore. The first time I went to his flat he pulled out a book of stories with beautiful pictures. I’d never really learnt to read and write properly at school and hated English lessons but Ibrahim started to explain the stories as if we were discussing a football review in a newspaper. I don’t mind reading the sports pages – especially about

Arsenal. (There was giggling in the audience and muttering between some of those who supported the rival teams: Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspurs)

The first story that Ibrahim told me was about the lion and the hare. It's a long story but I think you will like it. I always imagined that I was like a lion but Ibrahim taught me to see how strength is not everything.

### **The lion and the hare**



A lion caught a hare and was about to eat him but the hare, a clever animal, stopped him saying, “You don’t want to eat me. I’m small and thin. You’ll still be hungry when you’ve finished eating me. Why don’t we go hunting together?”

The lion dropped the hare and looked at him in surprise. “What could you catch?”

The hare scratched its ear with its hind leg and said, “Okay. If we go to the village and you don’t find something fatter than me, I’ll let you eat me.” So they went to the village.

The lion caught a fat young bull and the hare found an old thin donkey which had been rolling in the dust. As they returned with their new possessions the hare looked at the lion and said, “I’m sorry you’ve had such bad luck.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well your bull is so thin and scrawny. You might as well eat me.”

“My bull isn’t thin. Just look at your skinny donkey.”

“I bet if you hit it with a stick it wouldn’t give off steam.” the hare said, picking up a big stick and smacking the young bull.

“That’s because my bull is fat.”

“Oh no! Look what happens if I hit my donkey.” He said and hit the poor beast so much that a cloud of dust filled the air. “Now that’s a fat animal. You’ll just have to eat me.”

“No, I refuse. Give me your donkey and I’ll give you my bull.”

“But I caught the donkey. It’s mine.” the hare cried.

The lion started to get angry and roared so the hare gave in and let him have the old donkey in return for the big fat bull. They continued walking and the hare, seeing eight feathers on the ground, picked them up. Seeing the lion’s knife in his belt, he put them into a belt round his waist. Then they stopped to rest.

“I have eight knives,” he announced. “If I lose one I still have seven left but you have only one knife. What would you do if you lost it?”

The lion thought about this. He was not happy that a creature that was so much smaller and weaker than him could have such an advantage. “I am a mighty warrior and you are a mere small animal. You must swap your weapons with mine.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t do that.”

“Are you arguing with me?” the lion roared.

“No. No I would never do that. Here you are.” The hare handed over the eight feathers and took the big knife off the lion.

Then they got up and continued on their way. When they reached the door to the cave where the lion lived the hare stopped and pointed at it. “It’s a trap!” he cried. “Aren’t you afraid?”

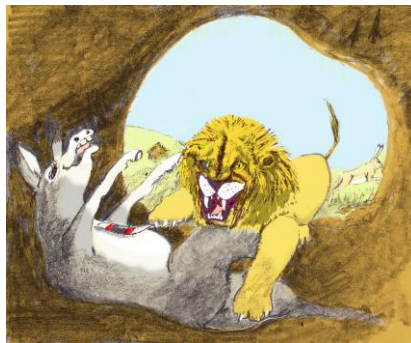
“Afraid of what?”

“Of men! Look at my house,” and the hare pointed to the holes in the ground. “I have many doors to escape if men come after me.”

“Then we shall trade.” the lion insisted.

The hare was about to protest but the lion bared his teeth so he reluctantly agreed. Therefore, the hare moved into the lion’s cave with the big fat bull and the sharp steel knife with which he killed the bull. He ate it and grew fat.

The lion moved into the hare’s underground home and tried to kill the donkey. He took out his first feather and stabbed the donkey but the feather bent and only tickled the donkey. It laughed. The lion took another feather and stabbed harder. This tickled the donkey even more and it laughed louder still. Each feather tickled the donkey until it could stand no more and it escaped from the lion and found a field to live in.



So if you listen to a donkey braying you know how it sounded when the lion tickled it.



The congregation were still laughing at this story as Said went back to his seat. David patted him on the shoulder and the hall gradually fell silent as his sister walked up to the lectern.

## *Chapter Four*

### **Fatima's story**

I met Yonas when I was walking home from school one afternoon in the summer. My brother, who usually escorted me, was staying behind for a football practice and Daniel and Yonas were walking in front of me. I had seen them round our flats with their friends and noticed them in school. Daniel is in my year group but we don't have any lessons together.

On that particular day they turned to see me then laughed. I thought they were laughing at me so I walked faster to overtake them. I was not afraid of them and actually thought they were good looking, though not as handsome as my brother of course (she added, smiling at Said).

As I was passing them I heard Yonas ask Daniel, "Have you heard the story of the 'Woman and the Lion'?"

I thought they were trying to insult me so I stopped and said to Yonas, "No, tell me that story."

Yonas just laughed but Daniel looked more serious. "Go on, Yonas. Tell us that story." So Yonas began to tell us both this story.

\*\*\*

### **The Woman and the Lion**

Once long ago in Ethiopia, a woman lived with her husband. She was sad because he did not love her. He never spoke to her when she woke in the morning and made his breakfast or in the evening when he ate the meal she had prepared. He never said anything to her. He never even looked at her.

So she went to see a wise man and asked him what she should do. He listened to her and then said, “I will tell you what to do but first you must bring me some hair from the tail of a lion.”

She was very upset. How could she get a hair from the tail of a lion? She thought about it and decided to try. There was a lion’s cave near her home and she went there with some meat to tempt it. When the lion came near, though, she ran away because she was afraid.

The next day she tried again. She took more meat and left it outside the cave entrance. Then she hid behind a tree and waited. Before long the lion came out of the cave and ate the meat.

The following day she took a sheep and stood nearby as the lion greedily ate it. On the fourth day she actually held the meat in her hands as the lion ate it. Slowly they learnt to trust each other until she felt brave enough to pull a hair from the lion’s tail while he ate. He took no notice so she pulled more hair from his tail. The lion didn’t seem bothered.

The woman took the hair back to the wise man and asked him what she should do. “You have learnt to be friends with the lion. That took some time and you had to be very careful. You had to learn to trust each other. Now you must do the same with your husband. You must become friends in the same way.”





Fatima looked at the audience and then at Daniel. “I remember how Yonas looked from Daniel, who was still grinning, to me and I didn’t know what to say. I was surprised. It was such an unusual story. I think I asked him where he’d found the story.

“That’s a secret. Meet me tomorrow and I’ll tell you another,” was all he said. Then he and Daniel ran off back to the flats leaving me still thinking about the story. I knew I couldn’t tell Said what had happened but I did want to hear another story from Yonas so I looked out for him at school the next day and passed him a note asking where we could meet. I watched him walk away reading it then he put it in his pocket and wandered over to his friends. I felt a bit cheated. I thought he’d made been making fun of me in front of Daniel.

That afternoon, after school, I was walking home from school with Said and I decided I was going to tell him everything but one of my friends came running up to me. “You’ve forgotten your homework,” she said, giving me a book I didn’t recognise before running off. I pushed it in my bag and didn’t open it till I was home in the room I share with my sisters. It was a French text book covered in some tatty brown paper but inside was a piece of paper on which was written,

‘Have you heard about the clever son? 7.30 the seat - community hall garden’. I couldn’t wait to finish my meal and go.

It was still summer so there were a few people walking in the garden and Ibrahim was there, brushing up leaves. There was no sign of Yonas or Daniel. Then Ibrahim came over to me and handed me a note. “I think you are the young girl who this is intended for.”

I read it and looked at Ibrahim, still brushing the leaves. He stopped work and took me to his flat where Yonas was waiting with Daniel.

“We thought it best to meet here so no one would see us talking to you,” Yonas said, inviting me to sit next on Ibrahim’s stool. “I know you would be in trouble if anyone saw you alone with Daniel or me so Ibrahim invited us here.”

“I’m not sure my family would be happy with this arrangement either,” I admitted, “but, now I’m here, I’ll stay to hear your story.”

“Good. You’ll enjoy this.”

\*\*\*

### **The Clever Son**

An old man had three sons. The old man knew that he had only a short time left to live so he called for his sons. He wanted to find out which one was the cleverest so that he could leave everything to him.

He gave each son a small amount of money and said, “I want to know which of you is clever enough to find something to fill this dark room.”

So each boy took the money and thought about how best to spend it. The eldest boy decided it wasn’t a big problem. He went straight to his local market and bought some straw. The second son scratched his head and tried to think of something cheap that would fill the room. He finally decided to buy feathers. The youngest son sat down and considered the problem. ‘What can I buy for this small amount of money that will fill a dark room?’ Eventually he went to the shop and bought a candle and a box of matches.

The following day the sons returned to their father's room. The eldest son dragged in the straw he had bought but it only filled a corner of the room. The second son emptied the sacks of feathers that he had bought but they only filled half the room. Then the youngest son pulled out of his pocket the candle and the matchbox. He lit the candle and the light from it filled the dark room.

The old man clapped his hands in praise. "Well done, my young son. You've proved to be the cleverest so I will leave you all my land and money."

\*\*\*

Fatima paused then continued. Yonas looked at us with a big grin on his face and smirked, "Great story, eh?"

I remember the look of pride on Ibrahim's face as he watched Yonas telling the story. As I didn't know their backgrounds then, I assumed that Ibrahim was a close relative. After that I did return to the flat with Yonas, often accompanied by Daniel, but sometimes I went on my own.

Ibrahim once said something to me in his own language that meant, 'The foolish grasshopper burns while it watches.' He explained how a foolish person considers something dangerous as fun. I didn't really understand the proverb at the time but later it made sense."

It was on one of my visits to his flat that I learnt about his past life – the period he spent in Somali before escaping Ethiopia. I think I'd mentioned that I really liked Yonas. I also understood how dangerous it could be for both of us if it developed into friendship. I'm still very young but, back in my own country, girls who are just a bit older than me are already betrothed or even married, often to men much older than themselves but

always to Muslims. Apart from my brother, I didn't know any Muslim boy here who I really liked. Yonas was different.

Anyway, Ibrahim told me how he'd met the woman he loved one day when he was fleeing Ethiopia.

"I was still in the Somali part of the country when I saw this beautiful girl sat outside her parent's home. She was sitting in the shade of the house, sewing the hem on a tunic that her father had made. He was the local tailor. When I asked for a drink of water she looked up at me and smiled. She put down the garment then reached for a stick and pulled herself up then, leaning on it, limped on her one foot into the dark doorway. I waited outside until she returned with a drink and gave it to me. She remained standing, leaning on her crutch, and waited for me to finish. She then asked where I was heading. I couldn't tell her that I was escaping so I said I was looking for work. It wasn't a lie as I needed to find food and shelter before I trekked to the Somalia border.

I asked her what had happened to her foot. She explained that it was a landmine from the war. She'd stepped on it while walking to the mosque. Luckily her life was saved but her leg wasn't. Since then she'd had to stay at her home helping with the housework, cooking and sewing. She knew her father would be grateful for help with their land as her only brother had gone to fight. All her older sisters had married and gone away. So I stayed there helping to grow some crops and looking after the goats and cattle.

I became comfortable and made no real effort to contact my family or to escape. No one in the village seemed concerned and there were no soldiers from either side. One day I asked her father if I could marry her. I knew that we were of different faiths but I really loved her. Her father told me he would only let her marry a Muslim. So I changed

my religion. It was easy for me as I had lost my Christian faith watching the fighting and seeing the greed of many of the people I had once admired. However, her father was not satisfied with me simply professing to be a Muslim. I had to practice that faith for a full year before he would consider allowing me to be engaged to his daughter. So that was how I became a Muslim.

Then, almost a year later, we were woken by gunfire and realised that our village had been attacked by the Ethiopian troops trying to flush out any soldiers from Somalia. I knew that I would be taken prisoner, even though I was Ethiopian, as I had fought against my country's army. I was a traitor so I was forced to escape and had to leave my beautiful fiancée and her father. I promised that I would return but, once I reached Somalia, there was no way that I could go back. I went into a camp over the border and stayed there until the opportunity to seek asylum in another country came."

Ibrahim was then silent but I saw a tear run down the side of his face. He then turned to me and told me a simple proverb in his own language. He then translated it. "After you throw the spear, you cannot catch the end of it." I looked confused so he explained. "You cannot undo something that you have done, no matter how much you regret having done it." I then understood what he meant."

## *Chapter Five*

### **Birtukan's story**

Fatima could not say any more. The hall was so quiet that every breath could be heard. Her lips quivered and tears filled her eyes so she could not continue her story. She looked at Yonas's mother and grandmother, then said, in a weak voice, "Before I go on with my story, I think it would be nice for you to hear from Yonas's own family."

Birtukan, his mother, nodded and stood up as Fatima returned to her seat. They did not make eye contact as they passed each other and Fatima slumped into her chair. Yonas's grandmother reached across to hold Fatima's hand in hers as her daughter proudly stepped onto the stage and faced the people she had grown up with. She spoke quietly at first then gained confidence as she told everyone in the hall her story.

I was born here, just like my only son, Yonas. I've never visited Ethiopia but I consider myself an Ethiopian. I wanted my son to grow up proud of his background and the culture of my parent's homeland but as he grew older he seemed to rebel against his family and community. I have learnt so much about him today that I didn't know. My mother speaks very little English but we have talked about these recent events and tried to understand what happened to our child. Now I am ready to tell you our story.

Genet, my mother, knew Ibrahim well when she first arrived here after the Red Terror in Ethiopia. She was married to a young architect student who had a promising future under Haile Selassie but was seen as a dangerous rebel by the Derg led by Colonel Mengistu. He refused to join the government troops. His life was threatened and, with my grandmother, they escaped and eventually settled here.

My father could not continue his studies or find work in his profession so he worked as a labourer on a building site. My mother gave birth to me shortly after they left Ethiopia and I was brought up near here in a block of flats. For the first few years of my life we had very little money but we were very happy. My parents felt safe.

Among their small group friends was Ibrahim who arrived here when I was about twelve years old. He became close to my father and I remember them spending evenings in the flat, talking Amharic and playing *Gebeta*, you know that game with the pebbles and a board with hollow pockets? (Some of the older people in the hall nodded and smiled.)

Ibrahim became like an uncle to me when I was a young child. I remember him telling me stories. His English was better than my father's and, although I could speak some Amharic, for both of us it was our second language. When I was young, Ibrahim told me a story about the *gebeta* board.

\*\*\*

### **The Game Board**

A young boy had a beautiful *gebeta* board that was carved by his father. He took the board wherever he went. One day, while he was grazing his cattle by a river, he met a group of Somalis with their camels. They wanted to light a fire but had no wood.

“Where can we find wood?” they asked him.

“You can have this.” he offered, handing them his *gebeta* board but, when they set light to it he began to cry.

“Don’t cry. You can have this.” one of the Somalis told him, handing him a new knife. The boy took it and went off to find new grazing with his cattle. He met a man who was trying to dig a well in the dry riverbed for water to give his goats.

“Can I borrow your knife? This ground is hard”

The boy gave the man his knife but he snapped it when he tried to dig.

The boy was so upset he started to cry.

“Don’t carry on like that,” the man said. “Here, take my spear.”

So the boy took the spear, a lovely object inlaid with silver and gold, and went away with his cattle. He met a party of hunters. One of them saw his spear and said, “Let us borrow your spear to kill this lion we’ve been following.”

The boy, fearing for his own life, lent the hunters the spear. He watched them hunt the lion and kill it but his spear was damaged.

“What have you done to my spear? The shaft is broken.” he cried.

“Look, we’re sorry about your spear. Take this horse in place of it.”

The horse, with leather saddle and bridle, followed the boy back to his village. As he approached he saw a group of workers repairing the road. They made such a noise that the horse reared up then ran away. The boy watched in surprise then turned to face the workmen. “Why did you do that? Now I’ve lost my horse,” and he started to cry.

A workman came over to console him and handed the boy his axe. “Here, take this. We’re really sorry about the horse.”



The boy continued to walk towards his village and came across a woodcutter trying to cut a tree with a small axe. “Hey boy, lend me your axe so I can chop down this tree.”

The boy handed over the axe and the woodcutter lifted it up then brought it down on the tree trunk. The axe broke. To stop the boy crying the woodcutter gave him a branch from the tree. As he wandered through the village with the log under his arm he was stopped by an old woman.

“Let me have that log for my fire as I’m very cold.” she pleaded. He couldn’t refuse and gave her the wood.

“Now I have nothing,” he said to himself.

The old woman looked at him and went to her shelf. She lifted down a beautiful *gebeta* board and handed it to him. He smiled and took the board. When he arrived at his home, with the *gebeta* board under his arm, his father greeted him.

“Son, it is good to see you safely back with the cattle. What could be better than a *gebeta* board to keep you out of trouble?”

\*\*\*

We’ve still got our board but no one taught me how to play it after my father died. Unfortunately, when I was about fourteen, he was killed in an accident on a building site. My mother was left to bring me up alone on benefits.

Ibrahim continued to visit our flat. He knew that I didn’t enjoy school because I struggled with my lessons and was the only child of immigrants in my class. I used to cry because I was unhappy when children made fun of me, calling me names and telling

me I was foolish. My mother could not go to the school to complain because she couldn't speak English.

It was Ibrahim who told me the well-known Ethiopian tale of Mammo the Fool. You probably all know it but I will tell you it anyway.

\*\*\*

### **Mammo the Fool**

An old woman lived with her only son, Mammo, in a small house near a village in Ethiopia. They were poor but she made enough to live on by baking *injera* and brewing beer.

His mother used to get annoyed with Mammo because he was foolish. He could never remember what he was supposed to do and the children in the village would laugh at him and call him a fool. They made fun of him and one day, when he had been to the market to buy butter, they told him that the best way to carry it was to put it on his head. Now it was a very hot day and the butter, wrapped up in a leaf, began to melt and pour down his face. When he got home his mother was angry.

“Why did you put it on your head, you silly boy?”

“Because the children told me that is how you carry it.”

“You should have carried it in your hands,” she told him and sent him to bed.

The next day she sent him to fetch a cat from a neighbour's house to catch the mice. He remembered what she told him and carried the cat home in his

hands. The cat struggled and bit him and scratched him but he kept hold of the animal. Then the cat escaped and he had to tell his mother.

“What made you hold it in your hands you silly fool?”

“You told me to.”

“You should have tied it on a piece of string and pulled it,” she cried and sent him to bed.

The next day Mammo’s mother sent him to get meat from the butcher. Of course Mammo wanted to please his mother so, remembering her advice about the cat, he took some string and tied the meat up then dragged it back home. The people he passed laughed at him. The dogs followed him licking at the meat and picking up pieces that fell off. His mother was furious.

“What made you tie it on a piece of string, you silly thing?”

“I thought that would please you. I didn’t lose it this time.”

“There’s nothing left but bone. You should have carried the meat on your back.”

When his mother asked him to take the donkey to the field later that week, Mammo remembered the last thing she’d told him. He went out and picked up the donkey and struggled to put it on his back. Then he carried the donkey to the field. It was very heavy and he was bent double.

On the way to the field there lived a young girl who was very unhappy. Nothing that her parents did could make her smile. She sat at the window of her room looking out over the fields and saw Mammo with the donkey on his back. She started to giggle. Then, as she watched the donkey kick and Mammo struggle

to keep it in place she laughed more loudly. Soon she was crying with laughter, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her parents came running to see what was wrong. “Look at that silly boy carrying the donkey on his back.”

Her father looked and saw Mammo. He ran over to the boy, who dropped the donkey, and asked him to come back to the house. Mammo did as he was told. Then the man asked Mammo to marry his daughter because he was the first person who had made her happy. And so Mammo was married, and lived happily ever after.



“By the time Ibrahim had finished telling me this story I was crying with laughter,” Birtukan admitted. “I went back to school with more confidence. I made friends and started to enjoy lessons. I believed it was because of Ibrahim’s story. Years later I heard he had been to visit the school and told them that I was unhappy so it was probably a bit of both.

However, I left school early to get a job in a café and, as some of you may know, I became pregnant with Yonas. His father was also Ethiopian but he was already married. I was a fool. Anyway, Ibrahim helped me to get me a flat here and kept watch

over us but he did not interfere. I should have taken more notice of him and encouraged Yonas to get to know him. I didn't know that they had become so close."

Birtukan began to silently weep but did not move. Her mother squeezed Fatima's hand and gestured for her to join Yonas's mother. Fatima took strength from her and returned to face the congregation at Birtukan's side. They hugged each other then Fatima told the people in the hall that she was going to tell Yonas's story but first she held onto Birtukan's hand and faced her.

"I do not think you were a fool. You are a wonderful mother to a lovely son who is lying in a hospital bed because of his bravery. Now I'm going to tell you all what happened to him."

## *Chapter Six*

### **Yonas's story**

“Yonas and I continued to visit Ibrahim, sometimes with Daniel, sometimes on our own and occasionally individually. I knew it was risky to be seen to call at his flat on my own but I trusted him and enjoyed his company. He continued to tell me, and the others, stories and proverbs which related to our lives and the situations we found ourselves in. The last time all three of us visited him together he told us a story which we thought was aimed at making us a bit more cautious. See what you think.”

\*\*\*

### **The Three Wise Men**

Once there were three wise men who spent all their time studying and trying to find out new things. They read books and discussed what they had learned. They asked their king if they could go further afield to discover more. The king agreed. So the three wise men travelled to a far-off place and there they found a dead lion. They all agreed that they could make the lion return to life. The first said he would put the flesh back on his bones. The second said he would make him breathe and the third said he would make him move again. They hadn't realised that another man had been listening to them.

“Don't you realise,” he said, “that if you give this dead lion life, he will eat you?”

The three wise men turned and laughed at him. “You foolish man! How could a lion that has been restored turn against those who brought him back to life? We three are clever and know what we are doing.”

So the man went away and hid. He watched as the first put the lion back together, the second breathed life into it and the third made it move. Then he watched the lion turn and face the three wise men. Their smiles disappeared as the lion roared then pounced on them, killing each one and started to eat.

When the lion had finished his meal and disappeared, the man returned to the remains of the bodies. He looked down sadly and said to himself, “When a knife is too sharp, it cuts its own case; when a man has too much wisdom, it leads him to his death.”

\*\*\*

I think Ibrahim knew that he had not only made new friends, but also some enemies. He not only befriended the three of us, but also my brother. Many of you here think that what happened to Ibrahim was as a result of Said’s hatred towards Yonas and his protection of me. I can tell you that you are wrong. I know you saw the police come to our flat yesterday to interview Said but he is not under suspicion.

Before this memorial service, I visited the hospital where Yonas is still recovering. He asked me to tell you the following in his own words.

“Hello friends. Sorry I can’t be there with you to remember my friend Ibrahim. I want you to know what happened to that great man so that his family and friends can live in peace. You all know Ibrahim did not survive the fire in his flat last week. We had our suspicions about who tried to scare Ibrahim after a burning rag was pushed under his door the day before the fire. I admit I suspected Said but Ibrahim assured me that it was not him. I spent that evening alone with Ibrahim and he told me how Said had been a

regular visitor at his flat and that he'd helped him to understand that my friendship with Fatima did not necessarily mean there was anything to worry about. We are all still young and it is too soon to say we are anything other than friends.

I trusted Ibrahim but the following night, when I saw the black smoke seeping under the door and the flicker of orange through the glass, I immediately thought Said had some part in it. After shouting for Daniel to phone the fire brigade, I decided to go straight in, smashing the glass on his door to undo the lock. I never thought about the effect of this and was knocked back by the sudden explosion. By that time other neighbours were on the stairs and the balcony as thick dirty choking fumes belched out.

I didn't listen to them trying to stop me and went inside to find Ibrahim. I guessed it was probably too late to save him as the smoke had probably killed him, but I didn't give up. I crawled along the floor where the smoke was less dense, I'd pulled my jacket over my head but it was impossible to see and I started to cough and choke. When I reached his living room he was lying on the floor, the chair was blazing and his curtains were smouldering.

The next thing I remember was waking up in this bed in hospital. The police were waiting to talk to me but I'd inhaled so much smoke, I couldn't speak. I think they suspected me at first but Daniel and the neighbours told them I'd discovered the fire. When they did speak to me I told them about Said.

I'm sorry, I should have trusted Ibrahim. Something happened to me last night which confirmed this. I had fallen asleep and thought I'd woken up as I was laid in the hospital bed and had a visitor. It was Ibrahim. He was sat in the chair in his usual



working clothes and he was watching me. When I opened my eyes he smiled and then he spoke.

“I want you to get well and go home. You must trust your friend and believe that what happened was nothing to do with Said. He is a good young man and you should talk to him. The police will find the people responsible for this cowardly act. They left clues and they do not deserve to escape this crime. Nobody in the flats knew them. You certainly don’t know them. Having said that, forgiveness and trust are two values which you need to develop. This is the last story that I will tell you but it won’t be the last you hear. Now close your eyes and listen.

\*\*\*

### **An Act of Kindness**

An old man lay in his bed. He knew he was dying and he called his three sons to him so that he could divide his estate equally among them. They were all good young men but he wanted to find out which of the three was the kindest so he set them a task. Taking the jewelled ring from his finger he said, “This ring will go to whichever of you can tell me of a kind act that you’ve performed.”

The eldest son stood by his father and took his hand. “Father, once a man left a large amount of money in my care. He then went away for a long time and when he finally returned I gave him all the money back. He wanted to pay me for looking after it but I refused to take anything. Isn’t that kindness?”

“No that is honesty, but it is not kindness.”

The second son pushed past his brother and started to tell his father about his own good deed. “I was passing a deep pool and heard a cry from child who

was drowning in the water. I was so concerned, I jumped into the water and swam over to the child and saved her. I carried the little girl to her parents and they were overcome with relief. That is kindness, isn't it father?"

"No son, that is brave and you showed sympathy, but not kindness."

The youngest son stood before his father and admitted that, one night, while walking along the top of a steep ravine he saw his enemy staggering on the edge of the gorge. "He was drunk and I could have left him but I was afraid he would fall to his death. I took him by the hand and led him away then left him in a safe place to recover. Is that an act of kindness?"

"Yes my son. To be able to help your enemy in their time of need is the greatest act of kindness." He took the ring off his finger and gave it to his youngest son. Then he closed his eyes and passed away peacefully.

\*\*\*

Fatima and Birtukan went back to their seats. Everyone watched in silence. David, the councillor, who had welcomed them over two hours earlier, went to the front and, after a short conclusion and a blessing, told them to go in peace.

Once outside, the people began to chat and share their recollections of Ibrahim. People seemed reluctant to go back to their homes. The last to leave the building were those who had spoken. Fatima walked out with Birtukan and her mother, one on each side, hand in hand. They were followed by Said and Daniel. When they reached the doorway the congregation stood back and applauded them. Daniel turned to Said and grasped his shoulders then pulled him towards him in an embrace. Fatima went over to

them and put her arms round them. The crowd cheered and clapped as Said responded to both his sister and his new friend.

“Mother and I are going to visit Yonas,” Birtukan announced to the three youngsters. “Will you come with us? I know that is what Ibrahim would have wanted.”

“We’re coming,” they enthusiastically replied.

### **Commentary on The Storyteller**

Storytelling is one facet of oral literature and Ethiopia shares this culture with the other African nations as explained in chapter 4. The author wanted to illustrate (in story form as well as pictures, a sample of which are included ) some of the stories that have been retold among Ethiopians for generations and are now preserved in writing. Most of these Ethiopian stories retold in this novel are traditional and were adapted from published versions including Schlomo Bachrach's 'Ethiopian Folk-Tales' and 'The Elephant and the Cock Folktales from Ethiopia' retold by Elizabeth Laird.

Although the author never had the good fortune to be told stories in a traditional way she was the recipient of a number of original tales which are included in appendix 2. She also witnessed occasions when asmari singers performed both formally at functions and informally.<sup>1</sup> Despite never being present at storytelling under a tree or round a fire the author was aware that this function was not restricted to a specific person but was undertaken in the home by parents or grandparents as well as by elders in the community. According to the home page of the website, [www.ethiopianfolktales.com](http://www.ethiopianfolktales.com), storytellers: 'included farmers, teachers, health workers, government officials, students, shopkeepers, old soldiers, an Ethiopian Orthodox nun, a priest and a retired diplomat, among many others.'<sup>2</sup>

The choice of a man from Oromo region as the main character was prompted by a number of issues including the popular proverb, *It is said that when a man of Oromia dies another library is lost* which prefaces the novel. There were many stories, proverbs and other forms of oral literature which were told in this large region of Ethiopia which borders the region of Somalia in the east. Between 1950 and 1990 many young people

and workers would have been exposed to a variety of stories which would be passed from generation to generation orally. One possible function of storytelling in this part of Ethiopia might be the association with activism against the ruling power as was evident among people in parts of this region.<sup>3</sup> During the period of the military government, when the main character of this novel lived in Ethiopia, the country aimed to increase adult literacy but the language predominantly used for teaching was Amharic.<sup>4</sup> The Cushitic language, Afan Oromo, is written in Latin script unlike both Amharic and Tigrinyan which use fidel characters.

Although the author chose to make this character literate, to encourage him to write down the stories in Afan Oromo, his own language, Amharic and later English, it is the telling of the stories to the young people in the city that is more important. In retrospect this could have been emphasized through intensifying the wording in each story with greater emphasis on repetition and rhythm, and relating each tale to the lives of the audience rather than concentrating on the theme. Another method would be to relate the story orally, expressing the content differently depending on the location and spectators, delivering it in a traditional format. The author felt that she was not qualified to do this having not been immersed in this oral ritual in her own culture let alone that of an Ethiopian.

The audience she was writing for included both non Ethiopians in Western society who, in addition to learning about other cultures and receiving a moral message, would hopefully enjoy the traditional tales within the modern stories which make up the novel. This audience was intended to include the Diaspora, both in Britain and other Western nations, with the hope that it would encourage young people to discover more about their

traditional roots as well as their country's history and cultures. The other possible audience could be Ethiopians either reading the book in English or possibly translated into one of the local languages. This would again provide a resource which raised awareness of the culture and history of their country, and in particular of the region of Oromia, but would have the added element of describing life in a western city, where issues such as racism and bullying can occur, and posing the question of whether it is better than life in Ethiopia.

Although the author considered submitting the story to publishers and agents she decided to review this novel first. It is only a short book and yet the language is too complex for struggling teenage readers. The content is not suited to younger readers despite the inclusion of the tales which have appeared in children's books. The possibility of reviewing the novel with the support of a person from Oromia is being considered by the author. This would hopefully make it more appealing to an Ethiopian audience.

---

<sup>1</sup> On one occasion the author met an asmari minstrel who was returning over the mountains from a function in a village and he promptly made up a song about the 'white' group members which was translated by their Ethiopian guide.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ethiopianfolktales.com](http://www.ethiopianfolktales.com) 'The stories were collected by Elizabeth Laird under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and the British Council with the collaboration of the Ethiopian Regional Cultural and Educational Bureaux.'

<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this study is to examine closely the nature of (Salale) Oromo folklore as the art of resistance against domination in Ethiopia and to explore conflicting local political attitudes and the problem of activist (folkloric) research. <http://oromofolklore-resistance.blogspot.com/2011/04/ethnographic-mystique-self-in-folkloric.html#comment-form>

<sup>4</sup> Getachew Anteneh & Derib Ado 'Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends' [www.ethiopia-ed.net/images/257055575.doc](http://www.ethiopia-ed.net/images/257055575.doc) downloaded on 7/12/2011