

## Introduction: A World Apart

I come from Ethiopia, a landlocked country in the Horn of Africa. On a map, the Horn looks like the continent's elbow. This is a land of jungles, rivers, mountains, caves, and colorful contrasts. The lifestyle is healthy; except for the few very rich, most people are self-sufficient. The land is virgin and farming is organic. People use what they have, and they are very grateful for their sustenance.

Through the ages, Ethiopians resisted colonial forces and have maintained their independence to this date, which contributes to a sense of national pride. My native land was probably the earliest home of *Homo sapiens*, the ancestors of the entire world's population. From this ancient land, I immigrated to the New World, to the United States, a country so different from my own that it might have been on another planet. And here, in this land of opportunity, I have found my calling as an emissary from downtrodden women and girls in what we call the Third World.

In 1973, when I was six months away from college graduation, political upheaval in Ethiopia changed my life forevermore. The revolution that raged ousted longtime Emperor Haile Selassie from power, and chaos ensued. Students and workers demonstrated against the government. Food shortages were widespread; border wars flared up; and dramatic increases in gasoline prices drove multitudes out of business. I fled to neighboring Djibouti, where I struggled for four years before fleeing once again, this time to the United States, which has been my home ever since.

The lives of refugees everywhere are bitter, conflicted, and desperate. In these pages, I will share my experiences with you and will hold nothing back. More than that, I will tell you how one woman's journey can inspire, encourage, and empower refugee and immigrant women of the world, wherever they are.

My life has been shaped by gender, hard work, faith, and education. Luck has played a part too, both good luck and bad. But more important than luck was the supremacy of choice in my new homeland. Soon after arriving on these shores, I discovered that in America, I could become whatever I wanted: the choice was mine. In a country that embraces freedom as a way of life, choice was the prevailing climate. *Make the right decisions*, I told myself, and I could achieve the American Dream.

Inherent in this dream is always remembering where I come from. I cannot turn my back on those who can barely survive, let alone dream. New immigrants and refugees, especially African women, pull at my heartstrings. It is my life's mission to provide fairness, justice, and opportunity for them. Not so long ago, I was in their place. America has been good to me. Now I am returning the favor on behalf of my sisters who bravely take their place in a new world.

Growing up in rural Ethiopia, I never played as children do in America, in Europe, and in other cultures. I had many siblings, but no friends. Looking back on my earliest years, I marvel

at this paradox: how can one child be happy with so little, while another might be unhappy with plenty?

You could conclude that my family was poor. I suppose that we were, and yet, I was a very happy little girl. In fact, I never stopped to consider whether I was happy or not. I was too busy! Everything that I did was work—real work, and not play. School filled my days; endless housework filled my afternoons and weekends.

My only pastime was reading, which I did every night. Meticulously, I made notes of each book I read: its title and author and subject, and what I thought about it. The list grew and grew. By the time I finished high school, I had read more than 750 books.

I get pleasure from books, as much as from a good meal after a long day of work. They nourish my mind and my soul. Of all the professions, my deepest admiration is for authors, because they continue to give long after they have written their last words. I still read when I find the time. Somehow, I always find time to read.

Now I'm writing for others, hoping to give them the same pleasure that thousands of authors have given me. It's another way for me to give back to the world from which I came, and to the one that I call home—a world apart.

Let me begin.

## Chapter 1

I was the only girl in a stack of boys: two older, two younger, and me, squeezed flat, right in the middle, at once yearned for and spurned for the very same reason: my femininity, the core of my identity. I was loved, but controlled; cherished, yet restricted; and valued for my differences—while held on a very short leash.

Born in rural Ethiopia in 1952, I was the fourth child and first daughter of Haregou Tesfa Ghiorghis, my mother, and Major Keleta Beraki, my father. My oldest brother, whose name I never knew, did not survive his childhood. My brother Tadesse, born in Asmara in 1948, came next, and my brother Girmay, who followed in 1950, was expected to be a girl. My birth was therefore cause for celebration. Samuel and Abraham, the two brothers who followed me, fulfilled their foreordained roles as sons in a poor family.

In my culture, sons were more desirable and were therefore prized. Even so, my parents, especially my father, longed for a daughter. Some Ethiopian parents want daughters because they are more likely to help their aging parents than sons, who rarely take care of their parents after they marry and have their own children. This varies from family to family, and I think that my parents simply wanted a girl. From my first moment of self-awareness, I felt very special. Although I was aware of my difference from my brothers, I didn't understand the disadvantages that women face until later in life.

From the beginning, I was torn between my father's lofty wishes for his only daughter, which conflicted with my mother's divergent plans. As much as my father had longed for a daughter, he wanted that daughter to be educated, ambitious, and accomplished. His goal was for me to attain no less than a doctoral degree, and I am carrying out his desires by pursuing a PhD.

My parents were devoted to education, believing that it would give their children a better life. My father's high expectations for me were a powerful force in my development, and my fervor to follow his direction shaped my entire life with regard to education. I started life early on with the pressure to strive and succeed. In fact, he gave me the name Esther from the Bible, because he wanted me to follow in the Queen's footsteps and save my people. When I arrived in the United States, "Esther" became "Aster," the name that I carry today. In the Amharic or Tigrigna language, the transliteration of Esther sounds like Aster.

My father's education went as far as the fourth grade and then stopped. This was absolutely not his choice: the Italian colonialists denied students any education beyond a few years of elementary school. Later on, he joined the Ethiopian Army, where he was promoted to Major before his retirement. He made it clear that not only was I to surpass him, but I was to excel in every class, from the first day of first grade to the day I would receive my doctorate.

In my earliest childhood memory, I was six years old and walking to school for the very first time, happy and excited about this new adventure. Other children were walking with me. On the way, I stopped to pick *kuente*, a kind of grass that has buds in its roots. I put the buds in my mouth to enjoy their sweet taste, appropriate for a little girl about to savor her first sweet taste of education.

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At the same time, my mother saw her only female child as a little housewife-in-training. As such, I was assigned multiple responsibilities from the age of seven: all the traditional chores that a girl might do around the house, accompanied by none of the privileges granted my older and younger brothers. My family role was to assist my mother, and this was considered typical training for a refined young girl. Daily tasks included cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, making beds, washing and ironing the family's clothes, and everything about homemaking that my mother could teach me.

My fulltime mother was a strict disciplinarian who made me work hard, and then proudly told her friends and neighbors how her daughter had learned to cook and to brew beer and honey wine, Tela and Tej, at the early age of seven. These beverages are brewed at home and kept on hand all the time. Tela is a healthy, fermented drink made of hops and barley. Tej is made of



The author in the lap of her mother, Haregu Tesfa Giorgis.  
From left: Godmother Deummat and brothers Girmay and Tadesse.

hops and honey allowed to ferment to either a dry or mild state, depending on the desired alcoholic content. We made our own liquor, too: Arakie, which is equivalent to Mexican Tequila.

Children are not allowed to drink. My older brother Girmay never drank alcohol until his late teens, and I imitated him. He was an intelligent, well-disciplined boy. Adults drink these beverages with meals, no more than one or two glasses. I never saw anyone intoxicated from these drinks.

Almost without a backward glance, all of my brothers could come and go as they pleased. On weekends they would wake up, eat breakfast, and leave home. They would return for lunch, leave again, and come back for dinner.

But my time was not my own; my whereabouts were never left to chance. I was closely protected and sheltered by my parents and brothers. Never did I have to ask for anything or fight for anything; I was considered special, the only girl; physically weak but emotionally strong. All of my brothers depended on my skills and authority for preparing their breakfasts, lunches, snacks, and dinners. A well-brought-up girl had to know all the ins and outs of running a household. So I accepted my role as a girl as prescribed by my mother.

Although I played that role well, my mother was not my role model. Almost as soon as I began school, I became aware that she was completely illiterate and had never been educated. She spoke both the Tigrigna and Amharic languages, but she never checked our homework because she could not. That task fell to our father, who took care of all our needs for school. He talked to teachers and decided what we should study.

My mother never worked outside the home. Unfortunately, her illiteracy was normal for that time and place. My generation must have been the first in which children had the opportunity to complete high school. When my mother was young, many girls did not attend school, and others did not get as far as high school. Girls married young, in marriages arranged by their parents.

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I don't have any sweet memories of home life, but I never complained about doing housework. That was simply the way things were. In fact, we always had a maid who did much of the work. However, my mother insisted, "If you hire a maid, unless you know what you are doing, she won't do it." Housework was a cooperative effort.

In rural Ethiopia, the presence of a maid in a household did not indicate wealth or economic superiority. On the contrary, maids were considered part of the family. We usually hired little girls who would help out in the house and grow up there. When they got older, they would get married and have their own families. In other instances, family members would come from other cities and live with us for a while. They would help with the housework, get some money, and then move on with their lives. It was a rudimentary support system for girls and women: they helped us, and we helped them.

The three of us—my mother, the maid, and I—never ran out of work to do. Housework never ends! Adding to the work was the second group of siblings who arrived after I had finished a few years of primary school. There was my little sister Zewdie, followed by little sister Hana, and last, my little brother Yosef. You can imagine the long list of daily chores in a house with eight children, two parents, one maid, and frequent visitors. As a daughter of a military family, with my father away most of the time, I helped my mother raise all my brothers and sisters until I finished high school and moved away from home.

Even though I had two small sisters, I still felt like the only girl in a group of five siblings. That was because I interacted with the older group in many ways, and my position within this group of brothers defined my formative years. I don't remember much about the second group of much younger siblings, who were small children when I finished high school and moved out of my parents' house. I was not part of their lives.

On a typical day, I would return home from school and begin my chores. Often, I would bake different kinds of bread. Cooking was always a creative activity. All of the ingredients were from scratch; nothing was the “just add water” variety of recipe from a box.

Our characteristic bread is called *injera*, which is used to scoop up stews made of meat and vegetables. It also provides a lining for the serving trays containing the food, and it is eaten entirely by the end of the meal. Instead of wheat flour, a round grain called *teff*, unique to the region, is used to bake injera. It's very nutritious and also gluten-free. The *teff* is fermented before the bread is made.

Neighbors would stop in every day for coffee and snacks, so I made fresh coffee throughout the day on weekends. Coffee is a distinctly Ethiopian beverage and appears in many varieties; in fact, coffee was discovered by an Ethiopian shepherd in the eighth century BC, when coffee plants grew wild. Ethiopia became one of the best coffee exporters of the world.

In other creative work, I was taught to crochet and knit, and I made clothes for all of my siblings. There was so much work to do! We didn't buy cloth from a store; instead, we wove our own cotton, and we made garments from this homespun cloth. I wove baskets, too, which were immediately put to use around the house.

There were no labor-saving machines to make our lives easier, so all of this housework was done by hand. To grind spices, we used a mortar; we ground coffee beans by hand as well. We kept at least six months' supply of dry food on hand.

Everything that we prepared for brewing and cooking was strictly from scratch. It was a sensory feast! Corollary to all of this labor-intensive work was the aroma of spices as we roasted and ground them. The sizzling of savory varieties of appetizing food accompanied our busy conversation as we worked in the kitchen. When we were finished, I always felt great joy and a sense of accomplishment for a job well done.

Even though this was only housework, my activities during my formative years provided me a strong foundation to take on unexpected challenges that life might bring. Regrettably, the

circumstances of my daily life did not foster closeness with my mother. Her strictness and perfectionism did not help either. Because of the strenuous regimen that she enforced and the restrictive environment in which I lived, I did not grow up fond of my mother. I even told my classmates that she was my stepmother.

Only after I had grown to adulthood were my mother and I able to talk earnestly. It was then that I understood why things were that way. The culture demanded the protection of young girls to keep them busy and out of sight of the public.

When I became a parent myself, I gave credit to my mother for the way she raised me. That's when I understood that most parents would not willingly hurt their children in any way. My mother did not give me immediate gratification; nevertheless, I praise her for raising me to be bold, brave, and hardworking. These skills ensured my own survival. I would never have been able to create my own job in the United States if I hadn't learned to cook my native food.

When I was eleven years old, I even helped with home construction. We had moved to a new house that was partly unfinished. My brothers and I helped build smaller rooms adjacent to the main house. In the garden, we grew lettuce, onions, garlic, potatoes, spinach, collard greens, carrots, red beets, corn, squash, and other vegetables. We raised sheep, chicken, and two or three milk cows. In addition to tending the garden and doing housework, I had to milk the cows every day. My childhood years were filled with work of many kinds, all of it in addition to full-time attendance at school.

There were no children's toys at all in our house; nevertheless, I do not remember ever being idle. I never whined, "Mommy, I'm bored, I have nothing to do." My play was real housework. Instead of pretending to do adult tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening, I actually did the work. Even as a little girl, I found it rewarding to see the benefits of my activities: my family wore the clothes that I made and washed and ironed; they ate the food that I cooked; they drank the milk that I carried in buckets; and they walked on floors that I scrubbed on my hands and knees.

I didn't even play with my brothers, although I had favorites: my older brother Tadesse and my younger brother Abraham. With Girmay and Samuel, things did not go as smoothly. I would sometimes snitch on Girmay to my parents, and then he would be in trouble with them. My parents listened to me and believed my complaints. Their nickname for me was "Posta," which means a mailing envelope.

From all of these childhood experiences, what remained with me for life was my work ethic. Thanks to my early responsibilities, I had the satisfaction of pleasing others by helping them. I was a very happy girl, creating enjoyment in the tasks that I performed. To this day, family members remember my smile, my motherly role, and my service to others.

Except for going to school, I never left the house. If I needed shoes, my mother would have me stand on a piece of paper so she could trace around my feet to get my shoe size. Then my father or mother would go buy the shoes and bring them to me.

My entire existence was circumscribed by home and school, and my world was explicitly defined. But I felt protected rather than restricted. And there was something very big to look forward to every night. After cooking and serving dinner and then washing the dishes, I was allowed to do as I wished, so I read books until my eyelids drooped. There was no television, but I didn't need any. The library was better than any television program. Within the pages of all the enchanting books that I read, new worlds opened for me. Characters popped off the pages and did amazing things. They traveled to places I'd never heard of. They were as real to me as the hard work I did every day. Every night, tired from the day's work, I fell asleep with sights and sounds from this literature flowing into my dreams.

I wouldn't change a thing about the life I led.

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I had a loving father; we were very fond of each other. He didn't say much. But he didn't need to. Because of his respect for me and his kind words, I always wanted to please him. He encouraged me to do well in school, and my motivation was strong. Thanks to my father's pride in my accomplishments, I felt confident and usually ranked within the top three students in class.

In the Ethiopian school system, all students are ranked in class from first to last, and these ranks are written into their report cards. During one semester, my mother was ill and my mind was not on my work. When I was ranked seventh, my parents took me aside and counseled me; not blaming me, but finding the reason why. The next semester, I worked very hard to get unusually high grades in order to move my rank back up to third place.

Ranking among the top three students gave me more than my parents' approval. These top students received a lot of attention, including an award from the mayor of the city. They were admired by their classmates, their teachers, and their community. My goal throughout all my years of schooling was to place in the top three. The happiest day of every school year was when I received the mayor's award.

My father would give me a small gift every year when I received the highest award. Two of these gifts stand out in my memory: there was a pretty head scarf, which might have cost him 40 cents at the time, a significant amount. And there was one big gift: a gleaming silver replica of the Atse Fasil Castle, which was built by Emperor Fasilides, the ruler of Ethiopia from 1632 to 1667.

Even better than the gift and the award was hearing my father say how proud he was of a girl achieving excellence in education. I was considered a model girl in the community for what I did. Other children told me that their parents even talked about my work at school and at home.

Many of my fellow students were jealous. More than once, I mysteriously lost my notes during exam week. This was an irreplaceable resource. The first time that happened, I had to copy the whole year's notes by hand from the notebook of another student who kindly lent me his. That was hard work, but I had no bad feelings about it. "Just get it done!" I told myself. After that, I decided to store my knowledge in my brain in case my notes disappeared again. The

practice of memorization helped me to invest more in my brain than in a material thing; in this case, my notebooks. I learned that someone can steal a notebook, but nobody can steal my knowledge.

When summer came, schools closed for most of June, July, and August, the rainy season. Beginning after sixth grade when I was twelve years old, my father enrolled me in an apprenticeship program where I learned typing, sweater making, and home economics subjects, including cooking. Each summer for three years, I took these courses. This was fun! But I was serious about the work there, too. In school, I had a typewriter for practicing. At home, I drew the keyboard on paper and practiced silent typing diligently. It worked! By the time I was in seventh grade, I could type 90 words per minute.

I could tell that my father did not approve of my mother's demands on me, which never let up all through my years of schooling. Still, he could not object—not in front of me. If there was ever any conflict between my parents, we children were not aware of it. I never saw my parents argue in my life. And there was a bonus to doing all of this housework: I enjoyed my time in school, as it was easier to sit down and learn than to do chores as home.

Some strategy was required to meet both parents' expectations. I had no time to study at home. During exam times, I studied after everyone else in the family had gone to sleep. Slowly, I opened the front door so as not to make a sound. My study lamp was the light in front of the house. It lighted the yard all night, and I studied without distraction until dawn. I had to be perfectly quiet—a couple of times, my father caught me and told me to go to sleep. Unfazed, I returned to bed, waited until he fell asleep, and crept back to the front door to finish studying.

Staying awake during exam time was no problem. I couldn't sleep anyway, unless I felt comfortable that I knew my subjects well enough. On the tests, I would get 100 percent and sometimes even higher because teachers would give makeup exams for those who needed them, and I was allowed to take those as well.

Tutoring other children helped me review my own learning as well. My mother liked it when other children came to our house for help. I would eagerly tutor those who needed help; these were boys and girls ranked within the bottom ten of the class. They would come to my house during exam time, but I would never go to their homes. As a child, I didn't have friends. This tutoring arrangement was as close to friendship as I came. In helping others, I felt their pleasure at improving, and I deepened my knowledge at the same time. It was great both ways!

During the early years of my education, our family moved several times. Only once did this frequent moving harm my studies. We had returned to a place where we lived before, and I started fifth grade. For some reason, I did not pass and had to repeat that grade. Ever since then, I excelled in class no matter where we were.

When I reached sixth grade, my father retired and built our own home in a different city. We moved out of military housing. Our home was so close to my new school that we could hear the bells, and when the first bell rang, my mother would send me to school. She would scare me



to death, warning me not to talk to boys and not to play along the way. Every day, by the time the second bell rang, I was sitting safely in class, having had no chance to talk to anyone outside.

Whenever there were school demonstrations, I had to go to the library and study until someone would come to pick me up. I never participated in these demonstrations, which involved mostly older students. The student body would make certain demands, and if the school administrators did not acquiesce, the students would protest and the school would close until the problems were worked out. My father never learned to drive, so the driver who would come to get me was always one of the soldiers who had reported to him.

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My father was always my guiding light. It was he who decided what I should study, without asking me. If I'd had the choice, I would have preferred science courses. I loved math, chemistry, and physics, and earned high grades in those subjects. However, I obeyed him and did as required, while basking in his praise.

To this day, I am thankful that I had such good parents. All of the values that I have now came from my mother and father's way of raising me. I had no role models outside my family. From my mother, I learned the virtues of discipline, cooperation, completion, and compassion. From my father, I learned how to learn. There is no better teacher than one who teaches a child to teach herself.

I loved my father's high expectations of me, and I did well in school so as not to disappoint him. Determination, hard work, achievement: all of these treasures are mine because of him. Thanks to a father's confidence in a little girl's ability, if I make up my mind to do something, I don't sleep, eat, or do anything else until I make it happen. Once I have accomplished the work, then I sleep very well.

To my oldest brother, my father was like a friend. To my next brother, he was an example. And to me, he was a protector. If only I could have my father back with me for just one day... I would be so proud to show him my life in America, and how I have done my best to embody his goals.