

## Close to Death

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### Forward:

There are compelling reasons for this story to be translated so it can be exposed for a wider circle of readers. I admire Beljig's and his likes for their courage to go visit the darkest places of their emotions, which the memory can make the days a blur and the nights longer. Almost poking into their pain, bringing it back to life, it is hard. It is painful. I cannot begin to imagine in what kind of trauma they go through to bring these stories into light. But we have to encourage more.

I firmly believe that this sort of individual heroism has to be continually passed to the next generation. Fighting for Democracy, fighting for equal rights, gender rights, and raising voice for the voiceless is a NOBEL deed. Has to be given highest regards in humankind's history. The most anticipated change was charged until it abruptly ended by chocking and cruel iron-fist of Derg' ruling. Ethiopia was about to embark into the world of democracy; weather it could have been fruitful or not that is a discussion topic for another day. But those who fought bravely to bring Ethiopia change to the betterment of Her children don't deserve to be treated the way they were treated, killed the way they were killed. It was simply wrong then, it is wrong now, it will always remain wrong. But the courage deserves national salutation. And I pray for that day to come.

Children who are born and raised outside Ethiopia don't read stories that are written in Amharic, and also are confused by what they hear, bits and pieces of stories. It almost seems a myth and things that didn't happen during their parents' time. They have a hard time accepting their parents were part of a movement that was about to make history. They tend to measure everything by their adoptive countries and or current time. So here is an opportunity to open a dialogue.

We need to learn as much as we can how many people got hurt during the making of a dictator that not only tortured and killed unaccounted number of people; also robbed and incapacitated the generation(s) that followed thereafter, its ability to engage in what seems a national interest. Derg's<sup>1</sup> terror and propaganda wiped out Ethiopia's children courage to stand for what is right. We have simply become a nation of by-standers and let things take their own natural course rather than telling what is right as "right" and what is wrong as "wrong". One

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<sup>1</sup> Derg was a military regime that toppled Emperor Hailelassie in 1975.

can't fathom a government give an edict to kill openly unleashing the evilest and deadliest sides of humans by the name of revolution. At that time the world was watching in disbelief. It was simply incomprehensible. You just want it to be a horrible dream. But it wasn't. Ethiopia lost her precious children.

There are simply too many open wounds simmering under the cover in our beloved homeland. Not tendered, not addressed. There are countless people hurting. Be it, by being a victim, by being family of the victims etc., In order for our country to heal and for atrocious acts such as the open killing by edict like red-terror or the murders and arrests of countless citizens at the hand of the current Ethiopian government to stop, a healing must start NOW.

It is NEVER too late to demand our basic natural rights to be respected by the government. One killing is too many. One arrest is too many. A violation of a person's rights is a gross violation of human rights. We have got to make demand. The only way we can do that is when we acknowledge those who passed through the turmoil without fearing and bending to dictators' iron-fist oppression and paid the ultimate price for it. We have to build on them, so to show evil they didn't die in vain. We have to acknowledge that they were the precious children of Ethiopia, and pay our due respect for those who survived the gruesome torture and prison time; and of course, those who live with physical and emotional scars and physical and emotional disabilities, and for those who lost their loved ones.

May God bless Ethiopia and *Her* Children! Regards, Haregwein Sileshi

### **Close to Death: Part I**

Winter is just around the corner. I do hate European winter as it is too harsh for my aging bones. Especially today it looks too ominous. Depressing. When there is no real sadness to the heart it creates surreal feeling. I was standing by my window looking outside. Nature has certainly made an effort to beautify the surrounding. The trees are still carrying their leaves. Leaves speckled with fiery gold color as though this is their new outfit for the season. Just for this sort of gloomy, dark and depressing day!

Immersed in my own thoughts; in this sort of depressing weather, the touch of beauty amazed me. The happiness within this kind of feeling is more precious? How many sadness a person encounter in his life time? I asked myself? Again my thought has no trouble to swallow me, as scattered as it is. I looked up the sky. It looks as though death buried within its belly. Is this how the world is going to end? Is there such a thing "end of the world"? Whether or not the world is ending death for humans is the end of life. Oh, yes I am thinking of death. I focused on Abel and Cane's story, the bible. Why did Abel die? Was it is mere luck? Hate?

The table by the window has a computer on it. Its volume is loud. Pal-talk is on. The room is filled with a woman screaming voice as if she is possessed with some sort of powerful demon. **“Death to EPRP! EPRP shall be destroyed!!!”** (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party). She says it all. I think I have heard this voice before. I don’t know what happened to her. If anyone listens to her it is easy to figure out she is indeed possessed by the meanest, and the most powerful demon of all kind. What is making her scream? Could it be hate? Deep in my heart I prayed mercy to be upon this woman from my beloved childhood protector Lideta (Holy Mary). Tired of listening to her pointless scream I turned the volume down and went back to look outside my window.

On the streets there are old women bundled with winter coat and walking slowly. Children are nowhere to be seen because of the looming cold weather, as they were not crowding the streets with their running around during summer time. I am always mesmerized by them. During winter it is hard to tell because they are bundled up with oversized winter cloths. As soon as winter reseeds, they reveal themselves with tall and slender physique it is just as hard to tell who is who. It is just a joy! Summer comes! The surrounding is filled with children of all sorts. New life, new hope is renewed with the season. Joy and happiness is splashed on people’s face!

From Africa to Asia, to Europe, to America my thought is traveling at light speed. It is all mixed up. I made a laboring effort to pick one trace of thought, to just immediately abandon that and then picked another, then dump that all together so forth. It could be in relation to today’s weather? When I think of summer, the past hot summer, it strikes me. The “hotness” just stood out. That in return reminded me of prison. <sup>2</sup>Kefteghna 22-Kebele<sup>3</sup> 07 prison. Within that there is the so called infamous room “Sodera”. Everything about that room came and confronted me. It was such a small room. It was packed with prisoners to its bream. The prisoners sweat was coming down as a summer rain from the ceiling. There was no hope of life, not in any of the prisoners’ lifeless eyes. There was no hope of tomorrow. Death was so close. Suffocated by the under the arm sweat stench that could only secreted by fear. Day and night disgraced by those savage derg cadres, awaiting the very last minute that part the prisoner from the living.

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<sup>2</sup> Kefetghna – Addis Abeba was geographically divided into sections. Those sections are called Kefetghna and there were 25-Kefetghna’s at the time of Derg.

<sup>3</sup> Kebele within the Kefetghna there were further divisions by smaller sectors called Kebele. These divisions latter on assisted Derg to successfully eliminate any opposing political movement, because of its handpicked cadres, revolutionary guards, secret service, among other gullible(s) who were easily brain washed by Derg’s lies and deceipts.

The thought of prison also reminded me of something else. I have a pen friend who has been sentenced to die in Texas USA. How did I come to know him? I asked myself. There was this 75 years old lady who worked at the AMENSTY International who asked me to befriend him via pen-friendship. She asked me if I could be kind enough to befriend this condemn young prisoner. Accused of murder—in death-row- I don't know who he is, how could I be friend with him? How could it be? For a long time I didn't do anything. At one point Christmas was approaching, in the spirit of wishing him Mary-Christmas I started writing him. How long ago was that? I have done a lot since. This poor guy is awaiting his death in that small prison cell!

The woman in pal-talk still screams aimlessly. The outside still looks gloomy and depressing. In a hope to find something a little relaxing than this crazy woman's scream I started hoping from one pal-talk room to another. I end up in a room where young Ethiopians insulting each other using fowl languages. I exited the room quickly thinking what someone would think of me if they see me in this room. For a minute I forgot I used a screen name.

I remembered my youth age. I wondered what these youngsters are thinking of their country. Do they think using these awful languages as a sign of modernity? Or are they displaying this sort of behavior as a vent for their frustration? Could it even be a way of self discovery? What made them sound so hopeless? It is just concerning. How could a society address these sorts of questions? I thought about it for a few minutes. No answer popped in my head, so I was at liberty to return to my own youth age.

Intertwined with this gloomy day I remembered HabteGiroigs Deldeye (HabteGiorgis Bridge). I remember that dark, polluted water, stinking sewage pipe. Those pipes were serving as a toilet to the homeless; the memories just came in full force and make my body cringe. How could I forget that stench? How could I forget the darkness of that place? I will never forget it. We hid inside those horrible pipes for seven days to escape Derg's roundups<sup>4</sup>. The dark sky today resembles our hopelessness plastered on our face at that time. The memory not only filled my heart, as fresh as it can be, my face has also reflected it. It now looks the dark sky.

I recalled, regrettably, there was a similar woman in Lideta area at that time. She used to repeatedly shout these slogans **"Death to EPRP! EPRP Shall Perish!"** The cigarette smoke and Katikala(a locally brewed alcoholic drink) had successfully wiped her womanly beauty. What is left of her is ill-fitted looking, so frail, lifeless, the death-angel. At a glance any one could recognize the irreversible damage she has brought to herself. She could never skip from her cigarette and alcohol addiction; where there is virtually nothing to make her stop, she would start screaming with her terrorizing and screeching voice **"Death to EPRP!"** Her voice

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<sup>4</sup> During the time of Red-terror there were roundups all night, most of the days and free style executions (shooting at anyone from a moving vehicle) on the streets if the cadre/revolution guards think the person looks/acts suspicious. One can skip a few roundups, but can't possibly evade all.

filled with hate and such fury. Was she about to drink human blood instead of Katikala? She was the beneficiary of the Revolution<sup>5</sup> that swiped Ethiopia under her feet. So people would not dare to challenge her, to wrongly cross her path. They would stand there and listen her screams and shouts with weariness.

Why was all that youth killed? I thought. What was the need?

Tenbaho Monople is located within Kefetghna-22 Kebele 07. At the time of the red-terror savage cadre's and revolutionary guards, secret service members, such as Keste, Tensae, Haile-Mariam roamed through its neighborhoods and streets arresting, terrorizing, harassing, rounding up, torturing and killing at will. How many people did they kill? With how many innocent people's blood have they washed their hands? Lema, Argaw, Shambel Desta and many others. Ledeta, Biremo, Tolosa Sefere, Anbesa Awtolese, Mexico what do they look like now? It was more than 20 years ago that I was there. Twenty years! Indeed time flies.....

In North America Texas, my pen friend is awaiting his execution. He was only twenty years old when he was convicted. He is held in "Polanski Unit" death row until he dies.

I no longer control my thought. It is going wild. In the small room there is a bookshelf. I started scanning the books, and found what I was looking for. Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, I started flipping through the pages. Why did the main character Raskolnikov kill the pawnbroker and her sister? Could it be as the world renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud suggested he wanted to be above the law and society? Could it be that? Or could there be another explanation?

There was also another book on that same bookshelf by Dostoevsky called the "The Brothers Karamazov" Ivan Karamazov "If God does not exist, everything is permitted" I remembered fellow prisoners who were, religious, decent, Jehovah Witness followers executed by the red-terror of Mengistu, just because they refuse to shout out or repeat after the Derg Cadres "Death to EPRP!". I made an effort to concentrate on what this demonized woman is saying. Via pal-talk she released ear-piercing satanic laughter, as though the demon possessed her to make it clear the idea of killing again and smelling human blood is really enjoyable. Truly, my heart sank. I remembered those Jehovah Witness followers; they were truly honorable people.

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<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia's Revolution had toppled the last kingdom, Emperor HaileSelassie in 1975. There was so much hope for change. However the military junta that called itself "Derg" hijacked the power and started massacring people by thousands. The country and the people have yet to see unspeakable and gross human rights violation by anyone's standards. Derg(Mengistu's) regime has lasted for almost 17 years. The revolution blindsided-ly took away some people's wealth, extra houses, land, property, vehicles etc....some used this as a short cut to get rich or to well positioned themselves.

When we were transported to Tinbaho Monople, Keble 07-murderous prison we were either 7 or 8. From Kerchele<sup>6</sup>(Addis Ababa's State prison) to Keble 07 isn't that far, distance wise. But for a person who doesn't know his/her faith it simply is an endless journey. A prisoner who doesn't know his/her faith is always filled with worries. My pen-friend in Texas wrote me a letter telling me his journey filled with uncertainty and fear of the unknown.

Here we go again.

It was 4 am when they woke me up, a Monday. I ate my breakfast of eggs, sausage, and biscuits, all the while preparing myself mentally for the trip I was about to take. Only twenty years old, I hadn't seen much of the world yet, nor was it likely that I ever would.

Once on the road I leaned back in the seat, head on the back deck of the car, content to stare silently up at the stars, their distant twinkling soothing my mind. Many nights I'd started into the infinity of space, ever pondering our place in the universe. On that cold morning my thoughts were more self-centered. I wondered just what lay ahead of me. I'd heard numerous horror stories and seen a few movies about prison, but I didn't know what to expect. Would death row be worse? I wondered.

At around 8 am we arrived at the Diagnostic Unit in Huntsville, all red brick walls and chain link fences, with guard towers strategically placed around the perimeter. My guard, two deputies I'd known most of my life and didn't like very much, led me in the back door, where a short sergeant with close-cropper blond hair and blue eyes that missed nothing awaited us.

Inside was one large, high' ceiling room split into four identical cages by black bars. I was ushered into the first right hand one and told to "get out of 'em." Strip searches are a part of life in every prison. When you lose your freedom you lose your right to privacy. I'd already been through many such searches, so I knew the routine: strip naked, raise your hands and spread your fingers, open your mouth and lift your tongue, run your hands through your hair, lift your testicles, turn around and lift each foot and spread your cheeks.

After "the butt-naked dance" (as I call it) they left me facing the wall while the sergeant went to get some clothes: boxers, shirt, pants, and cloth slippers. Fully dressed, I was again cuffed, though in the front this time, and moved to the second

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<sup>6</sup> There was no court system; no law was cited for political prisoners. We were round up, tortured, thrown to jails in shackles, and executed, buried on mass graves. We can be transported from one prison to another depending on our capturers' mood etc.... the country was run-down by rulers who took the law on their own hand, make themselves above the law and act impromptu.

cage on the left. There I sat for several hours while two busloads of prisoners were processed.

Finally my turn came. The blond sergeant told me to follow him into the next room, another open area, dominated by a communal shower on the right and barber chairs on the left. I sat down in a chair and had my hair shaved by an old black man who looked like he'd been in prison forever. Since I'd already showered, I skipped that part of the process. Next I was escorted into the hall. As we stepped out the Sergeant yelled, "UP AGAINST THE WALL!!" And his command was immediately obeyed. When I passed behind those prisoners facing the walls I noticed many were watching me, some whispering aloud "death row" and "there's another one" and "he looks like a kid." Being popular is one thing, but THAT kind of attention isn't something to seek.

We made a right into the long room where a bored woman in her forties fingerprinted me. From there it was upstairs to have my picture taken. No one has said much until then. Two officers questioned me about religion, gangs, drugs, tattoos, scars, education, etc. After the interview, I returned to my spot in the cage, there to wait for the escort to arrive from death row. Those escorts finally arrived, a tall light-skinned black man named Bradford and a pale woman with curly dark hair named Thompson. I was shackled and chained again, then hobbled back outside in the rain. Breath plumed as we walked across the asphalt, my feet already freezing in the cloth slippers. With help, I climbed into the back of the dirty white Dodge van. It has been modified. All the seats had been removed. A narrow hard bench ran down either side, each separated by steel mesh from floor or ceiling. Hard rubber covered the floor. Pine-scented disinfectant hung in the air, barely able to mask the smell of vomit.

Our trip was short, but agonizing. At breakneck speed, we wound through many back roads until we reached the Ellis Unit. Around to the back we went. Everything there was similar to the Diagnostics: lots of red brick buildings and miles of chain link fence watched by guards in towers with AR15s.

Bradford opened the door and helped me out. What had been rain had turned into drizzle. In front of the van I was told to kneel. My shackles were removed and both guards walked away. I stayed there, unsure what to do, very aware of the fat man standing in the tower behind me with a rifle in his hands. Thompson stopped and turned, an incredulous look on her face, and said, "Are you gonna come on, or what?" Embarrassed, I got up and followed, saying something about not wanting to get shot. A rush of warm air greeted me as I entered the double door, stretching out before me was a narrow walkway with a line of twenty or more toilets down to the left wall and a waist high wall on the right, beyond which were a laundry room and huge communal shower. Everything was covered in pea-green tile.



Stepping into the hallway was almost like trying to get onto the interstate. It stretched perhaps had a mile in either direction, crowded with prisoners, guards, nurses, and other people going here or there. No one yelled this time. Three quarters of the way down the hall we came to some sky blue bars, the boundary between death row and the other prisoners. A wooden sign above the door read:

## **Welcome to Texas Death Row. Welcome!**

I put away the letter and went back to my thoughts. The time we have been taken from Kerchele to Keble-07 is now laid before me. In front of the Alem Bekaghen (Division of Kerchele where life time sentenced prisoners are housed), they tied both of our hands and shoved us into a car. After we drove for a while we enter the small streets we have seen parents whose children are arrested. They were just waiting in a hope to hear news about their fast disappearing children, husbands, wives, relatives or if possible just to see the prisoners face at a glance. When they saw the car packed with us, they rushed to it. The revolutionary guards didn't take chance. They pointed their guns at them while shouting out orders, and chased them away. As we get off the car and stood inside the compound, a huge banner with a declaration glared at us. It was written in bold letters with, red ink. It looks written by human blood and carrying our DEATH SENTENCE.

**Kefteghana-22 Kebele-07-KeyShibere<sup>7</sup> Yefafame<sup>8</sup>!!!**

To be continued.....

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<sup>7</sup> Key-Shibere- is translated as "Red-Terror". Derg started red-terror towards end of 1977 has massacred unknown number of citizens claiming they are obstacles of the revolutionary movement.

<sup>8</sup> Yefafame- is basically let the killing/execution continue in full force. No slowing, certainly no stopping.