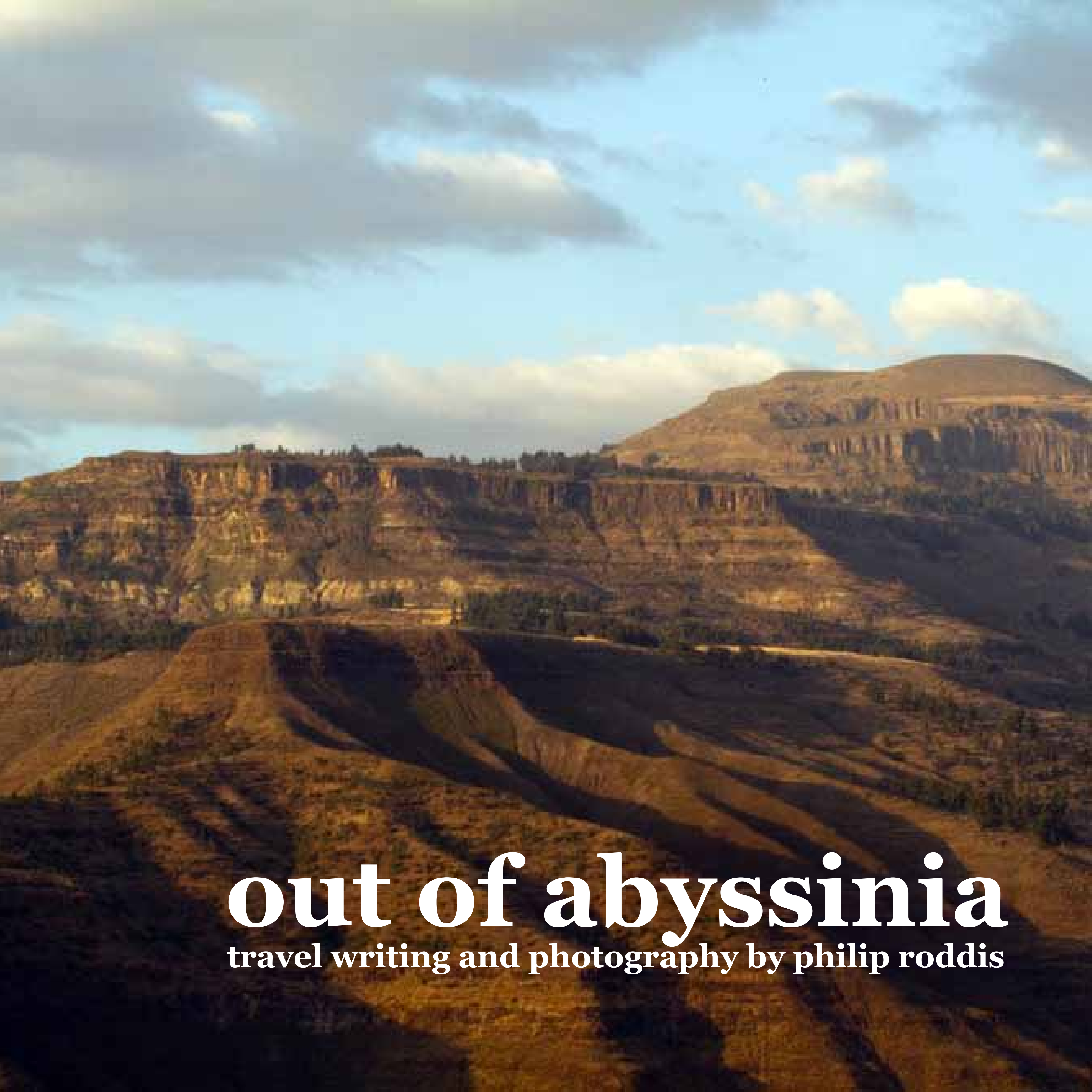

out of abyssinia
travel writing and photography by philip roddis

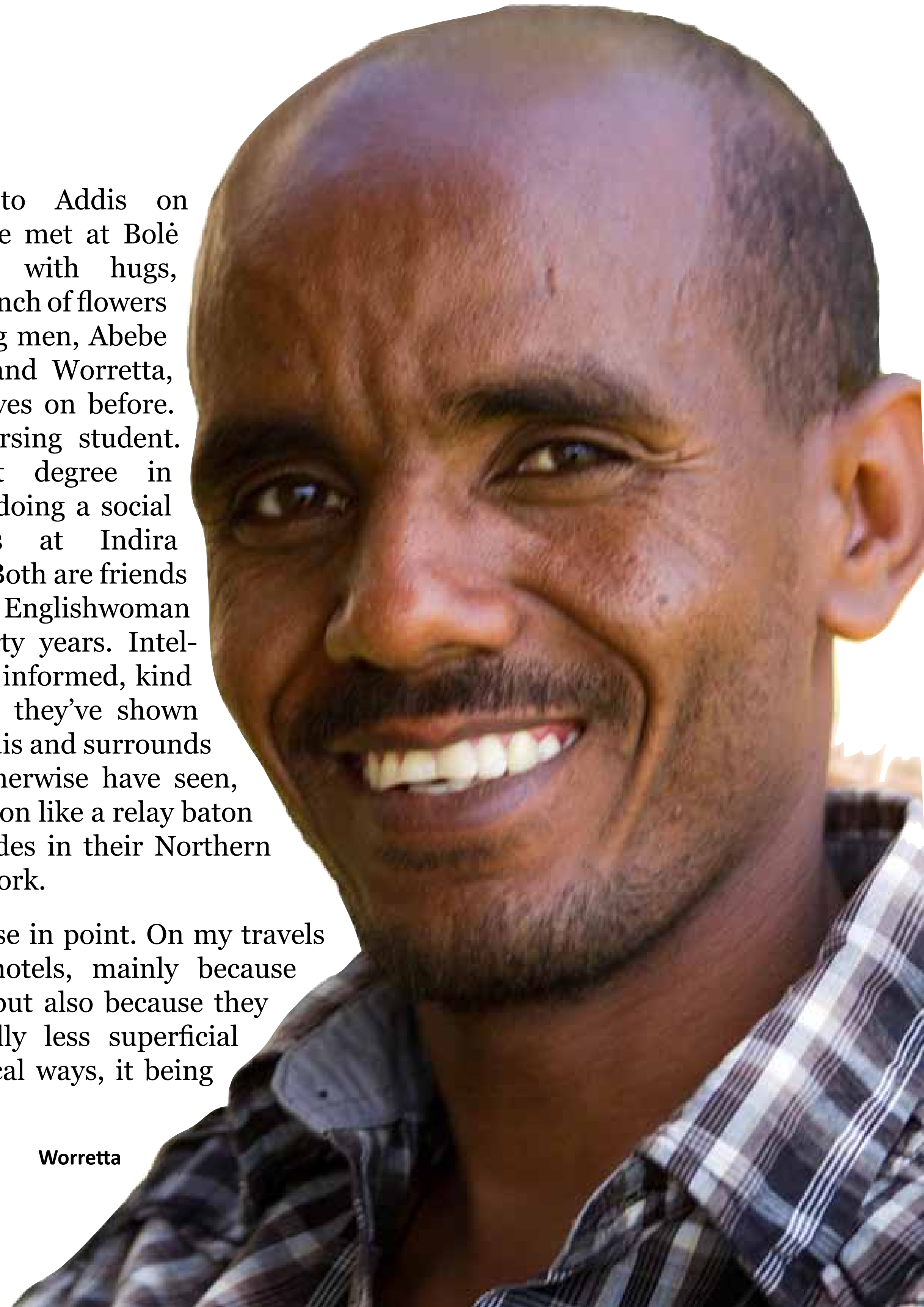
Thursday, 6 January 2011.

With a cranial capacity of four hundred cc, a third of yours, she'd neither bore you with small talk nor go in for morbid introspection. But she walked upright on two legs, all three foot six inches of her. And when, three point two million years on, her near complete remains were found at a desiccated lake bed east of the Rift Valley in Ethiopia, she sent shockwaves through a paleontological community forced now to quadruple its estimate of how long hominids (next door to the apes on Primate Alley) have walked the earth. Over the next two decades the figure would be further revised upwards. So extravagantly high is the ratio of informed speculation to hard fact – like trying, in the words of my Bradt Guide, to guess the subject of a one thousand piece jigsaw from twenty scattered bits and no box lid – that any significant new find may throw into disarray much of what we thought we knew about who we are and how we got here, and oblige eminent scholars to eat Desperate Dan size slices of humble pie. Paleontologically speaking the 1974 discovery of Lucy (after a Beatles' song playing in camp at the time) was as significant as things ever get.

One early response was to embrace her as a direct ancestor: our gran, so to speak. Subsequent finds, also in East Africa and no less startling – including strong indicators of dimorphism, with males not slightly but considerably larger – suggest she is both less and more than that. Lucy is a great aunt at best but the first known example of *afarensis,* from the *australopithecus* genus of hominids whose last branch died out a million years ago. That's long before *neanderthalis,* penultimate branch of the *homo* genus and our true evolutionary rivals, vanished from the scene, for reasons we can only

guess at, between 25,000 and 100,000 years ago: the when being as hotly contested as the why. With mitochondrial DNA similar both to our own and that of our closest living relatives, chimpanzees, Lucy is the nearest thing we have to the missing link; the smoking gun to establish beyond doubt that we, *homo sapiens sapiens,* doubly wise in that we Know That We Know, are the spearhead of ten million years of primatic evolution propelled by random genetic mutation and steered by natural selection. As it happens, at the time of Lucy's discovery a team of linguists and zoologists were spending the decade trying to get Washoe, an unusually bright female chimp, to learn a non vocal form of natural language. The less than thrilling result of this pedagogic offensive being her mastery of the vocabulary and two word syntax of a toddler on the threshhold of true language acquisition.

Which makes you think. As did the sobering experience, two days ago at the National Museum in Addis Ababa, of seeing Lucy in the bones. I'd first heard of her twenty years ago in an account by Richard Leakey as gripping for its multi-disciplinary detective work as for its tentative conclusions, without ever believing I'd one day pay my respects in person.



I'd flown into Addis on Monday to be met at Bolė International with hugs, smiles and a bunch of flowers from two young men, Abebe ("Abburbah") and Worretta, I'd never set eyes on before. Abebe is a nursing student. Worretta, first degree in Psychology, is doing a social work masters at Indira Ghandi Open. Both are friends of Marion, an Englishwoman I've known forty years. Intelligent and well informed, kind and courteous, they've shown me sides of Addis and surrounds I could not otherwise have seen, and passed me on like a relay baton to different nodes in their Northern Ethiopian network.

Lalibela is a case in point. On my travels I use cheap hotels, mainly because I'm a tightfist but also because they allow marginally less superficial exposure to local ways, it being

Worretta

a dependable rule that the more you pay for accommodation in Asia or Africa, the less the experience will differ from that of a stay in London or Los Angeles. But with Ethiopia's Orthodox Calendar more Julian than Gregorian – though in point of fact neither – today is Christmas Day. Any place of religious significance will be jam-packed with pilgrims from now to Epiphany. Before leaving the UK I emailed a hotel in Lalibela, holiest of holy towns and famed for its stupendous rock hewn churches. Bradt indicated five pounds a night. The hotel replied within hours to say, yes, it had a bed for me at just eighty-five dollars the night. Fat chance. I'd only considered booking at all on Marion's say-so. In my third world wanderings, arriving on spec in a new town at nightfall generally works out. And should word in Addis caution otherwise in this case, I'd just go some place else, where devotion was not driving hotel costs into the stratosphere and a bed could be had for the asking.

But Worretta and Abebe, natives of Lalibela, made it plain they held this plan B in low regard. True, it was their own gloomy prophecies of every last room snatched up in a Dutch Auction of the faithful that had led me in the first place to state my willingness to give the town a miss. Equally clear though was the fact that in their eyes I might as well visit Agra and skip the Taj Mahal, or drink my way through Cambodia and not trouble Angkor Wat with my presence.

Out came Abebe's mobile for protracted negotiations in Amharic, the upshot being that when I arrive in Lalibela I'll be met by Abebe's brother (a term seemingly applicable to any male relative, which Ethiopians have in spades, of broadly equal status). He will take me to what Bradt lists as a superior hotel, the Seven Olives, which will host me for as long as I like

at thirty dollars the night. Granted that's still three times what I'm used to paying anywhere south of Malaga, but I guess my wallet will stand the trauma just this once. Should anything go wrong I am to use the phone and local SIM loaned by Abebe for all to be smoothed out. As if by magic.

Saturday, 8th January 2011

Axum, early evening. I sat out front of a cafe on main street to watch mule drivers and cyclists, old trucks from the Soviet era and newer ones from China, a few cars and women back from the fields. They carry themselves well, these women; proudly Abyssinian, though most sport cheap cotton prints from the sweatshops of Dacca and Shanghai.

Woodsmoke from hidden courtyards drifted over the rooftops and the first cooking scents of the night wafted my way. There was *injera*, the ubiquitous sourdough from the nation's staple cereal, *tef*. From what I guessed were wealthy households – though at this time of year all but the destitute would push the boat out a little – I could smell chicken, spit-roasted in butter and *berbere* ("burberry") the country's fiery answer to masala. And of course there was the seductive aroma, too late in the day for me alas, of coffee beans roasting in dry pans. Ethiopians may be off the mark in claiming to have exported to India the virtues of spicy cooking (and even if they are not, the latter cuisine long ago surpassed theirs in range, depth and subtlety) but are surely correct in saying they gave the world coffee, theirs being the one country on earth where it grows naturally.

I raised and lowered my drinking straw to sample in turn the pulp of three fruits – strawberry, mango and avocado – layered like traffic lights within

my glass tankard. It's a real treat now I know the magic words, *ie se'kar,* to stop them ladling in the sugar.

I'd been two days in Axum, Ethiopia's most northerly town and one time capital of an empire that stretched west to Sudan, east to Southern Arabia. You can barely take a step here without stumbling over collapsed stelae or falling into tombs dug out in the days of Jeremiah: all remnants of a civilisation that traded as far afield as Greece and India.

Today's Axum, cut off from its former Red Sea port, forty miles to the north-east in what is now Eritrea, has sixty thousand inhabitants, an unfeasibly large church and reassuringly small tourist industry. Locals who looked more or less sane have told me with straight faces that the empire was ruled by a dynasty able to trace an unbroken line from a dalliance between

Queen of Sheba (Sabae and Axum being near synonymous) and that canny arbiter of maternity disputes, King Solomon. The line ended abruptly in 1974 when its final manifestation, 'Lion of Judah' Haile Sellasse, was ousted and, it is widely held, personally smothered with a pillow by one Mengistu Haile Mariam. *Not me guv,* Mengistu protested. But he would say that, wouldn't he? With all due respect to Rastafaria's cherished myths, it has to be said that evidence of the Old Lion having done anything of value for his people is thin on the ground. Then again, patrician incompetence can seem almost endearing when weighed against psychotic interpretations of Marx-Leninism.

I'd spent the day walking in hills alive with biblical heritage. Uniquely in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia's Christianity is not only independent of Europe's but predates it by several centuries. Its Judaism is just as deep rooted. Disowned by Orthodox Jewry, the Falasha (Amharic for 'exiled') were not received into the fold until 1975, when the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem declared them authentic Jews whose isolation on the wrong side of the Muslim Caliphate (echoes here of mediaeval Christendom's Prester John legend) had caused them to lose their way, to be sure, but that in no way meant forfeiture of their birthright under Israel's so-called Law of Return. Mengistu's Derg, which had forbidden the teaching of Judaism and locked up its leaders on fabricated charges of zionist espionage, was a second hurdle to their emigration but this too proved superable. In the event, those Falasha who went 'home' to Israel found their dark skins drawing the kind of welcome received by the Windrush Jamaicans in fifties Britain. Many are now back in Ethiopia.

That morning I'd photographed a beautiful woman who laid on for me the full Abyssinia coffee ceremony: roasting the beans on charcoal, bringing them over so I could inhale the heady scent before she ground them with pestle and mortar to make the coffee in an elegant black pot. She'd served me from a tray lined with carefully arranged grasses and, as we drank, spoke longingly of New York City.

At our hotel, two young Germans strapped water barrels to a jeep in the courtyard. They were set to rise at five to cheat the sun on the dirt roads of Tigray, their goal the sixth century monastery at Debre Damo. It stands on a cliff-edged plateau in an Arabian Nights dreamscape, accessible only if you are male (even female animals are forbidden) and relaxed about having monks haul you by rope up eighty feet of sheer rock.

Next time, I'd consoled myself. For now I'm confined to places served by public transport, though the word is you can get off the beaten track here by flagging down a 4WD to negotiate a price for vehicle and driver. Amharic is not needed, American dollars the language of choice.

Tuesday, 11 January 2011, 09:30. A day above Lalibela

Before first light I left the Seven Olives with Sisay, whose remarkable story I'll tell in due course, for a day's trek in the mountains cradling Lalibela. I'd viewed them from the air eight days earlier as night flight ET0701 from Heathrow to Addis cut south through a cloudless dawn sky. I'd stared down on formations common to mountains everywhere – sunlit peaks and dark valleys, knife-edged aretes and scooped out corries – and on features less familiar. Such as the giant rock slabs and columns, segmented like Toblerone bars and tossed this way and that against slopes of sandstone in a dun wilderness that met the horizon in every direction.

Least familiar of all were the plateaux, flat-topped and elevated on every side by cliffs which, I would today discover, can drop a hundred metres sheer. Some are isolated: thrust outlandishly from the beds of once glacial valleys, sun-bleached and wind-scoured, their sides tens of miles apart. Others are linked by hairline ridges, scaled down versions of the two great land masses implausibly held by the bikini strip of Central America. Seen from the air these badlands have an alien beauty slow to reveal itself to eyes more accustomed to rills and becks, to slopes of rainwashed verdancy.

Dawn broke to reveal the same vast, slanting expanse of olive and dun I'd seen from the air, gouged here and there by the darker clefts of valleys

dry for eleven months of the year. Peasants in shawls and hoods moved purposeful as ants up and down the hillside. Lalibela's octupine sprawl, configured not by planners but mountain topography, grew smaller with every backward glance. A network of paths trodden for thousands of years diverged and converged to link makeshift dwellings dotting the landscape here and there. Some, evidently owned by men of substance, looked big even from afar. They stood next to spinneys; green, spring-fed polygons against the parched beige. (There are fortunes to be made, Sisay insists, from a fast growing local tree currently feeding Addis's mania for construction.) More commonly though, the dwellings were meagre and windowless: a few stark on the skyline, most huddled into and barely discernible from the hills, though these too stood next to patches of contrasting hue. As the sun rose over a saddle in the ridge to our right, those patches above and to our left shone golden. Cereal farming, I guessed, too short of breath to ask.

Those whose paths crossed ours were not the fashionably turned out fell walkers of Europe. A few rode mules but most went barefoot on baked earth and spiky rock, their backs doubled over by firewood, bags of tef and, once, a huge sack stamped *US Aid* below a star spangled banner. It dwarfed the girl doubled up beneath it. All smiled and bade us *selam*. Some tested their schoolroom English: 'welcome … how are you? … what is your name? …'

Four middle aged women; willowy, burdens on their heads in the manner of peasant women from Quetta to Quetzaltenango, sailed past. Their brown eyes glinted as they appraised handsome Sisay, mocked my pace and commented – I think not unkindly – in Amharic on the many stops they'd witnessed from below as their easy strides had eaten into our lead.

Sisay, nineteen to my fifty-eight, is also tall and slender. And fit as a rat in the way of the adequately fed but only just. You see that fitness in the rickshaw cyclists of Delhi, stick-thin as western models; life expectancy thirty-five. Sisay will fare better but I'll get to the why of that later.

I don't hill-walk quite as often as I used to, and have grown too fond of easy strolls. Now I was at 3,000 metres for the second time in six months. As in Guatemala's Western Highlands, the going was tougher than on British hills. With lead in my legs and a mild headache, I was shorter of breath than I'd have been on the equally steep but lower slopes of Helvellyn.

Sisay, by contrast, could have danced all the way up. Two hours into the climb, after a short stop at the head of a gorge, he'd quietly picked up my rucksack, heavy with camera, lenses, tripod strapped across like a bedroll, and water bottle; none of these things needed by him, not even the water.

It was late morning when we reached our destination, a plateau with sheer drops on every side save for a ribbon of rock connecting it to a second plateau to the north. For the last half hour our path had sloped gently upwards, cutting a diagonal across the mountain side with dense scrub below and to our left; towering sandstone cliffs on our right. As the height of the latter gradually lessened, I realised we were on a natural ramp and would in due course be level with the cliff top, hence the plateau itself. The final few minutes were a scramble over scree to the sliver of rock, flat at the top but barely two metres wide, linking the plateaux. Our approach, I could now see, had been the only one possible. On the far side the rock dropped vertical for ten metres at its lowest point. As the neck widened at each end into northern and southern plateaux, the drop increased.

Access from this connecting strip to the northern plateau was unproblematic but our plateau was guarded by blackthorn, spikily impenetrable, the one gap guarded by coils of barbed wire above and around a makeshift door of corrugated iron. Not bothering to try the door, Sisay banged twice with a small rock while shouting for "Desta", then squatted on his heels.

"Desta will come."

I waved my hand towards the barbed wire and heavily chained door.

"Why this?"

"There are bad men on the hills. Desta is the watchman."

* * *

Desta looked my age but I'll bet is still in his forties. He offered tea. I'd rather have had coffee – we'd set out too early for my morning fix – but would not have dreamed of saying so when the chances were he'd have none and be upset, not in the far eastern sense of losing face, but because he'd want his guest and new friend happy in every way.

The smoky gloom of the hut was pierced by angular shafts of sunlight from unglazed windows, their crude wooden shutters thrown back against the outer wall. The inner walls were bare stone and unmortared, furnishings primitive. Stones around the fireplace may or may not have been low stools. Probably not, I decided, since all the men squatted on their heels in the way few westerners can emulate beyond infancy. (Our calf muscles are tautened by the heel to toe tilt of shoes, our spines sacks of potatoes from countless hours on chairs that do us no postural favours.)

In the corner furthest from the light a table was covered with tools for farming and building, with ancient cans and bottles, and with piles of coarse cloth that told me some or all of the men sleep here.

After the pleasantries were over, aided by Sisay's near fluent English and easy social skills, I'd taken my pictures. Knowing the light would fall off exponentially the further he was from the window, I'd placed Desta closest to it. I wanted his features, craggy as the mountain itself, in sharp definition even if that meant those of the other two men being blurred.

One of the men lowered a blackened kettle onto the slumbering log fire as Sisay knelt, cheek resting on the earthen floor, to blow grey embers back to a crimson glow. He'd neither asked nor been asked to do this and I was struck by his easy familiarity, in a land steeped in patriarchy, with those many years his senior. For their part, the men's pleasure at his arrival was transparent. Not for the first time in my travels in Africa and Asia, I looked on with delight tinged by envy at the unequivocal enjoyment, by people more bound to one another than we in the west are, of simple communion. Leaving them to trade news and gossip in their own tongue, I stepped into the sunlight to explore the plateau.

It was Africa's savannah in microcosm: a cracked patchwork of baked earth in and around coarse grassland interspersed with scrub and the odd gnarled tree. It wasn't hard to envisage Lucy on this terrain, entertaining, in that small but evolving cranium, ideas of a supremacy to come.

Eight hundred metres north to south, five hundred east to west, the plateau was a rough oval dotted here and there with traditional huts of varying size and shape. Most were circular, one or two rounded rectangles. Several were still under construction, though the one workman I could see, close to the western edge, looked to be farming. I made for the eastern edge whose views, though hidden all morning by a ridge and the plateau itself, I knew would be stupendous.

For a second time I looked down on Northern Ethiopia in the large, as I had from the cabin of ET 0701, but now with the added frisson of vertigo. I've a fair head for heights but my imagination ran riot as I took in the extent of the drop, inches from where I'd planted my Doc Martins. The mind

can do funny things in such places, its reasoning power hijacked, ditto the assumption of control over our limbs. For a fleeting moment we sense – it's more than just a wayward idea – the inexorable movement of first one leg, then the other, stepping into thin air like Popeye sleepwalking, the laws of gravity suspended till he wakes up and looks down ...

The sensation passed. I assembled my tripod and put a graduated neutral density filter on my lens to reduce light from the sky while allowing all of it from the thousand or so square miles of arid grandeur spread out below. For the next few minutes I was engrossed, childishly gratified by the crisp snap of my shutter in the high altitude silence. The shots taken – not one, I noted, at a speed low enough to warrant the tripod Sisay had shouldered on my behalf – I took a step back, detached it from the camera and set it down a good two metres from the edge. Overkill, that. Tripods don't leap off cliffs, not even on the roof of Abyssinia.

On the far side of a clearing, close to the southern edge, I came upon a troupe of gelada baboons. Three mothers, each with a youngster on her back, moved across the cliff top with an easy, loping gait. The alpha male, blood-red delta on snowy chest, followed sedately.

If my presence bothered them they didn't show it. When the mothers stopped to forage, the infants got down to play baby making. Dad stayed majestically aloof, seemingly oblivious to consorts and offspring alike. Not that I had ideas of putting his indifference to the test. He was big enough and doubtless fast enough to tear me apart in seconds should he get it into his head I was after his females, or a threat to the little guys.

I edged round the clearing. They stayed put until I was fifty metres off, then decamped, only to settle a few metres further along the edge. Again I stepped forward; again they moved. I got the message. They'd happily share the space – I could go wherever I chose – but the fifty metre gap would remain a constant.

I'd already switched wide angle lens for telephoto. These wouldn't be award winning shots: those demand optics costing thousands of pounds, not hundreds, more time than I had, and a knowledge of gelada behaviour I don't pretend to possess. I was thrilled to get anything at all though, and knew that when the baboons had had enough, and swung down with consummate cool to ledges where not even the leopard dare follow – though most leopards would in any case shun that alpha male in favour of prey less dangerous – I could turn my lens to the skies for the raptors that can swoop in at one hundred and sixty miles an hour.

(On the ascent we'd seen an eagle climb the sky, still low enough to reveal the small furry thing gripped in a death cell of talons.)

The tea was excellent, a gentler lift than coffee. What makes the latter so good here is the high ratio of *arabica* to *robustica,* but that also makes it easy to underestimate. More than once I've drained cup after tiny cup, only to find myself a jittering, pulse-racing wreck an hour later.

Sisay took me to a part of the plateau I'd not seen. At a still unfinished hut he shouted a greeting to the wiry man I'd noticed earlier as, using both hands, he'd repeatedly raised a tool above his head to bring it down hard on the ground. I'd thought he was digging. In Africa those who work the land are often shoeless. Spades as we know them are of little use. Instead, a spadelike blade at right-angles to a wooden shaft is hefted much as you or I would swing a pick axe.

The man was not digging though. With an axe-like chisel he was trimming a window shutter like those at Desta's hut; rough planks placed vertically and held edge to edge by a cross piece top and bottom. With the shutter laid out on the ground, held in place with his own bare feet – which had me flinch each time the blade came down – he pared it to size. With each blow a shaving peeled away, its wafer-thin curl proof both of his skill and the blade's edge. After several strikes he picked up the shutter and, the two of us in tow, took it inside to try for fit against the unglazed window.

Using a stone for chalk he marked the area still to be trimmed then put the shutter down to greet us Ethiopian style: hands clasped, shoulder curving in on shoulder like interlocking halves of the yin-yang symbol. For Sisay the semi-hug was repeated thrice: right shoulder and hand … left shoulder and hand … right again. For me it was just the once. Sisay introduced us: "Philip. Bekele". Something sparked in my trivia-collecting mind.

"*Bekele!* Champion of the world!" I simulated running.

He beamed. A minute earlier and I too might have merited the triple monty.

By now I'd seen and done the shoulder thing many times, and was clued up sufficiently to know I'd misread Abebe's and Worretta's intent on greeting me at Bole International. Each had approached with arm outstretched, as if for a handshake, but then leaned his upper torso forward in a way our newly touchy-feely west takes to mean an embrace is on offer. I'd responded accordingly, using both arms to hug each man in turn.

Abebe and Worretta are too courteous to have shown surprise, far less horror, and my subsequent mortification was not great. This is an easy culture, with no call to creep about in fear of causing unwitting offence. Come to think of it, the pair probably went home that night congratulating themselves on their presence of mind in adapting, as though such things happen every day, to this faranji[1] way of saying 'how do you do?'

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1. *Faranji* in Ethiopia, *farang* in Thailand and Vietnam: such words seem to be corruptions of 'foreigner', though a competing etymology traces the word back to the Germanic Franks of the early middle ages. The terms are used descriptively as far as I can tell. Even Latin America's *gringo* – a throwback to the American-Mexican wars when a certain General Green was invited to "go" – is in my experience non pejorative.

Unlike Desta's, these walls were mortared with dung and straw, the latter protruding in places like stray hairs from a yokel's chin. Sisay pointed to the hut's conical roofspace. A single wooden girder, each end resting on the circular wall, bridged the diameter to support a central upright. Two dozen or more secondary beams radiated down from the apex to rest half a metre apart on the wall. These were ringed by cane-like tertiary supports for the thatch that brings coolness in the day, warmth when starry skies send night temperatures plummeting. I was impressed by its rough beauty and said so, omitting the 'rough' bit. Sisay relayed my praise to Bekele, who nodded thoughtfully as he considered this appraisal of his craftsmanship, turning it over in his mind before nodding his agreement.

I'm no architectural photographer but with both men clearly expecting it – the kit round my neck was worth more than their combined annual income so the least I could do was use it – I took a few shots. As in Desta's hut, the chiarascuro quality of light and shade helped nudge the results from the merely documentary to something of intrinsic interest, but I needed a high ISO setting to get sufficient light to the sensor.

(I should have left my tripod at the Seven Olives and brought my flash unit instead. On-camera flash is an anathema, drowning every nuance in a blue-white flood. With its angle on the subject to all practical intent that of the lens itself, a golden rule of all the visual arts – for interesting light we need interesting shade – is broken. Given a detachable flash gun and orange gel filter I could have lit this roofspace to allow a low ISO for zero digital noise, and a narrow aperture for depth of field. All without compromising the pleasing harmony of soft colour.)

By way of manly nods and sagelike grunts, I gave both men to understand I had no little expertise in the principles of African hut design. The trouble was, I couldn't figure why *these* huts were here at all. The place seemed an African version of the Marie Celeste.

On our way back to Desta, Sisay explained. His boss is working with the Ethiopian Tourist Board to develop the plateau for faranjis in search of something out of the ordinary. With eco-tourism taking off, a night in these huts – no electricity or running water; but firewood and candles, a well for washing and men and mules to bring bottled water – will fetch a high price from trekkers. I didn't yet know it, but in a few days time would see for myself how memorable such a night can be. Meanwhile I did at least know

why the huts were there, and why – other than that labour is cheap – they were being built using methods as old as, well, the hills. I even knew why those huts were mortared while Desta's was not. The stones are set in mule dung not for strength but for warmth.

We said our goodbyes, me promising prints via Sisay in a few weeks. After checking with the latter, who assured me it was not expected but would be welcome, I left thirty birr (sixty pence) with each man. For the next half hour we retraced our steps before cutting east through a gap in the ridge, south of the plateau. For two hours the going was easy; at first with no net drop in height, later gently downhill. Relaxed and in my stride, I drank it all in.

I'd seen this wild infinity from the air, and from terrestial vantage-points. Now I was in and among it, free to enjoy it on the move but undistracted by light-headedness, shortness of breath or screaming calf muscles. Childish, I know, but in my mind I was the high plains drifter, threading a taciturn path between rock and gorge, buttress and cliff; eyes not on street corner and office block but a shimmering, jagged horizon scores of miles distant in every direction. Sergio Leone would have seen the possibilities in an instant, though the logistics might have put a few extra creases on his brow.

By mid afternoon we reached one of those extraordinary churches unique to Ethiopia. Each was created – around the time the barons at Runnymede looked on, arms grimly folded, as King John set his reluctant seal on Magna Carta – by carving out a trench on all four sides of the granite bedrock;

up to thirty metres long, three wide and fifteen deep. With hammer and cold chisel, brute strength and visions of paradise, artisans had worked inward from these trenches to sculpt from the solid rock – an architecture not of addition but subtraction – windows and doors, floors and ceilings, supporting columns and stairs.

St Georges Church, Lalibela

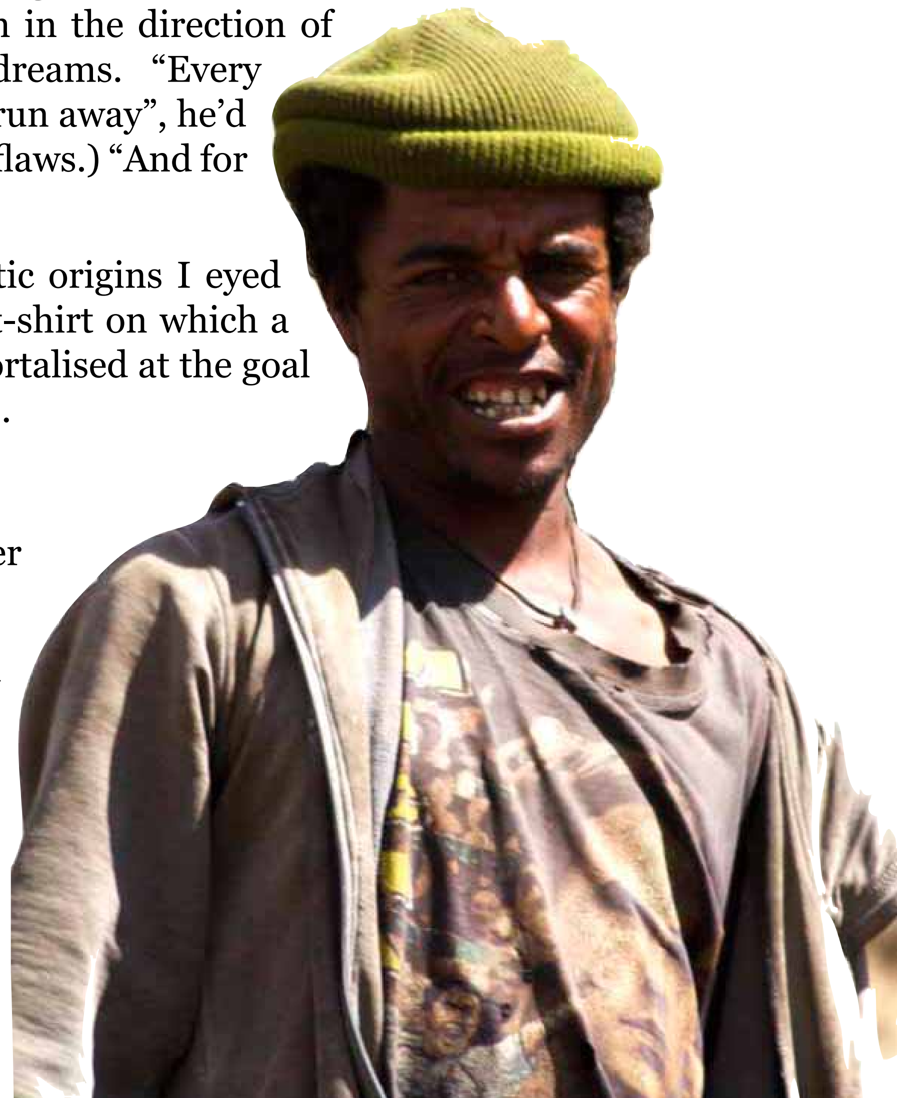
No one knows why such monumental feats were undertaken but, as always in this land of fine division between myth and history, there's no shortage of exotic theories. Of which more in due course.

This church was smaller than those in Lalibela but its isolation made the logistics of construction no less impressive. Even today there can be no doubting the devotion of impoverished hillsmen setting off long before dawn to stride across the barren terrain, hour after hour on Holy Days, to receive the word of God at some half buried temple in the middle of nowhere but dedicated to their particular saint. Today the place was locked and deserted save for a lad of fourteen or so, instructed to watch over it. He had neither means nor authority to let us in but we traded oranges for a fistful each of roasted wheat berries; tasty enough once we'd picked out the grit and blown off the chaff. I was glad of the carbs.

Our route descended more rapidly through pockets of fecundity with gnarled cypress, centuries old, and scarlet flowering cacti. At one point we encountered mud where water from a spring in the rocks to our right trickled onto the path, its dust greedily absorbing every drop. At small farms the harvest was being gathered: men, women and children scything, bundling and threshing cereals I recognised; not tef from the warmer and wetter south, but hardier crops of wheat and barley. A few drove oxen in circles to trample sheaves in a way I couldn't quite grasp, but must have been designed to separate chaff from grain.

Some were planning the next crops. We came upon man and boy driving an ox to drag a wooden plough over their strip of hillside, as they would have done a thousand years ago. OK to photograph? Sure. But dad, who'd been content to watch his son at the tiller before we came on the scene, now took over. No question who'd be the star of this shot.

Sisay had a go. In the rocky ground his furrow was crooked but he handled the ox like he'd been doing this all his life. Part of his incredible story is that he ran away, at the age of *seven,* from the dirt impoverishment of his mountain family. After years on the streets of Lalibela, he was met and befriended by my friend Marion, who taught him English while he ensured the shopkeepers didn't cheat her. She got him the Seven Olives job, paid for his schooling and thereby – given that he's as smart as he is resourceful – pointed him in the direction of a future transformed beyond his dreams. "Every day I thank God for making me to run away", he'd told me. (Even Sisay's English has flaws.) "And for bringing Marion to me."



As Sisay reconnected with his rustic origins I eyed up the father, taking in the dusty t-shirt on which a jubilant Michael Owen stood immortalised at the goal mouth, arms high for the accolades.

"Liverpool!"

"Newcastle!", this African hill farmer sternly corrected.

The country is football crazy. In the hills of Axum a boy had asked which part of England I was from. My travels have taught that if a conversation in the third world

gets this far, the answer most likely to keep things flowing is Manchester. It's not far from the truth, thirty-seven miles to be precise, and brings instant global recognition. But on this occasion the effect had been especially electrifying. The boy's face had taken on a feral look. His eyes had doubled in size as bony arms shot into the air and his body threw itself into a martial half crouch.

"Yes! Yes! Win Roonay!"

From his jacket he'd produce a much thumbed photo of the man himself.

With fatigue setting in, the going got rough on the lower slopes as the path wound down like a corkscrew to Lalibela. The drop was rarely steep on both sides but the scary edge shifted at each turn. With the path a sliding treachery of dust and pebbles, my ageing Docs were inadequate. I learned to take shorter steps so my soles hit the ground at more obtuse angles but, after a while without incident, would grow complacent, risking longer strides until the next skid renewed my caution. (If you ever rode a bike on cinder you'll know what I mean.) Finally, after many lesser skids, I lost my balance on an outer arc where the path below spiralled back on itself some three hundred degrees. In slow balletic motion I saw myself tottering on the edge of a three metre drop, camera sliding down my arm. Sisay moved fast as a snake to catch and steady me, but it was for him the last straw. Having asked politely several times, he now confiscated the camera and insisted I take the stick I'd till now stubbornly refused.

In Lalibela he left me for his shared room in the town. He needed to wash and change for waitering duty at the 7-O. Within minutes I was in my own room to shed clothes layered in dust. About to step in the shower, I caught my face in the mirror. My nose, damn it! I'd been careful: sunhat ... long sleeves ... factor forty. But that conk of mine just sticks out in direct challenge to the high altitude sun. Now I'd have to watch myself for days.

Showered and towelled, I collapsed on the bed and into a coma. When I surfaced it was dark. The sound of a dozen conversations, at least one of them in Antipodian English, rang across the leafy terrace close to my door. This is a busy place. Even locals dine here if they can afford it. The smells of roast meat, rosemary and berbere mingled in the night air to remind me I'd eaten little all day and was ravenous.

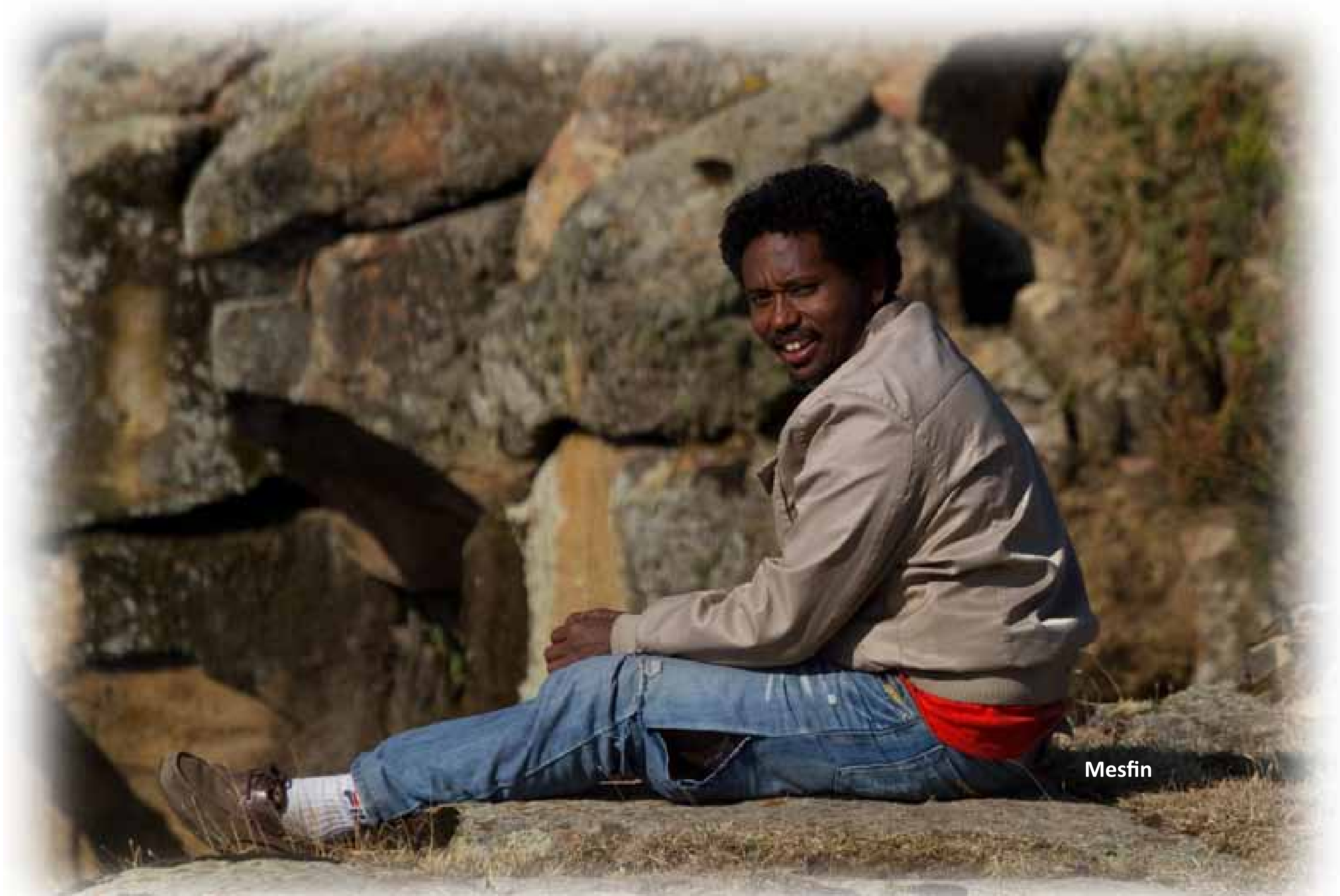
I chose *kai wat;* spicy lamb. Halfway through my meal I spied Mesfin. He's in his late thirties I'd say, short for an Ethiopian but good looking and well proportioned. And *very* smart. The night before we'd talked for hours of the impending Sudanese referendum, Egypt's meddling, and its strong-arming the region over a Nile that may flow through Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania but is regarded by Cairo, he says, as its own private property. I'd already learned from my time with Abebe and Worretta – including a memorable discussion of Africa's plight in the grounds of a swanky hotel by a glittering crater lake south of Addis – how well informed and savvy Ethiopians can be. But Mesfin is in a league of his own. After setting out his take on African affairs he'd fired questions at me. Was Condoleeza Rice a puppet? Was Tony Blair sincere in his catholicism?

Why had he rubber-stamped Bush's adventure, disastrous in every way, in Iraq? What did I think of war criminal Mengistu enjoying the life of Reilly in Zimbabwe?

Two old kleptocrats keeping one another company, I'd replied. Which was wide of the mark since, as with many a dictator, power rather than riches is the key to these men. Nevertheless I'd delighted this urbane entrepreneur from a region, Tigray, that had suffered more than most from the Derg's deranged policies. But the country as a whole had suffered and I'm sure it tickles Mesfin's keen sense of irony that the plateau on which he's now building eco-huts had, not so long ago, hosted artillery trained on the Tigrayan and Eritrean north, yes, but also on the town below: hub for, and seething hotbed of, traffickers in the opium of the people.

Mesfin runs the Seven Olives. He's already told me that as a friend of Marion, who comes often and is held in exceptionally high regard – "here she is like the queen" – my thirty dollar rate has been further reduced to twenty. He had given Sisay the day off precisely so I could safely experience the joys of fell walking, Africa style, and has made clear that if there is anything else he can do for me I need only ask.

So who was I to argue now as, catching my eye, he strode across the terrace to seat himself at my table, tear off a strip of my injera, dip it into my kai wat and pop it into his mouth? What, he asked while chewing reflectively, had I thought of Forest Whitaker's performance as Idi Amin in The Last King of Scotland?



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