

## A Blessing

**by Rosie Scott**

It is a remarkably white gathering. The thought strikes me almost half way through the meal with a dull leap of shock that I have not noticed it before. The Reverend and Mrs. Fraign – the vicar of St. Michael’s and his wife – both in their early fifties, Mr. And Mrs. Dane-Phillips who work at the embassy, Jane who is involved in the rotary club, and of course Mark and Ellen who, as usual, have called a gathering of ex-patriot friends together for their weekly supper at one of the better restaurants in the city. My house-mate Chris sits on my left; we are younger by a good twenty years than any other member of the company and feel somewhat removed from the general air of smug, ex-patriot affluence. I wonder, vaguely, if this thought makes *me* smug. I shall take a crowded minibus taxi home, while all these Pimms-sipping, philanthropists will climb into their Landrovers, close the windows to the dust, and the begging fingers and the sweaty evening air. Yes, slightly smug.

The rains are due any day and the evening is stifling hot. The door hangs open to let the air circulate but the heavy air makes the taxi calls and other traffic seem far away. The restaurant is one of many Italian pasta and pizza places in Addis Ababa. It is rather better than most and the clientele is almost exclusively white. The prices – 15 birr for a pizza – effectively keep out all except the wealthiest Ethiopians and, if Chris and I were not there at the invitation of Mark and Ellen, would keep us out too. We are an example of that almost unheard of phenomenon in Addis, white people who do not have money.

We arrived in Addis nearly seven months ago and came to work for Ellen in one of the many educational projects that she is involved in throughout Ethiopia. We were placed at the same school and so, by default, ended up living together. Looking back now, I wonder if it would have been possible to put together two more incompatible personalities than Chris and myself. At the passport desk he told me about his recent back-packing trip around Europe and why he chose to come to Ethiopia. I told him my name. In the car on the way to Mark and Ellen’s house he explained at length why his university had been the best in the UK. I watched a vulture duck under a sliver of rainbow and come to land on the sprawling abattoir roof. Over the following days he outlined his opinions on the people, the weather and the lager in his new home and since then on the many shortcomings of his boss and the other teachers. I listened. I always listened.

I’m listening now as I make my way through a four cheese pizza. The talk is of the rains. We call rain rains here.

‘They’re getting later each year. It’s hell for the farmers of course.’

‘Yes, shocking harvest last year. And then the floods...’

‘The floods are due to bad planning, of course.’ Chris has decided it’s been too long since he last spoke. It’s been at least a minute and a half. ‘The farmers need more modern methods and help from the government. I remember a project I had to do for social anthropology...’

Mark cuts across Chris. He's heard all this before. 'It's something of a Godsend for some of the beggars, though, eh?' There's a general murmur of agreement. I think of the woman who lies under the tree at the roundabout near my house. She lays her baby by her on the dry ground and holds its hand every night.

'Those who have nowhere to go at nights are going to suffer when the rains come.' Jane's big happy face is creased into a frown as she speaks. 'Do you know I was asked for money by a toddler yesterday? Not even walking properly yet and already begging!'

Mrs Dane-Phillips looks as if the very thought is distasteful to her. 'Poor things,' she murmurs, but seems unable to hold back her disapproval, 'they're everywhere, these days. It's just ghastly; you never know what to do for them.'

'Well surely you give them something!' Jane seizes her chance to disagree with Mrs. D-P. I know her temper has been on simmer for some time now and seems to have finally come to the boil. 'Surely you give something to the children.'

'Well...' Mrs D-P looks ready to justify herself. She has drawn herself up and seems to have taken in a long breath for a good long speech. The Reverend Fraign cuts across with a wave of his dripping pizza.

'I give out these meal tickets that you can buy.' A tear of mozzarella lingers at the point of the pizza slice, 'as long as you can explain what they're for you can give them out to these poor people and they can get a free meal.' The mozzarella falls gracefully to the table top and the two women smile at the reverend. Blessed are the cheese-makers.

'I don't give to the kids.' Chris's voice is trenchant. 'They only end up giving it to some big boss man somewhere whose just using them. Besides, they should be in school.'

'Well that's true,' Ellen has a teacher's expression on her face; she wants us all to be thinking like this is an epistemology class, 'but what makes you think they'd be in school if none of us gave them money?'

'True, true,' Mr. Dane-Phillips swats at a persistent mosquito as he speaks, 'the problem often lies with the parents. Don't want to work so send out the children to...' He doesn't make it to the end of the sentence. Swatting at the mosquito once more he sits back from an empty plate as if exhausted by the sweating air and his quattro stagione. I watch the mosquito land at leisure on his arm and I say nothing.

'How can you say that, Mr. Dane-Phillips? Many of these families either can't find jobs or have jobs that don't pay enough to allow them somewhere to live.' Says Jane; she looks upset that someone could think this way.

'I know all of us have enough that we *could* give to all the beggars we meet,' says Mark, thoughtfully, 'but should we encourage it?'

'They're a menace,' says Mrs. D-P shrilly, 'it's not good for the tourist industry, surely, to have the streets crawling with thieves and beggars.'

'I think if we can help even one of them to eat that day then it's all worth it.' As Jane defiantly folds her arms I catch sight of the dark patches of sweat at her armpits. Aware of my own heat I place my hands flat on the cool tabletop.

'I agree,' says Chris, he seems determined not to be aligned with the Dane-Phillipses as they are everything he hates about humanity. 'I've been pestered and fucking followed ever since I got here because of the colour of my face. But I'll always give to the mothers and the disabled.'

'Does everyone have a policy? Who they give to and who they don't.' Ellen looks challenging once more as the faces round the table duck away from her and from her question. 'Who do you give to?' She asks me.

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'I can't believe the cafe's closing!' I wail, 'where am I going to get my donuts now?'

I'm sitting in my favourite cafe with a group of Ethiopian friends; we're all teachers at the same school and are taking our mid-morning break with milky coffee, sugary tea and watery cakes. It's a dingy little place with cool metal chairs, walls that might once have been pink, and grumpy waitresses. There is also, unaccountably, a fish tank with no fish sitting next to one of the vast ovens. This will be our last coffee break at this cafe as it is being closed down so the road can be widened. Already the noisy machines are prying up dirt along the road, dirt that will quickly turn to heavy, sticking mud when the rains finally fall.

'There are donuts in other cafes.' Says my friend Abeba, with a smile.

'Not like these ones. Why do we need a wider road anyway?' I grumble.

'It is a millennium project,' Dawit tells me, 'you know next year in Ethiopia we will have two thousand years.'

I do know. The Ethiopian calendar is out of synch with the rest of the world; they have thirteen months and are seven years behind other countries and will never catch up. 'Of course, that's in years; in terms of development they are much further behind.' This rather unkind remark of Chris's pops into my head and I flush as I look round at my well-dressed, clever friends.

In September they will celebrate their millennium and everyone has different stories of the exciting plans for the millennium celebrations. For some however the widening of the road has meant an unceremonious chucking out from their homes and businesses without warning or compensation. I feel sorry about this of course, but just at this moment, tucking into my last donut, I feel mainly annoyed that the cafe will close.

Abeba and Desta are talking in low voices beside me. They have a secret, which they have been refusing to share with me over the past week and my gossip antenna is whirring and bleeping. I lean in and raise an eyebrow. Abeba promptly switches to English so that I may be included in the conversation.

'We have written a letter; maybe you will check it for us?' She looks hopefully at me.

‘Of course, but what’s this about?’

‘We have written a letter to Mr. Berhanu because we did not get a pay rise last term and the previous boss said that we would.’ Desta adds another three or four spoonfuls of sugar to her tea. I bite back a remark about whether she would like any more tea with her sugar, since this is clearly serious. ‘We need the money because I want to move in with Abs and Mele.’

‘Oh wow, are your parents driving you crazy?’ I nod understandingly, but she looks surprised.

‘No. My cousin has come to stay in the house with his wife and there is many many people now. He is sick...’ She trails away and I say nothing as she clearly doesn't want to talk about it. I feel embarrassed suggesting her parents would be annoying her. Every time we have gone out at night they have called her home very early and she has gone without a single remark.

‘Well, how much is your rent?’ I ask them.

‘One thousand for one month,’ says Abeba. I know this is vastly more than they could ever have to spare. In truth I don’t know what their exact salaries are because I am too embarrassed to ask. From what I gather, however, what they earn in a month would be barely enough to keep me supplied with coffee. I blush furiously and promise to help with the letter. But I know there isn’t a chance they will get any more money. I know that even if they did Desta’s parents would never let her move out. I know that knowing what I do will not change the way I live, will not stop me moaning about losing the cafe, will not make me challenge Chris about constantly asking the school for more money even when his salary is three times what other teachers get.

I look up from where I’m sitting and stare at the television screen, where a grainy flickering president is looking out with a self-satisfied smile. For a moment the clamour in the cafe seems to die away and he seems to be speaking directly to me, though I can't understand him. I try to understand my friends too but maybe I’m too embarrassed to ask them properly. Why do they want to get out of this country that I love so much? It has brought me so much freedom but for them there is none. I don’t understand, and perhaps I never will.

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I sit rubbing my eyes in the hospital waiting room and trying not to yawn. It seems inappropriate somehow to yawn with tiredness or to fidget or even to read my book while groups of people sit around the room with tense and worried faces, but with so much patience. It is one of the things I have admired about the Ethiopians, their patience. I have seen them crouching by the side of the road for hours, unmoving, waiting for buses in the rain with only a plastic bag to cover their heads, standing in the lake while the sun beat down from morning until evening.

In fact I am worried and tense too. Abeba is sick. It’s probably malaria, though malaria is not supposed to exist so high above sea level. I’m here with Desta and Melesse to visit her but a long night with another group of friends the night before has left me hungover and tired. Of course the pre-rains heat doesn’t help; I haven’t showered or cleaned my teeth. I become aware that I am slouching in my seat beside Desta, who is sitting bolt upright and appears to be lost in her own thoughts.

'When did Abs begin to feel poorly...sick?' I ask.

'She has been sick for three month, but she is ok. Then before one week she went to the Doctor and he told her she must go to hospital.'

'But she's been at school all week,' I say, confused.

'Yes because Mr. Berhanu say, "if you take more sick days, pay will be cut".' I remember him saying it. I had looked at Abeba at the time, ready to roll my eyes at her and see her smile back, but she had been staring pensively at the ground looking uncharacteristically serious. Now I knew why.

At that moment Melesse appears at the end of the corridor, walking back from where Abeba's room is. Desta and I get to our feet and I pick up the plastic bag of books and fruit that I have brought. The backs of my thighs stick to the seat and make an audible squeak as I pull away. Mele and Desta exchange a few words of Amharic, of which I understand nothing. They are much more apt to speak Amharic when Abeba is not here since neither of them speaks English as well as she does.

'Is Abs ok?' I ask as soon as there is a pause.

'She is pretty sick,' says Mele, she and Desta exchange glances, 'but she has to leave.'

'Why?'

'The doctors say she must have medicine, but she cannot buy.'

'What do you mean? She can't afford it?' I feel the uncomfortable heat all around me.

'Yeah, she doesn't have enough money.' My stomach lurches and I know it's not from my hangover.

'Can we go see her?'

'Yes. You can go see,' says Melesse, 'it is room two four one.'

We walk down the white hallways past a myriad of open doors. Through each one it is possible to see the rows of three beds with figures laying still, the wooden crosses hanging on the walls, the smartly moving nurses. Room 241 is no different. It is almost impossible to distinguish Abs among the other patients, who all look small and grey, and for the most part lie asleep. Or perhaps they simply have their eyes closed. Abeba's bed is furthest from the door; she sits up as she spots us coming towards her.

'Hey.' The two Ethiopians exchange the traditional greeting of kisses, enquiries after family, health and how each slept the night before. It has been seven months and I still haven't learned the greetings properly, so I mumble and stumble my way through them with Abeba, head down, embarrassed. She doesn't even seem to have the energy to make fun of me today, as she has every other morning.

'Hey, how're you feeling?' She looks quite unlike herself. The energy and forcefulness have gone from her face and she looks very tired. I want her to tell me what to do, to laugh at me for some ditsy remark. I want her to tell me it's alright and to pull one of her hideous silly faces. But she merely smiles slightly.

'I'm okay. But my arm,' she shifts uncomfortably and I see the drip needle in her arm, 'it pains me.'

'Sorry, dude,' it's all I can think of to say. I feel foolish after a moment and ask, 'so, why do you have to leave?' I'm certain there must have been a mistake. They can't just ask her to leave the hospital because she can't afford the medicine, surely.

'I can't afford the treatment that they want to give me.' There is a silence.

'How much is it?' I can't help but ask. I feel the pressure to help, to do something.

'four hundred.' Another silence. I am thinking hard. Four hundred birr is all the money I have left. Payday is not too far away and I technically could make it without the money. I think about the dull food I have left in the house. I think about the holiday I was saving up for and the long days stretching ahead with no money to go anywhere or do anything. I think about my parents' warnings not to lend large sums of money, the same warnings I was given by Mark and Ellen when I first arrived. And I think about the night before, the money I spent and what I spent it on; the alcohol and, worse, the weed. I feel sick. And I wish I understood.

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'Ferench! Ferench!'

The cry is a familiar one to me. I've never been the type to stand out in a crowd but since I stepped off the plane in Addis International Airport seven months ago I have been visible wherever I go. The Ethiopians seem to separate the world into four distinct categories: Habesha (Ethiopians), Africans (from whom they separate themselves through a proud history), Chinese (that seems to be everyone with dark hair and pale skin) and Ferenchis (everyone else). I belong to the latter of these categories and with my white skin and pale brown hair seem to emanate flashing dollar signs as I walk.

I make my way as quickly as I can through the late-afternoon crowds in Mexico square. It is five o'clock, the air thick and leaden with the promise of rain, but the streets and pavements are still crammed with people buying and selling. It is a short distance from the place where my minibus stops to where I am meeting a friend and I must walk quickly or risk being waylaid.

'Ferench! Ferench!'

The man selling flip-flops from an arrangement of plastic sacks on the pavement has sprung up as he sees me approach and now attempts to show me his stock. Hundreds of pairs of many-coloured flip-flops and other plastic shoes are laid neatly on the ground where they compete for the attention of the not so discerning buyer with the sandals, trainers and underwear sold by the woman five metres up the street and, around the corner, the rich selection of handbags and T-shirts with slogans that you could never have believed existed. I am almost tempted by the pair of what look like pink rubber moulds of a pair of trainers (complete with Nike tick) that sit, smugly melting, in the middle. Think how practical they would be when the rain finally starts, as it has been threatening to for weeks. And I could fulfil a life-long ambition to walk around looking as if I was wearing a pair of neon pink Nike trainers, but not actually doing so. I demur. Despite apparently resembling a walking wallet I am on very limited funds and headed for Mercato, the largest outdoor market in the world, to buy presents for my far away family with this month's pay.

'Ferench! Ferench!'

'Good Lord,' I mutter bad-temperedly as I dodge the on-coming traffic heading for Meskal Square in one direction and Sarbet in the other, 'If I yelled out "Foreigner, foreigner" in the middle of the street in Europe I don't know what people would think of me!' This time I am hailed by two desperately thin but cheeky looking kids running barefoot towards me through the dust and crowds. I turn my head away and, eyes fixed to the ground, hurry on to the petrol station where I am to meet my friend. It is hard to explain what it's like being begged for money wherever you go, especially if you don't have very much to give away. I had made a bargain with myself that I would give money to women with children and to disabled people, but it could never be enough. The cynical thought arises, as it so often does when I refuse to give money to somebody that I am simply refusing because I would rather spend the money on myself than help someone who is clearly starving. I push the thought away and, rather ineffectually, attempt to cover my face with my hair and sunglasses. This is pointless of course since it is the hair that will draw attention to me anyway.

I lean on the wall by the Total gas station where I have agreed to meet my friend Eptsam. I have been told she is the best person to go bargain-hunting at Mercato with and since it is my first visit I am rather nervous; I shall stick to her like a limpet, I decide. Leaning my head back a little I scan the sky apprehensively. The clouds bunch together, pressing ominously in and the air around seems oppressive. This time, it is going to rain.

It is as I bring my head down with a sigh and a muttered 'Perfect' that I see him. I have heard about him before – hushed hearsay over coffee and French- fries, shakes of the head and ineffectual shrugs of shoulders – but now seeing him my heart still gives a sick little jolt in reaction. He is terribly thin; his open shirt and tattered jeans hang off him and the bones of his chest can be counted like railway tracks. He isn't old, though it is hard to tell his age exactly, but he staggers like an old man, arms outstretched, feeling his way because he can hardly see. He clutches a wooden cross and as he throws out a blind arm the wood scrapes the stone wall. The growth, whatever it is, how it had got there I can't tell, stretches across his face completely covering one eye. Where the eye should be is thick stretched skin that seems to pull his whole face to one side. His nose is almost totally gone, a misshapen lump of useless flesh. His heavy breathing flutters the elastic skin around the tiny gash that is left of his mouth and as his jaw moves in time to his continual mumbled prayers the grotesque, suffocating layer of skin stretches and relaxes; his own face a horror mask that he can never remove.

My own mind betrays me as the thought flashes across it, 'Please don't let him see me.' With all the prying, pushy, begging, friendly Habesha in the whole of Mexico Square I wish in that moment that this one will not see me, the only ferench.

He weaves towards me, head twisted sideways painfully. The eye he fixes on me is shot through with red, the face bunches and twists once more and the gash stretches as he smiles. 'Ferench.' I nod and smile pulling the corners of my mouth up as best I can. Now that face is so near I cannot look at it. A phrase rears up in my head from *Heart of Darkness*. I loathe that book.

'Salamnesh.' Peace be with you and the first drop of rain lands on my cheek.

My answer is a croaked whisper from a dry throat. 'Salamno.' And with you.

'Welcome in Ethiopia.'

'ameseghinallehu.' Thank you. Curt British nod as if he's offering me tea.

'Amarigna yechelalu?' Do you speak Amharic?

'Yellem.' No. Stammered Amharic. Shake of the head. Rueful smile.

'Exyehestelign.' God bless you.

'Exyehestelign.' I whisper the word. It's almost a question. How can he wish me well when I stand here in a parallel universe grumbling about the rain and mud on my old trainers? He will sleep in the mud and he has no trainers. The rain drops spatter his shoulders, turning his T-shirt from faded to new-washed.

I clumsily fumble in my shoulder-bag and reaching for his hand press a few birr into it. I draw my hand away quickly, embarrassed, hating myself. The hand that has touched him twitches as if I shall wipe my hand on my skirt. Wipe away the germs of poverty and disfigurement and bad luck that he may have transferred to me. 'Exyehestelign.' And it's over, he stumbles away. I am blessed. And each new drop of rain brings a new blessing like a starved garden bursting into life.