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Thirteen Months of Sunshine

Ambata K. Kazi-Nance

Shelena set off on foot towards Friendship Market to buy chicken for dinner. She remembered the way to the store. A right at the end of her street, a left out of the neighborhood, then a straight shot down about six blocks to the market on Bole Road, one of the busiest streets in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Salih rested snug in the carrier Shelena wore tied to her chest. She held one of his chubby brown feet that poked out of the bottom and squeezed it gently, marveling at the tender, plump flesh in her hand, the delicate, not fully formed bones. Four months old now, he held his head upright to peek out above the cotton straps of the carrier. Two months ago, when they had boarded the flight from D.C. to Addis Ababa, Salih had been so tiny he almost disappeared when Shelena put him in the carrier.

The sun, not yet at its apex, was intensely bright. Addis Ababa was just over six hundred miles from the equator but twenty-three thousand miles above sea level in the highlands of Ethiopia. Shelena felt the sun's closeness but none of its heat. A sun so close it seemed within reach, it reminded her how far she had traveled.

The streets were quiet at that late morning hour. Small herds of goats poked at the dry grass outside the gated homes. A young shepherd in baggy jeans swatted their backsides to move them along, though he didn't seem to be in any hurry himself. Men in business suits with phones pressed to their ears sat at outdoor cafes, smoking cigarettes and sipping coffee from tiny white cups. Young women in skinny jeans and high heels, their hair braided in elaborate cornrows, teetered down the cracked sidewalks huddled close together, whispering and laughing through brightly painted lips.

On the other side of the street, a massive Ethiopian Orthodox church, painted white with three blue domed pillars the same color as the sky, took up the entire block. Speakers sat atop the pillars. At dawn the voices of priests chanting in *Ge'ez*, the ancient language of the church, wafted through the neighborhood to announce the coming of light. Their words in a language Shelena didn't understand always woke her from her sleep. It didn't fail to amaze her that she had traveled thousands of miles to a place with millions of Muslims like herself, only to have the *fajr adhan* come from Christian priests. A high, ornate black gate surrounded the church. Outside of it, homeless men and women sat on torn pieces of blue tarp, tiny, ragged bundles stashed behind them. When Shelena looked over at them, she saw some of them looking back at her, but their eyes were unreadable.

Her husband, Mohammed, had offered to call Tesfaye, the private taxi driver they sometimes hired, to drive her to the store, but Shelena refused. She liked to see the city on foot, despite the stares she got from people, and despite feeling like an outsider.

She had spent that early morning after they prayed *fajr* crying into Mohammed's shoulder while he held her in his lap.

"I can't do this, Mohammed. I didn't think it would be so hard," she said. "I didn't know I would feel so lonely and out of place."

Mohammed gripped the hem of Shelena's white prayer scarf, a big cotton sheet that fell to her hips with an oval to slip her face through, and wiped her face with it. His dark brown skin glowed like copper against the whiteness of the fabric. He lifted the thin cotton up over her head like he was going to remove it, but instead he ducked his head under, shrouding them both. Shelena giggled even as fresh tears pooled in the corners of her eyes.

He pressed his forehead to hers, their noses touching.

“I understand this is hard for you,” he said. “Give me some time, okay? We’ll figure something out.”

Shelena took in a breath till she felt it open deep in her belly, taking in Mohammed’s scent of mint and soap, then released it. “Okay.”

She left the house that morning with a new determination. Embarrassed that she had cried like that, she also felt cleansed by her tears. She was going to find her way in this new country. She pressed Salih’s delicate toes between her fingers and recited a rhyme from one of his board books while she walked,

“To market, to market, to buy a fat pig.
Home again, home again, jiggety jig.”

*

Shelena and Mohammed had been married for five years. Mohammed was Ethiopian, but born and raised in America, in Boston. A diaspora Ethiopian. He told Shelena when they met that he hated being called that by other Ethiopians, even though it was true. He’d visited his homeland every summer of his childhood, but he was embarrassed to admit he had never lived there. On one of those visits, a cousin had teased him about his American-accented Amharic, calling him *farangi*, foreigner, a term only used for white people.

“I was so angry with him that I punched him in the nose,” Mohammed confessed to Shelena.

He said after that incident he vowed to one day move to Ethiopia, even if just for a year or two. “I want to know my homeland, to experience it more fully, not just for vacation,” he shared with Shelena. “I don’t know if I would want to live there permanently, but who knows, maybe.”

“I think that’s great,” Shelena told him. “And maybe you could have both, a house here and a house there. A foot in both lands.”

Mohammed asked Shelena to marry him shortly after that conversation. Her interest in his plans had sealed the deal for him, he said to her on their wedding night.

“I honestly didn’t think I’d meet any woman, Ethiopian or American, who would agree to such an idea,” he said.

On the plane ride to Ethiopia, their faces pressed together looking through the tiny window, they had watched the sun rise over the Sahara, the hues of early morning sending splashes of pink and purple across the golden sand. He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

“Thank you for this,” he said, and kissed the back of her hand.

“Thank *you*,” she replied.

Shelena knew it meant a lot to Mohammed to be there, but it meant a lot for her as well. When he first told her his uncle called to offer him a job managing the finances for the private school system he operated in Addis Ababa, she was just as excited as Mohammed, if not more. She had always wanted to live abroad but never thought it possible until she met Mohammed. She thought she might feel more comfortable in Africa, where a black woman in a headscarf wasn’t a strange sight. She’d spent her whole life feeling different from everybody else, always feeling like she had to explain herself. In Ethiopia, maybe, she could feel more at home.

“Let’s go,” she said when Mohammed gave her the news.

Now Shelena stood at the crosswalk on Bole Road, the sign for Friendship Market in garish red letters across four lanes of traffic from her. She wrapped her arms around Salih and eyed the constant flow of cars for an opening. The line of cars stretched on for miles and there were no stoplights. An elderly woman dressed entirely in white sidled up next to her. Shelena took a step closer to the woman and waited for her to make a move. She dashed across the street with the woman like she was hopping on hot coals.

“We did it, Salih,” she whispered in the baby’s ear when they reached the other side.

He lifted his head and gave her a drooly smile. She smoothed back the black curls that rested on his forehead and kissed his nose.

In the store, she grabbed a rickety cart with wheels that groaned and pushed it towards the back where the meat was kept. The neighborhood souks displayed the fresh meat hanging on hooks in windowless rooms, a feast for the scavenging flies, but in the grocery stores the meat was already cut up and kept in freezers. These were the only options for meat that Shelena had found. She grabbed one whole chicken pack and dropped it in her cart.

Shelena felt a peacefulness envelop her like a soft, warm blanket while she stood in line to check out. *I can do this*, she told herself. *I am doing this*. It was small, she knew, silly maybe, but she had accomplished this simple task of buying chicken for her family's dinner and she felt proud.

She stepped out into the bright sunlight and decided she didn't want to head back home just yet. The chicken would take hours to thaw so there was no need to rush. She headed over to a café next door and found a table in a shaded corner. She stuffed the bag with the chicken under her chair. Salih was quiet but she decided to nurse him now while she sat. She loosened her headscarf over her chest to cover herself. She ordered tea and a croissant and studied the busyness around her.

The parking lot and storefronts were all packed with people. Taxi drivers in pressed jeans and silky button-down shirts, gold crosses dangling from their necks, leaned on their cars smoking cigarettes and chatting. Boys in ragged jeans and flimsy cotton shirts maneuvered through the crowds and hustled packs of chewing gum, tissue packets, pens, and CD's. "Soft, soft," they called, holding up small rolls of toilet paper. One young man with a serious face held a stack of books that went all the way up to his chin. They were bootleg copies of American books. She squinted at the title *Dreams from My Father* on one of the spines. It was the same book she read on the plane.

She snuggled Salih while he dozed at her breast but was interrupted by a commotion in the parking lot. A white woman with a tiny baby in a carrier just like Shelena's came out of the grocery store and was immediately mobbed by the junior hustlers and beggars. Another woman walking down the sidewalk with a baby tied to her back made a beeline for the white woman and stuck her hand in the white woman's face, her palm open wide. The white woman shook her head and tried to push through the crowd to her waiting jeep. Shelena sympathized with the woman but chuckled to herself. She might be having trouble fitting in, but she looked enough like an Ethiopian that she had never been hassled for money like that.

*

"Eh, she looks *Habesha*, no?" Mohammed's mother had said when she first met Shelena.

"*Habesha*?" Shelena asked.

"Ethiopian," Mohammed explained. "It's what we call each other."

Shelena didn't really see the resemblance, other than skin color. Her nose was wider at the tip, like a mushroom, where theirs was slender and pointed, and her eyes were smaller, more almond-shaped, where theirs were larger and oval. But seeing how beautiful so many of the women were, she took it as a compliment. When she and Mohammed talked seriously about moving to Ethiopia after he got the job offer, he told Shelena that looking Ethiopian would be her advantage in living there.

"Everyone's friendly there, but there are some very poor people and they sometimes harass foreigners for money. If they don't hear you speak English, they'll think you are *Habesha* and leave you alone."

Mohammed was right that Shelena looked Ethiopian enough to avoid being hassled by beggars—they still asked her but accepted her "*Ai*, no" with a silent nod—but the stares she got from the locals informed her she did not fit in as seamlessly as she thought she would. For one thing, she wore Western clothes, mostly jeans and button-down shirts, and hijab. She didn't see

any Muslim women who dressed this way. They wore dark *abayas*, long, shapeless dresses, with thick, solid-colored headscarves, mostly imported from Saudi Arabia, whereas Shelena preferred the lightweight multi-colored scarves Ethiopian Christian women wore as shawls. She'd tried an abaya once but found it impossible to nurse in with its high collar and back zipper.

She also stood out because she took Salih with her everywhere she went, something Ethiopian women of her social class didn't do.

"Where is your *mamita*, your nanny?" they asked her when they saw her out with the baby.

On Mohammed's salary, they could afford a live-in housekeeper, a young woman named Baseemah from a rural part of the country. Most people in Ethiopia had some type of house help who performed various tasks—cooking, cleaning, going to the store, caring for the children. Baseemah was just a teenager though, no more than sixteen years old, and spoke only a few words of English. Shelena didn't feel comfortable leaving Salih with her while she went out. The local women laughed good-naturedly when Shelena expressed this concern.

Shelena figured from the stares she got that she was probably being mistaken for a diaspora Ethiopian. The locals that spoke good English usually insisted she was Ethiopian, despite her demurs.

"You are Ethiopian, yes?" a man at the post office asked her once.

"No," Shelena replied.

"You are not Ethiopian?" he asked again, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"No," Shelena said with a small laugh. "I'm American. African-American."

"Ah," he said, nodding his head with a knowing look. "I see."

He rang up her stamps silently, then spoke again.

"But you are originally from Ethiopia," he said.

Shelena knew it wasn't a question so she bowed her head in acceptance. If not, he would continue to ask her, to tell her who she was. She knew they wanted to claim her out of nationalist pride. They were proud to be one the oldest civilizations of humankind and the only African nation that had never been colonized. Shelena respected their pride in their heritage and appreciated that they sought a kinship with her, she just wished it was enough to make her feel at home there. What good was it to blend in physically if she couldn't grasp the culture, if she, no matter how she dressed or spoke, was not one of them?

*

Shelena's tea arrived just as the woman escaped into the backseat of her SUV. A few kids still lingered by the car, wiggling their fingers in the crack of the window until the driver backed out and peeled away. Shelena sipped her tea and imagined the feeling of relief the woman must have felt sinking back into the seat's cool leather, safe from the reminder of this country's poverty.

It was approaching noon. Shelena had told Baseemah she would be back for lunch so she paid for her tea and gathered her belongings to head back home. After she crossed the road—she'd lucked out and arrived at the crosswalk at the same time as a large group of Indian women prepared to cross—she decided to make one more stop at a stationary kiosk to look for postcards to send back home to her family.

All the postcards were plastered with pictures of places she had yet to see: Blue Nile Falls, the underground rock churches of Lalibela, the walled city of Harar. She was about to move on when she found one that made her smile. It was a miniature of an Ethiopian travel poster she saw the first time Mohammed took her to an Ethiopian restaurant shortly after they married. On the cover, a young woman stood in front of a waterfall looking at the sky above her with sunlight filtering through the trees. At the top of the card it said, "Ethiopia: Thirteen Months of Sunshine." Mohammed had laughed when he saw the poster, explaining the meaning to her.

"You know, the Ethiopian calendar has thirteen months? The thirteenth month is only five days though."

Shelena later learned the real joke was about the sunshine part. When they arrived in Ethiopia towards the end of the rainy season in August, there were many days when Shelena never saw the sun. Thick black clouds had kept it hidden, releasing heavy sheets of rain that pounded the roof of their home and sounded like galloping horses. Now it was the peak of the dry season. Most days there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The trees were lush and green.

Shelena held the postcard up to the woman behind the counter. "*Sent no?* How much?" she asked.

The woman studied Shelena's face like she was adding up her features. "*Amest berr,*" she said.

Shelena knew the woman was overcharging her but she gave her the money. Five Ethiopian dollars was barely a quarter in American currency. The woman smiled then cooed at Salih who smiled shyly back at her. She rummaged behind the counter and pulled out a lollipop.

"For baby," she said, taking his hand and kissing it.

Shelena thanked the woman and tucked the card and the lollipop into her bag. She turned back to the street to find a girl and two boys standing in front of her with their hands out. They were barefoot and covered in dust. The girl had eyes the color of new pennies and wore an old-fashioned dress with a faded daisy pattern and puffed sleeves trimmed with lace that had once been white but was now gray. The boys wore torn brown trousers rolled up several times revealing ashy ankles and short-sleeved button-down shirts so thin they looked like they would fall apart upon touch. Despite their disheveled appearance their faces were bright and eager. Shelena smiled at them.

"Miss, miss, *ahnd berr, ahnd berr,*" they said in unison, pointing at their palms.

Shelena shook her head and walked on, thinking they would run off but instead they started to follow her down the sidewalk. Two kids squatting on the sidewalk on the other side of the street ran over and joined the girl and boys and suddenly they were all around Shelena, blocking her way.

"*Ai, ai,*" she said gently. "No."

Salih poked his head out of the carrier and looked around at the little kids, who were now pulling at Shelena's sleeves. When one of the girls, a thick smudge of green mucus above her lip, reached to touch Salih's hand that stuck out of the carrier, Shelena screamed.

"No! Don't touch him! I don't have any money!"

"*Engliziya?*" the girl asked.

The children squealed. Shelena groaned at her mistake.

"*Engliziya! Engliziya!*"

Shelena gave up on being gentle and pushed past the kids, walking fast down the quiet street. The children pressed on, tapping her elbows and her shoulders.

"*Ahnd berr, miss. Just one berr,*" they pled.

She thought they would eventually give up, but after two blocks when they were still jogging behind her, she began to fear they would follow her all the way back to her house, which was still several blocks away. After another block, Shelena spied a wooden stick on the side of the road and snatched it up, turning on the mob.

"I said I don't have any money! Now leave me alone!" she shouted.

The children screamed and scampered off, laughing. Across the street, patrons at a café stared at Shelena from their seats. Their eyes reminded her of the women's eyes at the pediatric clinic where she took Salih to get his first shots two weeks after they arrived in Addis. She had dressed her baby in a light cotton onesie and socks so he'd be comfortable in the eighty-degree weather, but all the other woman at the clinic had their babies wrapped in heavy blankets and hats. They'd eyed Salih's bare head and exposed skin before looking away. Salih began to whimper and squirm in his carrier. Shelena dropped the stick and stalked off.

Tears stung Shelena's eyes. She was ashamed at her behavior with the children, ashamed that she had lost her temper like that. They weren't scary or mean, just kids being kids. She could

have taken them to a souk and bought them candy, since that's probably what they would have done with the money anyway. But she had panicked at being exposed as a foreigner.

In the distance Shelena heard chanting, but not from the Orthodox priests. "*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, As shadu an la illaha il-Allah,*" rang out into the streets. "God is bigger, God is bigger. I bear witness there is no god but God." It was time for *dhuhr*, the afternoon prayer.

Shelena hoisted the shopping bag into the crook of her elbow and followed the call to a masjid two blocks down from the road that led to her neighborhood. She hadn't known there was one in this area. It was a large masjid, but not nearly as big as the grand church Shelena had passed on her way to the market. Its *adhan* couldn't compete with that church's calls at dawn. Outside the masjid's rusted iron gate a small sign read, "Masjid A'isha," the Mosque of Life.

Shelena walked along the side of the masjid where a few women sat at a row of sinks washing their hands, face, and feet in preparation for prayer. A pile of leather sandals and rubber flip-flops sat clustered in a circle near the steps that led to the women's entrance to the prayer area. Shelena stood just outside the door and peered inside. The room was dark and cool thanks to the three ceiling fans that whirred softly, flicking the pages of announcements pinned to a corkboard near the entrance. A small group of women sat along one wall on the plush green carpet reading Qur'an, their legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, waiting for the prayer to begin. Shelena wanted to pray, imagined rinsing her feet like the women making *wudhu* and sinking her damp feet into the carpet, pressing her forehead to the ground in *sajdah* position, whispering *Subhana rabbe al a'laa*, Glory to my Lord the most High, three times, finishing the prayer with a greeting to the angels at her right and her left, *As salaamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu*, Peace, blessings, and the mercy of God upon you, but she would have to leave the chicken outside and she didn't want anybody to take it or throw it away on accident. Another time, she thought, then turned to leave.

A woman stood just behind Shelena. She wore a navy blue abaya with a snowy white hijab wrapped tightly around her head. Her skin was the color of honey and her eyebrows stretched out black and straight above her hazel eyes, like delicate, perfect brushstrokes. Shelena ducked her head and said 'salaam alaykum' to the woman as she walked past her towards the gate. The woman didn't return the greeting but said something in Amharic at Shelena's back.

Shelena turned. "*Yikerta*, excuse me." Salih stuck a hand out at the woman, like he wanted to give her a high five.

The woman ignored Salih and repeated herself, her voice stern.

Shelena shook her head. "*Engliziya bicha*, I only speak English."

The woman set her mouth in a line and headed out the gate in front of Shelena. She called a boy over who was standing at the corner and gestured towards Shelena as she spoke rapidly to him. The boy leaned back slightly from the woman but nodded his head and walked over to where Shelena stood, uncertain, her throat tight like a fist.

The boy stopped in front of Shelena and kept his head bowed. The woman nudged his elbow and spoke again, waving her hand in Shelena's direction.

The boy, who must have been about ten years old, stuffed his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts and raised his eyes timidly at Shelena. They were big and round like chocolate drops against his cinnamon-colored skin.

"She says, uhm," his eyes darted towards the woman who stood watching him closely, "She says you are not dressed proper to go to the masjid." He stole a glance at Shelena's jeans.

Shelena clasped her hands in front of her, water from the shopping bag dripping onto her toes that peeked out from her brown leather sandals. She resisted the urge to tug on the sleeves of her tunic that exposed several inches of her forearms. She felt the edge of her whisper-thin blue hijab slip back from her hairline, but she refused to adjust it in this woman's presence.

"I wasn't going into the masjid," she said, her face hot with embarrassment. "I was just looking."

Shelena wanted to tell the woman she'd wear what she wanted, thank you, but she was too tired to fight a battle she knew she couldn't win. She squared her shoulders and looked the woman in the eyes.

"As salaamu alaykum, *ukhti*." She purposely drew out the word 'sister.'

The woman hesitated, her eyes flickered with some recognition, maybe, then she muttered, "Wa alaykum salaam" before turning sharply back through the gates of the masjid.

The boy stood there, dragging the toe of his white sneaker in the dirt. He squinted up at Shelena and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't worry about her," he said. "Some people, you know, they just have to find something to complain about."

Shelena smiled at the boy and thanked him. "You're a smart kid," she said.

The boy's face lit up in a smile. He waved goodbye and ran off down the street, kicking up dust.

"Welcome to Ethiopia," he shouted over his shoulder.

Shelena rounded the corner and walked the last two blocks to her neighborhood, her legs leaden, the soggy shopping bag hitting against her thigh, soaking the leg of her jeans. The sight of the familiar corner souks and houses made her want to weep with relief, but she felt too tired to even dredge up tears. The midday streets were silent. She was three houses away from her own when she felt the heat and smelled the musty odor of a presence directly behind her. *No, not again, not one more thing.*

She whipped around, ready to yell, and found two donkeys walking so closely behind her they almost butted into her. She hopped out of the way to let them pass. They walked at a slow, even pace on their short, gray legs, their wet black eyes focused on the piece of road just in front of them. Shelena stuck out her hand and let her fingers graze the donkey's rough, wooly hide. Its sinewy hind muscles bulged with each step. Salih looked wide-eyed at the silent animal. Shelena took Salih's hand and crouched down so he could feel the donkey's fur. He balled his fist against the prickly hairs but kicked his feet in excitement.

As the next donkey passed in front of them, Shelena put her hand out again. The donkey turned its head towards her and licked her fingers. She jumped back and laughed in delighted surprise. Its tongue was warm and slightly abrasive.

Shelena stood in the middle of the road, gripping the bag of chicken, the meat completely thawed out now but still cold, and watched the donkeys saunter off, each hoof hitting the ground in rhythmic, measured steps. She resumed her walk and continued the nursery rhyme where she'd left off earlier that morning.

"To market, to market
To buy a fat hog.
Home again, home again
Jiggety-jog."

Salih reached up and grabbed her bottom lip. Shelena pretended to eat his hand until he giggled and pulled away.

"To market, to market
To buy a fat chicken.
Home again, home again..."

Shelena stopped. There was no chicken in the nursery rhyme. She shrugged and walked on. She'd just have to make up her own rhyme.

*

Baseemah made *doro wat* with the chicken for dinner that night. Chunks of chicken swam in a pool of thick, red gravy with a boiled egg in the center of the oval plate, circled by portions of steamed spinach, stewed cabbage and carrots, beets, and crumbles of white cheese. Baseemah

placed a small bowl of *shiro wat*, a pureed lentil dish that Shelena loved, next to the platter with rolls of *injera* stacked in small piles between the vegetables.

Mohammed held Salih on his chest and rubbed the baby's back while Shelena told him about her day. His face was grim, the lines in his forehead forming a V where his eyebrows scrunched together.

"That's rough. I'm sorry you had to experience all that," he said. He shook his head and rested his chin on Salih's shoulder. "I've been thinking all day about what you said this morning. I didn't see my boss today, but tomorrow I'm going to schedule a time to talk with her. There's no point in us being here if you aren't happy. If you think it's best to go home, then we'll go home."

Shelena grabbed a roll of *injera* and tore off a large piece of the spongy bread. Her thoughts went back to the two donkeys, how they'd kept their eyes down and focused on the road in front of them and weren't the least bit startled when she turned on them, as if they could have walked right through her.

She shook her head. "No. I want to stay."

The words came out of her mouth just as they came into her head, like a smooth, clear stone dropped into a bucket full of water. She wanted to stay. For tear-stained hijabs, and morning *adhan's*, and donkeys that licked her fingers. For snotty-nosed kids and sour masjid aunties, too. For whatever existed down the road she could not see.

Shelena used the piece of bread in her hand to pierce the boiled egg in the center of the *wat*, then scoop up spinach and a chunk of chicken, dragging it all through the sauce. She folded the bread with her thumb then dropped the morsel into her mouth, her fingers never touching her lips.

Mohammed watched her with a smile dancing on his lips then tipped his head towards her. "You eat like an *Habesha*," he said.

Shelena smiled as she chewed the food, the complex spices of the *berbere* blossoming on her tongue.