

OF BEETLES & ANGELS:

A BOY'S REMARKABLE JOURNEY FROM A REFUGEE CAMP TO HARVARD

Chapter One: Memories

The desert, I remember. The shrieking hyenas, I remember. But beyond that, I cannot separate what I remember from what I have heard in stories.

I may or may not remember seeing my mother look at our house in Adi Wahla, Ethiopia, just before we left. Gazing at it as though it were a person whom she loved and cherished. Trance-walking to the house's white exterior, laying her hands on it for a few moments, feeling its heartbeat-feeling her own heartbeat-then kissing it, knowing that she might never see it again.

I remember playing soccer with rocks, and a strange man telling me and my brother Tewolde that we had to go on a trip, and Tewolde refusing to go. The man took out a piece of gum, and Tewolde happily traded his homeland.

I remember our journey and the woman we met. Despite her fatigue, she walked and walked and walked, trying to limp her way to safety across miles of stones and rocks. She continued to limp, wanting to stop, but knowing that if she did, she wouldn't move again.

She pressed on and on, and soon her limp became a crawl. And then I saw a sight that I would never forget-the soles of her naked feet melting away, and then disappearing into the desert, leaving only her bloody, red flesh, mixed with brownish sand and dirt.

But still, she kept on limping. For what choice does a refugee have?

We had no choice, either. We-my mother, my five-year-old brother, my baby sister, and I-kept walking, hoping that we would make it to Sudan and find my father. He had fled our war-ravaged home a year earlier, driven away by the advancing Ethiopian army.

Even stories fail me as I try to recall the rest of our journey. I know only that the wilderness took its toll, that our young bodies gave way, and that we entered a more barren and deadly internal wilderness.

We crossed the Sudanese border and arrived at a city called Awad. A sign should have been posted at the city limits: Awad, home of the exiled. Home of the hopeless. Home of the diseased. A simple sign that would warn and welcome us all.

Welcome, all you refugees. All you psychologically tormented. All you physically malnourished. All you uprooted. Rest your burdens here, for you can rest them nowhere else. Rest your hopes here, for no other place will accept them.

But do not hope too much. For too much hope can lead to insanity.

Beware. We can ill treat your ailments. We have few pills here and little life. We have no guarantees that medicine, not flour, fills the pills. But you have no choice, and neither do we. For we give only that which we have.

Beware our fishermen. Where's the water, you ask? There is no water. They fish strangers, vagabonds, foreigners, refugees. They look for you even now; if they find you, they will drag you with their iron nets to a wilderness hell.

Please do not blame us. What would you do if chaos approached you on the tortured feet of a million refugees? Could you handle so many?

I don't remember avoiding the iron nets or finding my father. But I do remember seeking safety in a Sudanese refugee camp. My family spent three years there.

But the camp had its own problems. Disease took its toll, famine always threatened, and warfare plagued Sudan.

Although the fighting never reached our camp, the Sudanese armies were always looking for new soldiers. And they didn't hesitate to draft refugees.

My parents wondered: What kind of future do we have here? What kind of future do our kids have?

They started hearing more and more about a distant land, a paradise where everyone had a future.

And then, one day, they decided that they'd had enough. War at home. War in Sudan. They wanted peace, and they were ready to go. The village elders watched them prepare and offered a few words of wisdom.

Heading to America, are you? They say that everyone there drives big cars and lives in big houses. Money flows through streets of glimmering gold. And everyone lives long, easy lives.

You will undoubtedly be happy there. Go well, live long, and please, do not forget us.

But as you gather your belongings, please permit us a few words of caution. We may be the poorest and least educated of folks, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees living in Nowhere, Sudan, but even we have heard things that may interest you.

America seems sweet on top, like fresh honey straight from the comb. But what's sweet on the surface is often rotten underneath. So beware.

Beware your skins. Blacks are treated like adgi in America, like packhorses. Beware, too, of thieves. Yes, thieves who steal much more than money-thieves who can loot minds, cultures, and even bodies.

Most of all, please remember your country and remember us. Remember your people.