

Endalegeta KEBEDE

UNDER THE DARK SKY

On his way to his office every morning, he always finds sitting in a street corner a beggar with her four children. He listens to her endless chatter.

The very appearance of the four children clearly indicates that they have suffered great misery. The mother's condition is even worse. The children are dressed in underwear whose colors have faded, then turned totally black because they had not seen water for ages. Below their waist, they are all naked.

She talks to them in language they don't know, and they don't answer her. The children understand one another in Amharic, the official language of the country.

Everybody doubts that the mother is healthy; some even think that she might have a mental disorder as a result of her excessive concern for her children's fate and destiny. She does nothing for herself. She skips so much on food and water.

Many passers-by throw coins in her direction as alms. Yet she is totally impervious to them. She does not pick up the coins. She looks at no one. She sits with her head between her knees. She stays on that roadside corner day and night.

A little distance away from where she sits, a young man in tattered clothes, who does not seem to have evil motives, watches the mother and her children with concern and protection. He smokes cigarette stubs he collected from the street.

Is he the father of the children or a temporary husband whom she had beried when she went out into the streets? Or somebody who followed her and came to protect her from evil? Or is he somebody who has devoted himself to spiritual life and protects the children?

The youngest of the children seems to be ill, and whose death is not far away. She is about two years old. The other child, about six years of age, has placed herself not far from her mother and is surveying passersby, entreating them in a soft voice,

"Please give some coins to buy bread" She saves the coins she has received as alms from passers-by. When her savings reach fifty cents, she rushes to the nearby bakery and buys bread. Her younger ones leave their mother behind and follow her, like chicks.

Upon her return, she hands the bread to the mother-who cuts it into four pieces and distributes them. She doesn't keep anything for herself.

The children do not persuade her to eat. The man on the sidewalk sometimes wonders what the children think about their mother. He has never passed a night there without saluting them. Warmly, he shakes hands with each of them. The children rush to touch his hand.

The mother doesn't see any of this. She is unaware of what is going on around her. It seems as if she is unable to raise her head and look into the eyes of others.

He searches his pockets looking for coins and finds a five-birr note. He looks around but all shops are closed. He just doesn't know where to change it.

The note was what he had kept to buy his supper. He did not have lunch that day. His stomach was so empty that it made sounds similar to a landside rumbling down a mountain. He just couldn't find a place where he could change the note. Pedestrians pass-by in hurry, looking at him with suspicious eyes. He doesn't ask any of them to change his five-birr note.

He asks himself, 'what would I lose if I didn't eat lunch and supper?' He first means to drop it near the family. Instead, though, he puts the note in the mother's palm. The mother doesn't respond, nor smile.

In fact, she did not see him at all. No voice was heard from her. Only the eldest child, a daughter, realized they have received something big. Full of great joy and surprise, she woke up the rest of the children who had fallen asleep. It wasn't difficult to wake them up. She ignored their guardian, who seemed quite asleep.

If one looks at how the mother and her four children are seated, the mother resembles a large clay water jar, and children look like pebbles supporting the jar, so it won't fall down.

The mother tore the five-birr note in to two pieces. Then she tore those to two more, so there were four pieces in all: in a minute, she handed them out to her children.

The eldest daughter was so angry that she curled her thick lips and threw the coins she had at her mother's head. With a deep sense of bitterness, she said, "You are useless! That note would have bought a lot of bread and save us from starving!"

As though she did not understand what her daughter said, the mother stared at her. She also saw the alm-giver's strange look, also beyond her comprehension. They stared at one another for a while. Tears began to flow out of his eyes, making lines on his cheeks and down to his mouth.

When this happened, the mother who tore the five-birr note to four pieces looked at him.

The alms giver began to move. Like a shadow, he walked slowly, disappearing into the vast darkness. She followed him with her eyes until his figure went out of her sight.

The mother cried, wept, and yelled with bitterness through the night. She may have done that because she rendered the five-birr note worthless. She might have realized that she could have used the note to avoid hunger. Or the tears of the alms-giver might have reminded her of something.

Nobody asked her why.

Translated from the Amharic by the author