Chapter seven – Subsection 5: 2014, The Biffles Visit the Motherland

Part fiction, part true.

Before we board the plane, let me clear up a friendly confusion. The **Beatles** were a British band from Liverpool—John, Paul, George, and Ringo—four young men who rewired popular music in the 1960s with harmonies you can still hum and inventions musicians still study. Their name is etched on stadiums and syllabi.

The **Biffles**, meanwhile, are no one's rock band and everyone's favorite inside joke. They're a self-named council of a dozen second-generation Ethiopians—children of the diaspora—who grew up braided across families, church halls, birthday parties, and road-trip minivans. They have four pairs of parents between them (diaspora math is always generous), and at least one parent from each pair signed off on a December 2014 mission: fly from San Francisco to Addis Ababa and see the motherland with eyes old enough to notice, young enough to be changed.

No one knows how the name "Biffles" stuck. It is **not** the fishing lure Google offers you, nor a mash-up of "best friend forever." It's just what these cousins and cousin-adjacents called themselves one day and never stopped. They even anointed a CEO—my daughter, **Bethlehem ("Betty") Aynalem**—because every diaspora enterprise eventually discovers it needs a meeting agenda and someone to keep the group chats from splitting into seven threads. Betty is the eldest; the title found its rightful owner.

The ages in this crew make a tidy arc: **Naomi**, the youngest at thirteen when the plan was inked years later, and **Betty**, thirty-three by the time we're telling this story. In between you'll hear from **Mesgana**, **Andreas**, **Beza**, **Meklit**, **Mickey**, **Amerti**, **Blein**, **Yoni**, and two siblings who anchor one end of our timeline—**Eyuel**, now a college freshman, and Naomi, his younger sister. The lore says many of them "joined" the Biffles around the time of **Eyuel's** birth; someone even kept a charming roll call of "age at joining"—as if membership were a sacrament: Mesgana at one, Andreas at two, Beza at three, Meklit at four, Mickey and Amerti at five, Blein at seven, Yoni at nine, and Betty, already fourteen, the founding older cousin who made sure snacks and schedules were evenly distributed.

And so, six years after I first returned to Ethiopia, the Biffles declared a reset. Yes, a few had crossed that ocean before—**Betty** at ten and again as a bridesmaid, **Amerti** as a toddler and at four, **Abel** at six—but the 2014 trip would be counted as the first on purpose: a clean plate for memories they chose themselves.

Wheels Up: SFO to Bole

At San Francisco, the parents—Elizabeth among them—counted passports like rosary beads while the Biffles counted possibilities. On the plane, a little diaspora orchestra tuned up: movie audio leaking from too-tight earbuds, zippered pouches of snacks parceled out by rank and seniority, whispered Amharic drifting forward from three rows back, and someone explaining—earnestly, wrongly—that Addis is colder because it's "near the Sahara," which is how Americans reveal the size of Africa every time they try to shrink it.

Somewhere over Greenland, the text threads slowed, and a hush set in—the old pressure of going back to a place you've been told to love. In the dark cabin, Betty's blue screen reflected a list titled **"First 48 Hours"**: SIM cards, money exchange, coffee ceremony, visit to grandparents' graves, trip to the National Museum to greet **Lucy**, stop at **Shiro Meda** for shawls, **Piassa** for legacy cafes, and a morning on **Entoto** for air thin enough to stretch a jetlagged chest.

At dawn they descended over **Bole**. Even the window-seat agnostics of nostalgia sat up. Addis doesn't reveal herself evenly; she grazes your senses in layers. **Eucalyptus** smoke first. Then the braided movement of people: school uniforms pulsing at intersections, buses gulping and exhaling, taxis half-gestures and full opinions. Then the skyline, taller than anyoneI remembered—cranes like long-legged birds stepping through a city under construction. In 2014, the **light rail** hadn't yet started its public run, but its line was already etched across boulevards, a promise in concrete and rebar.

At the arrivals door, the country performs its unbroken ritual: a sudden, almost comic multiplication of relatives. Hugs land as lightly as cymbals and as loudly. Names tumble out with titles: **woyzero**, **ato**, **gash**, **ensete** of honor layered over first and last names, everything softened by **enesu** and **antä**—you—and a chorus of **"dehna neh? dehna nesh?"** Even those who don't speak Amharic hear meaning in the cadence: **you are safe, you are welcome, you are ours**.

Addis, 2014: The City That Grew While I was Gone

Call 2014 a hinge. The Addis of the Biffles' childhood stories—lower skylines, fewer roundabouts, fewer espresso bars—had already molted. Construction fences wore billboard optimism. **Meskel Square** looked like a stage perpetually being set and struck. **Bole Road** unfurled like a runway for new hotels. **Mercato** was its old self turned up—corridors of commerce where the map changes every hour, and you learn to measure distance in **"how many left turns until the spice woman who laughs."**

The Biffles split into two tribes immediately: the **"we're walking"** group, led by Betty, and the **"we're negotiating a van"** group, led by all uncles in every generation. Elizabeth)everyone

called her aunty Elsa) job was to play translation and timekeeper and to win exactly one argument per day.

The first coffee ceremony

Day one's afternoon was claimed by a **bunna** ceremony. Green beans cracked in the pan—first smell—then an older cousin's hands moving like a remembered song: rinse, roast, grind, **jebena**, pour, pass. **Abol**, **tona**, **baraka**—first, second, third rounds—spaced not by caffeine but by conversation. This is where the Biffles began to hear the city's social grammar. You don't gulp and go. You sit. You make eye contact over small cups that somehow hold entire family histories.

Mickey and **Meklit** sat close, the siblings trading quiet glances as the steam rose. Their parents, **Mamme** and **Melaku**, met years ago in a **refugee camp in Khartoum**, when waiting was the job and hope was the only salary. Addis, then, had been a horizon; now it was a room they could walk around in. For Mickey and Meklit, the smell of coffee in a long-lived home was the anti-camp—a declaration that life can root again. Later that evening, Mickey said, almost to himself, "So this is what it looks like when our people don't have to ask permission to gather."

Piassa and the old cafes

If the coffee ceremony was home, **Piassa** was theater. The Biffles perched at a table under framed black-and-whites of emperors and athletes, ordered macchiatos with a shyness that broke by the second sip, and watched Addis pass by with the kind of posture you learn only by growing up here: upright, purposeful, dress shoes that mean business. **Beza** kept touching the marble tabletop with her fingertips, the way you might greet a piano you haven't played in years. Her parents, **Yene** and **Mesfin**, had flown straight from Addis to America, skipping camps and detours. For Beza, this city wasn't prelude; it was origin. She listened as an auntie explained which street had new **condominiums** and which had been a trench in the **Derg** days. "So much is new," she said, "but my mouth knows these flavors."

The National Museum: meeting Lucy

Lucy is a ritual you don't skip. In her glass case, the ancient bones look smaller than the weight of their meaning. The Biffles read the placards slowly, the way you read a note from someone you love who has been gone a very long time. **Yoni** leaned in and whispered, "She looks like she's still walking." **Andreas**—once the child who memorized everything, still the young man who holds facts like river stones—started listing the age estimates, the debates, the field sites. **Blein** nudged him and said, "Shh, let her talk," and everyone smiled and went quiet, the hum of the museum like a respectful wind.

Entoto's air

Day two, they climbed **Entoto** for the view that rearranges your lungs. The city below looks like a toy train set from up there; the noise dissolves, and the eucalyptus sings a different scale. They visited the church, read names in old wood, made the sign of the cross like people whose hands remember even if their minds need prompting. **Amerti**, always precise, collected a handful of leaves and tucked them into a notebook. "For later," she said. "For when the room needs to smell like this again."

The learning curve of streets

No first visit is complete without the dance that is **Addis traffic**. The painted lines are suggestions; the roundabouts are ensemble pieces. One of the uncles took the wheel and did what uncles do: narrated his excellent driving while inventing international hand signals. At one jammed circle, **Naomi** watched a man in a brown jacket step into the mess and, with a few sharply drawn gestures, untangle the knot. "Is he a policeman?" she asked. "Today he is," the uncle said. "In Addis you graduate to officer the moment you're needed."

The Biffle Voices

Betty (CEO):
"I planned the trip like a board meeting and lived it like a wedding. My spreadsheet had columns for SIM cards, bank hours, museum times, and 'adult energy levels,' which I rated optimistically. Addis didn't reward my precision; she rewarded my flexibility. Half our best moments weren't on the list—the extra coffee round because a story wasn't finished, a detour because a cousin waved from across a street, a sunset we chased because the clouds suddenly opened a path. Leadership here meant setting the table and letting the meal take its time."

Mickey & Meklit (siblings, children of Khartoum survivors):
"In the camp, our parents said, there were always lines—for water, for paperwork, for the possibility of tomorrow. In Addis we found lines of another kind: lines of embroidery on shawls at Shiro Meda, lines of verse at a reading where a poet spoke about **injera** in a way that made our aunt cry, a line of schoolchildren crossing the road with a teacher who held up a small paddle like a moon. Our parents' love story grew from waiting; our trip was a harvest. We ate from their certainty that the world can be kind again."

Beza (daughter of a straight-to-America flight):
"My parents took the long-haul flight that changes a family's language. No camp, no middle place—just Addis to America with a suitcase and a discipline you can smell in a kitchen at 5:00 a.m. Coming here wasn't a return; it was a meeting. The city recognized me—not by face, but by rhythm. The way I walked, the way I said **ebakish** to an elder and she smiled before correcting

my verb. I kept thinking: I am not adding culture to myself; I am uncovering something that was already mine."

Naomi & Eyuel (siblings whose mother Rahel lived under our roof):
"Our mom, **Rahel**, learned California by learning our household—where the cereal lives, how the washing machine sounds when it's full, what jokes unlock a long day. She met our dad, **Kalab**, after a trip like this. For us, Ethiopia wasn't a mystery; it was a set of voices we already knew by speakerphone. In Addis we got the faces to match. Our grandmother's soft hands, our cousins' chaotic laughter, the very bench our mom said she sat on the day she chose a path that led to us. Every time someone pinched our cheeks and said our name three times in one breath, it felt like being knighted into a story that started before we were born."

Andreas & Amerti (my younger two on this trip):
"They were a study in contrasts. **Andreas**—all quicksilver mind and restless charm—memorized bus routes as if they were music; he could tell you which minibus got you from Piassa to Bole faster at 3:00 p.m. **Amerti**, a future scientist's soul, tracked patterns: how often water delivery trucks passed on our street; which mornings brought more school uniforms to the corner; how the market's price for tomatoes shifted after rain. Addis gave them each a lab—one of motion, one of measure—and they both flourished."

Yoni & Blein:
"In the diaspora, you build an identity like a house you keep adding rooms to. In Addis, the blueprint is underneath the floorboards. **Yoni** learned you can make friends with a soccer ball and a few phrases, and **Blein** learned that when an auntie says 'five minutes' she means 'nineteen stories and a plate of **dabo** later.' They both learned that time here is elastic on purpose—so that care can stretch to fit what's needed."

What They Found, Given Their Ages

One promise Auntie Elsa made on the flight out—**wipe the plate clean**—produced a gift: each Biffle saw 2014's Ethiopia with the kind of clarity that belongs to the age they were.

- The **younger teens** found wonder in **scale**. A single Market block feels like a city. A single church service feels like a concert. A single cousin dinner multiplies into ten conversations.
- The **late teens** found wonder in **agency**. Haggling with confidence. Ordering food in half-remembered Amharic that came back fully remembered by dessert. Navigating without Google Maps because someone's uncle gives directions that begin with "where the jacaranda bends."

- The **twenty-somethings** found wonder in **work**. The espresso barista who plays both sides of the counter like a magician. The tailor who measures with his eyes and pinches the fabric exactly where it needs to fall. The street vendor who tracks ten customers' needs and makes exact change without breaking the rhythm of his patter.
- **Betty**, the eldest, found wonder in **continuity**. A great-grandfather's prayer repeated in a great-granddaughter's mouth. A street name that survived three regimes. A lullaby a grandmother sang on a porch now sung by a teenage cousin who learned it from the internet and a stubborn mother's memory.

Days that Became Chapters

A morning at Shiro Meda

Some trips are fluorescent; others are woven. **Shiro Meda** is the second. The Biffles touched cloth like it was language: **tibeb** embroidered edges that spell patience, **netela** light enough to carry memory without weight. **Meklit** tried on a shawl and stood in front of a mirror that had seen a thousand such moments. She didn't pose; she listened—to an older woman explaining patterns, to the starch's whisper when the fabric settled on her shoulders, to the way her own face shifted as the garment named her part of a longer line.

Mercato and the art of not getting lost

They started at one corner and were immediately nowhere they recognized. That is Mercato's charm. **Yoni** learned to read the flow of bodies like a current and to angle himself with it, not against. **Blein** adopted a seller as a guide for ten minutes and left with **berbere**, a joke, and a new way to say **thank you**. Auntie Elsa was reminded that every economist should be forced to spend three hours here before publishing. You learn more about exchange in those stalls than in a semester of diagrams.

The detour that became the story

On day five, a road closure rerouted them toward a neighborhood no one planned to visit. They stopped at a small shop to ask directions and found a woman who sold bottles of water and thirty minutes of history—this street before the new road, that corner before the flood, the year her daughter was born when the clinic opened. **Beza** wrote the name of the shop on a receipt and took a photo of the doorway. "For next time," she said, and in that sentence made both a promise and a home.

The Parents on the Periphery

The parents played their part—credit cards, medicine, the daily negotiation between itinerary and appetite. But they also learned to stand back. There is a moment when you stop interpreting a country for your children and let the country interpret itself. In 2014, Addis took the microphone, and parents learned to be ushers.

When parents did step in, it was to teach small verbs that keep a big city kind. **Greet** before you ask. **Wait** before you correct. **Follow** when an elder points. **Tip** as if dignity is priceless. **Refuse** scarcity thinking; **accept** generosity thinking. And one more: **laugh** when a plan dissolves and a better plan materializes in its place like a friend arriving unannounced.

What 2014 Addis Gave the Biffles

- **A larger self.** The Biffles learned that identity stretches to fill the room you give it. They didn't become "more Ethiopian" by buying cloth; they became more themselves by realizing which parts of them were already stitched in the old patterns.
- **A workable nostalgia.** Not the kind that insists everything was better—Addis in 2014 had traffic, smog, prices that could bite—but the kind that lets you love a place without lying about it.
- **A map that isn't on paper.** Shortcuts through kin. A cousin who knows a clinic director. An auntie who knows which line to stand in. A neighbor who knows a **micro** driver who knows a back road. The kind of map that makes a city livable and a diaspora survivable.
- **A first page, not a final chapter.** By declaring this trip their "first," they freed themselves to return without the guilt of "making up" for lost time. You can't make up for lost time. You can only make **this** time count.

A Coda from the CEO

On the flight home, lights dimmed again, the Biffles slept in diagonals. **Betty** stayed up with a notebook and wrote a list, not for herself but for the crew:

- Next time, start with grandparents.
- Pack fewer shoes; pack more patience.
- Always leave room for one unplanned detour.
- Learn five new verbs; use them until they're yours.
- Tip the storyteller.
- Take the photo **after** you've listened.
- When you say goodbye, make it a **see you soon**.

She didn't read it aloud. She just tore the page into small strips and tucked one into each cousin's passport while they slept.

The Biffles are not the Beatles. They don’t have a record contract, only a family contract. But in December 2014, they played a set you could hear if you stood in the right places: a coffee ceremony kitchen at 3 p.m., the steps of a museum case at noon, a street corner at dusk where a man in a brown jacket directed traffic with nothing but confidence and a smile. The melody has been stuck in everyone’s head ever since: a dozen young people discovering that the motherland isn’t a metaphor, it’s a door—and they’ve learned how to knock, and to enter, and to stay just long enough to be called back again.