Chapter Four. Subsection 1: Back to 1991, the circle around Bethlehem

Names carry instructions. We named our daughter Bethlehem in November 1991, and the world began to gather around her as if her small crib were a hearth. She was not only our first child; she was the household's shared treasure, a magnet for tenderness in a place where tenderness often had to fight for room. In the photographs from those first months, every adult's body angles toward her—elbows tucked in, heads slightly bowed, as if proximity were its own prayer.

A village in exile

From the start, her care moved in rings. The inner ring was me and Elizabeth, stunned-by-joy parents counting breaths in the dark. The next ring was Elizabeth's family—Sirgut and Genet, Mesfin, the cousins and aunties, everyone who had already learned to make America feel less like a test and more like a house you could enter without apology. And then there were the circles that widened when needed: neighbors who showed up with soup, church elders who arrived with blessings, friends who insisted on holding the baby so the parents could eat with two hands. Diaspora life builds family out of reliability. Our daughter was raised by that reliability.

There is a home video—shot on Asnake's RCA camcorder—where infant Bethlehem blinks in soft light while little Sara, the daughter of our friends Emebet and Daniel, leans into the frame. You can hear the low hum of adults speaking in two languages and two continents at once. In the background there is always a kettle, always a soft laugh, always a hand stretching into the picture with something warm to pass forward. That was her weather.

The great grandfather who brought the old country in a suitcase

In 1994, when Bethlehem was two, Elizabeth's grandfather—Ato Aklilu—arrived from Ethiopia on a tourist visa. I had met him years earlier after the encounter with his granddaughter at the Dashen Tea House stairs, the gatekeeper who could read a man's intentions in a single greeting and, somehow, extended me a quiet welcome. When he came to America, he carried less luggage than language.

He sat with Bethlehem on the couch and taught her the cadences of Amharic the way a patient gardener teaches a vine to climb. Short stories first—foxes and saints, market days and moonlit paths—then prayers whose vowels lengthen at the end like a sigh. He did not simplify. He spoke to her as if her mind could hold the weight, and in time it did. She learned to say selam and ibakish and egziabher yimesgen with the confidence of someone who understands that speech is a bridge to elders. In the evenings he would begin a familiar blessing and leave the last line for her to complete. When she found the words, his eyes shone in that quiet way great grandfathers have, where pride and relief arrive together.

By the time she could run a short distance without falling, she could also carry stories back and forth between rooms. The fear—every immigrant parent's fear—that a child will grow fluent only in the new country's grammar began to loosen its hold. Language is not just vocabulary; it is permission to belong. She was earning that permission in both directions.

Two mothers at one birthday

Bethlehem learned family the way children learn routes—by repetition and landmarks. On her first birthday in our American Canyon rental, two mothers stood by her cake because that is who she named, and names are true. She called Sirgut “Mom,” and still does at thirty-three. No one corrected her; we rearranged ourselves around the gift she was giving us: a larger definition. In the photographs, candles light up two faces leaning toward one child, nobody worried about labels, everybody certain about roles.

Clinton’s America as backdrop

For context, consider the calendar stamped behind her childhood pictures. Her second birthday fell in November 1993, near the start of Clinton’s America, and her seventh in November 1998, deep into it. Those were years of expansion and argument. The economy lifted; the internet dial tone became a household sound; NAFTA entered dinner-table debates; welfare reform renamed obligations; the 1994 crime bill reshaped punishment; California passed Proposition 187 and tried to make services contingent on papers before courts blunted its reach. Multiculturalism was a slogan on campus flyers and a puzzle in schools deciding what to do about bilingual classrooms. In all that noise, our house translated the era into the practical: a more forgiving job market for parents; libraries with story hour and computers on rolling carts; immunization schedules printed on yellow cards; teachers who asked how to pronounce our daughter’s last name as if that question itself were a test they wanted to pass.

We explained the background to her later, when she was old enough to ask why a law would try to chase a child’s doctor away. In the moment, we did what families do: kept the pantry full, kept the calendar balanced between church and school and gatherings, kept the door open to visitors who needed to feel welcome in a decade that didn’t always welcome them.

The small rituals that make a person

If you asked what shaped Bethlehem most in those early years, I would list rituals, not milestones. The Friday grocery run where she rode in the cart and learned the names of greens in two languages. The Saturday gatherings where coffee beans cracked in the pan and she learned to wait for the third round. The Sunday clothes folded carefully on a chair, not from vanity but from respect for the day. Weeknight dinners where injera shared a plate with rice because that’s what the pantry allowed and that hybrid told the truth about our lives. Drives in the Chrysler Fifth Avenue that once belonged to her great-uncle—leather seats that held the memory of another man’s hands on the wheel, now carrying a child named for a city that lives in every gospel reading.

She learned to say thank you to elders first, to offer chairs without being told, to listen for the part of a story that is instruction disguised as entertainment. She grew up in the corridor between languages and treated it not as a hallway to rush through but as a room to live in.

Father at the crib

There is a sentence I kept for myself in those long days: this is why I chose to stay. When fatigue threatened to make me careless, I would lean over her crib and watch the small work of breathing. The driver-ed weekends, the university weekdays, the immigration limbo, the disappointment of plans that kept changing—all of it organized itself around that sound. If you are a parent and you have ever stood in a dark room listening to a child sleep, you know the treaty it writes inside you. I would touch her back lightly, just enough to feel her body answer. Endure, the moment would say. Endure and organize your life so this person can grow into her name.

A child in a multigenerational room

We often talk about "the village" that raises a child as if it were a metaphor. For us it was a guest list. Ato Aklilu in his chair, teaching cadences. Two mothers sharing duties without ceremony. Aunties who arrived with soup and counsel in equal measure. Uncles who fixed something in the yard and quietly refilled the gas tank. Church elders who blessed her forehead and, when needed, corrected a toddler-sized mischief without offense. Neighbors who didn't share our language but understood our project. When she took her first faltering steps in the living room, so many hands hovered near her shoulders that tripping seemed unlikely. The miracle, of course, is that she fell anyway and learned to get up, which is its own liturgy.

Lessons the decade handed her

Clinton's America gave her a few early lessons that never left. First, that public institutions—schools, libraries, clinics—are the daily face of a country's character. When they worked for our daughter, we felt seen; when a policy threatened to narrow their welcome, we felt the cold. Second, that identities are plural without being diluted. She could be Ethiopian and American; she could answer to Bethlehem and to Betty and carry both names whole. Third, that equity is not an abstract word. It is who gets called on, whose accent is mocked, whose lunch is traded away because it smells different, who gets a second chance when they make a mistake.

The work she grew up to choose

Fast-forward and the child at the coffee ceremony is now thirty-three, a Director of Equity and Inclusion at Stanford University. I don't pretend causality is that tidy, but I recognize the fingerprints. The patience to listen across differences grew on our couch while elders debated in Amharic and English, sometimes at the same time. The instinct to make room for those at the edges grew at a table where an extra place setting could appear in a heartbeat. The habit of learning a person's name and saying it correctly began in a house where mispronouncing an auntie's name would get you the softest, firmest correction of your week.

When I visit her office, I see echoes: the way she arranges chairs to face each other rather than the door, the bowl of nuts that always seems refilled, the careful language she uses when explaining tough truths to people who want to do right but need a map. She manages rooms the

way her great-grandfather taught prayers—patiently, precisely, trusting that people can handle the full weight if you respect them with it.

The center and the choice

There was a week, long ago, when I nearly left. I missed an immigration interview and flirted with boarding a plane back to a life I understood how to narrate. The thing that kept me was a crib two rooms away. In a decade of argument and opportunity, of border talk and broadband, that crib decided my politics in the most intimate sense: I would be a father here, and I would make our house a place where a child could grow without apology.

I do not romanticize the cost. We lost a stove and a fridge to a change of plans; we surrendered seventeen years to a bureaucratic patience test; we learned to build side doors when front doors wouldn't open. But count the returns with me. A great grandfather in a chair, passing on a language. Two mothers at a cake, insisting love expands. A child who learned to use her name like a lantern in rooms that needed light. A family that made America answer for its promises by showing up to claim them.

If you are listening with your own map in hand

For the children of the diaspora listening to this, hold two ideas at once. You are the center of circles drawn by people who came far so you could stand where you stand. And you are also a circle-drawer now—making space for those who come after, widening the table, correcting mispronunciations gently but firmly, asking institutions to match their mission statements with their hallways.

Bethlehem's first year was laughter and tiny triumphs and the quiet miracle of growth. Her second through seventh fell under Clinton's presidency, framed by a country figuring out—imperfectly—how to welcome difference and how to argue about it in public. Through it all, she was the reason our house chose endurance over complaint.

Some nights, even now, when the day has been loud and long, I still hear the small rhythm of a baby breathing in a California room. It reminds me that the biggest decisions in my life were made in the dark, beside a crib, by a man learning how to be the father his daughter already believed he was.