Two Houses, Two Histories

Whenever I return to Nekemt, my feet pull me toward the houses that made me. The first house—one big room divided by a selein, that hanging straw mat—had been our boundary between sleeping and living, between the child I was and the privacy my elders never quite managed to have. Later the state took it, folded it into the Derg's ledger when "extra" houses were nationalized. The second house, a step up my father built with a fellow policeman—two tin-roofed houses that felt like a claim to sturdiness—stood for a time as proof that progress is sometimes just a better roof.

Decades later, I saw the old place again. It leaned, unsure whether to stand or surrender, like a city catching its balance after history's shove. The postures of those two houses—one seized and sagging, one self-built and stoic—still feel like the photograph of my childhood. They are also the frame through which I understood my closest friendship. Because across town, under a different tin roof, lived Solomon Ali and his enormous family—a household of twelve that throbbed with noise and purpose. His father Gash Ali, Eritrean-born and Nekemt-rooted, was the town's best tailor, a soccer referee, a community spark plug. He died young, but not before stitching pride into the fabric of a town. My own father worked far, dissolved marriages, left traces that were mostly absences. Two fathers, two legacies. Two roofs, two rooms in my heart.

We used to joke that the map folded in on itself: one father leaving Eritrea for Nekemt, the other leaving Nekemt for Eritrea, the two of them missing each other like trains that pass at night—one with lights dimmed; the other with windows full of faces looking for their stop. If you laid their routes on paper, you would see two lines that almost touch, kink apart, and then run on in stubborn parallels, carrying sons who would one day sit in the same cafeteria and argue about what a decent life requires.

Gash Ali came south with his trade in a bundle: needles, chalk, measuring tape, body memory. He arrived in Nekemt and let the town take his measure. The shop was barely a room—one foot-pedal machine, a wooden counter burnished by elbows, a shelf of cloth rolls like a muted rainbow. Outside, the dust carried rumors and football scores. Inside, he carried exactness. He would tug a shoulder seam, tilt his head, and hum a private scale, that tune tailors use when their hands are thinking: *half a finger here, a crease there, a new line to make the wearer believe the mirror*. People came for trousers and left with standing that elevated them In a place where cash thinned at month's end, he bartered dignity—let a harvest pay a hem; let a promise pay the rest.

He kept a second profession that never paid a single Birr: referee. On the field at the edge of town he learned their limits for anger and joy. The whistle was not a weapon; it was a reset. He knew how to make a bad tackle into an apology, how to keep boys from turning a grievance into a feud. When a match ended with the score knotted and tempers high, he walked the sidelines shaking hands until the air cooled. Ask anyone who played those years and they will tell you a

version of the same sentence: without him, the games would have turned into something else. A tailor fixes lines; a ref fixes lines, too—what is in and what is out, what we accept, what we won't.

People say he fled conscription, and the rumor has the shape of truth. The north in those years tugged at every young man: party cadres, whispers about clandestine recruitment or a splinter, it hardly mattered to a boy who wanted to live to see his children. Hope and fear cross the same border. Maybe he ran from a summons; maybe he ran toward a town that needed shirts for the market and a whistle for Sunday. Either way, he chose usefulness over ideology. He did not attend meetings at midnight or pass pamphlets at dawn; he cut cloth and kept order. A quiet politics, but politics all the same.

The night Solomon and I spoke—an international call that stretched past common sense—we began with measurements and ended with miracles. He told me what happened seven years after Gash Ali died, roughly three and a half decades after the young man from Eritrea slipped into Nekemt with a new name and a suitcase full of skill.

A visiting woman from Eritrea had arrived next door to the house where Solomon's family lived. She was told that a man who is Eritrean by birth—who had come long ago – lived next door raising ten children. When she enquired with neighbors further, they pulled out a photograph: a square of paper gone brown at the edges, the jawline set, the eyes carrying the same soft authority that once settled arguments on a football pitch. The woman asked to borrow it. She slipped it into her bag like a passport and said she was traveling north.

When she reached Asmara, she carried the photograph into a room of relatives and neighbors. She laid it on a table as if placing a question. Faces bent toward it, then shouted one answer: "Tahir! Tahir!" The room went to pieces—tears, clapping, a dozen voices overlapping. That name—Tahir—was the childhood version, the name that belonged to the boy who learned to cut cloth in the light of a doorway. Ali was the name he carried into Nekemt, a small change made for reasons that were both practical and protective. In an instant the two lines—Eritrea to Nekemt, Nekemt to Eritrea—stopped passing in the night and recognized each other.

The family in Asmara did what families do when a rumor becomes a map: they sent a nephew south. He traveled with no photograph—only a few place names and a thin thread of instruction: find the man called Tahir, Eritrean by origin, father of ten, somewhere in Nekemt. Weeks turned into months. He walked markets, leaned on shop counters, repeated the same two clues—Tahir, Eritrean, ten children—and watched the way faces changed when hope met confusion.

At last, someone made the connection: *Ali, the tailor-referee—the one who fitted dresses so that women felt their backs straighten, the one whose whistle kept a match from turning into a feud.*

The nephew made the discovery, and the long loop closed. A photograph had walked a border that neither soldiers nor slogans could manage without a fight.

Soon after, two of Ali's sons would meet at a gate with peeling paint, where the dust hangs and every new arrival looks taller from carrying a duffel. Negash was on his way out—boots broken-in, a canvas roll over one shoulder, the look of someone who has learned to sleep anywhere. Aman was on his way in—tags still stiff, haircut too new, eyes toggling between the guard's clipboard and the yard beyond. For a second each thought the other was a trick of heat. Then Negash said, half-smiling, "Are you seeing a ghost, little brother?" and Aman answered, voice breaking on the word, "You left without a letter. Mother keeps a plate at the table." They stepped out of the stream of recruits and trucks into a sliver of shade. Negash put his hand on Aman's shoulder and squeezed the way men do when they don't have time. "Tell her I'm breathing," he said. "Tell her I carry Father's name inside my cheek when it gets bad." Aman nodded. "They're calling me to artillery," he said, tapping the assignment sheet. "I'll be aiming at distances you can't see." Negash laughed softly. "Then learn to love the math. It keeps you honest. And keep your calf safe—bullets like muscle." A truck backfired; the yard jerked forward a few inches. "Write?" Aman tried. "If I can. If it's wise," Negash said. "If not, listen at five in the morning. The hyenas still tell the truth."

They hugged once—hard, fast, the way a door closes in a wind—and then each turned back to his line. As Negash cleared the gate he glanced over his shoulder and raised two fingers—I see you—a signal they had used as boys across a crowded pitch. Aman answered with the same two, pressed flat against his chest—I'll carry you. Later, when the family tried to rebuild the exact words, they disagreed on whether Negash said "forgive" or "remember." It hardly matters. What stayed was the angle of his grin, the weight of Aman's hand still tingling after the squeeze, and the simple fact that for one measured minute the lost brother was found, the new recruit anchored, and Tahir/Ali's sons stood within the same breath before the road pulled taut again.

But every reunion carries its ledger. Five years prior, Negash made a decision the way boys with a deceased father do when the arithmetic of a household corners them. He disappeared one night so his mother's bread could stretch further, unwilling to be a burden on a woman balancing ten futures. The Derg's sweeps were netting boys for the special commando units; they caught him and put a rifle in his hands. He became a fighter whose chances were statistical, not personal. By 1988, with independence three years away, orders sent his unit north for an operation near Mai Mido, not far from Keren, the city of his father's birth. Intelligence on the other side was too good; EPLF knew the time and place. The ambush did what ambushes do—emptied a future into the ground. Negash died there, not quite home, not quite a stranger.

Solomon paused on the phone then, and I heard the sound of a man measuring what a mother can accept. He said their mother still insists there is a chance her son lives—that somewhere a mistake was made, that a letter will arrive, that a knock will come. I do not argue with a mother's

refusal. Faith like that is not naïveté; it is a survival strategy against a world that will not give your children back.

Another brother, Aman, chose the uniform without the disappearance—Mitiku's path, Solomon called it, the soldier's line that keeps a ledger and salutes. Artillery was his specialty; he learned the math of distance and the patience of waiting for coordinates that might arrive too late. Tigray took him next, and he came home with a bullet lodged in his calf. Surgeons examined it, calculated risk versus function, and left it where it rests—a small metal logic that says: *Walk, even if you carry proof*. He lost his job when the EPRDF/TPLF restructured the army and men like him were sent home with discharge papers and silence.

With the sudden blank of time, Aman went to Asmara—the pilgrimage a son makes when fathers are mostly stories. He found his father's elder sister, took tea, listened to the genealogy spoken as if it were a street he could walk. Then history reached for him the way it reaches for many who think they have come only to visit. Independent Eritrea was conducting a sweep. Paperwork did not argue loudly enough. He was detained—mistaken identity—and sent to Sawa. The name is a place and a policy; it wears uniforms and speaks in ranks. He stayed a month. Then a door opened, and he walked out released, the calf's bullet still in place, a different kind of metal now in his memory.

Solomon and I held all of that on the line between us: the woman with the photograph, the shout of "Tahir!" when the picture hit the table, the nephew following thin facts to a house that was more map than address. We held Negash at Mai Mido, the way a boy can die almost home and it still count as foreign because he never got to hear his father's childhood name spoken by an aunt who would have told him the rest of the story. We held Aman limping a little and choosing grace—not bitter, not triumphant, just a man who has learned to sleep with metal and memory in the same leg.

If I were to give the tale a caption, it would be this: a family found by a photograph, a son lost by a timetable, another son briefly claimed and released by a state that could not decide who he was. Behind it all, Gash Ali—Tahir—the boy who ran from a summons, or toward usefulness, or both, and became the man who made a town stand up straight, who blew a whistle so boys would walk home as teammates and not enemies. On the phone, Solomon exhaled the way men do when they've carried a story to its edge. We sat in the quiet a moment. Some histories end with paper; some end with stone. Ours ended that night with a dial tone, and the feeling that two lines on a map had finally touched.

My father traveled in the other direction, toward Eritrea, with a gun that came with rank and transfers. He did not flee a list; he signed one—police or soldier, the uniform shifting with the posting, the salary the only stable detail. Where Gash Ali built one room into a landmark, my father moved room to room—barracks that smelled of solvent and sweat, quarters that turned

friendly just before another transfer arrived. He was not unkind; he was a man carried by a system that moved him like furniture. In the ledger of our house, his entries were many and brief: payday, payday, gone.

The one season he anchored was the season of eucalyptus—my sixth through ninth grades, the same stretch that brought a stepmother to our door and ended with our departure for Arjo, where my lone walk would begin. We planted trees with the seriousness of monks laying stones. The small blue-green leaves trembled in our hands; we tamped the soil and carried water in dented cans. For once, my father's work did not start with a whistle or a list; it started with a hoe. We measured growth in thumb-widths and children's heights against the trunk. Those weeks taught me what staying put feels like: evening light through new leaves, a promise rooted in ground that recognizes your shadow.

If you asked my father his best years, he would point to those three—for one more reason: the woods were his playground, rifle ready, mornings and late afternoons alike. He hunted gazelles and deer with almost no competition and often brought home a weekly supply of fresh meat. I cannot explain why I don't remember eating it; I remember instead how a shot could miss the right organ, an animal escape, and days later he would find hyena leftovers—the landscape finishing what he began. At 5:00 a.m., the hyenas' cry was our alarm, a summons to rise; in that odd arithmetic, they earned their share. And on some afternoons, his footpaths through the brush interrupted young couples tucked behind shrubs—footsteps, a startled glance, then a scatter of laughter and running—while the eucalyptus learned, quietly, to hold the young couples' secrets.

Then the 1975 proclamation came—the great redistribution that turned private marks into public erasures. It had reasons larger than our plot; the logic of it marched with history. But logic can be sharp. The lines we had drawn around those saplings dissolved under law. Our work did not vanish, but it lost its name. I learned that a tree can survive and your claim to it can die. A boy's lesson in civics, taught by roots and a new sign posted at the edge of town.

So two fathers: one showed a town how to fit—a skirt to a waist, a shout to a boundary—until people stood taller because a man with needle and a whistle insisted that we could. The other showed a boy how to read absence: the way an empty chair becomes a fact, the way a door that opens and closes leaves a draft that shapes the house. Between them stood Solomon and me, learning to walk with what our fathers gave us and what they didn't.

When Solomon spoke of his father, he talked about football crowd noise: how a whole town can breathe together after a goal, how the walk home after a loss can still be gentle if the ref kept his nerve. When I spoke of mine, I talked about stations—names of places that were not home but stood in for it, the taste of meals eaten fast because somebody had to return to duty. Solomon had a man who died young but left compressed time—years condensed into hugs and advice at the

shop door. I had a man who lived longer but left traces as gaps—cities that kept his handwriting in the duty logbook, sons who learned to pack quickly.

And yet, crossing paths is not only geography. In the years after his sewing became a tradition, it was the women in his precisely fitted dresses and skirts—teachers, market traders, choir leaders, midwives—who walked into council rooms and neighborhood meetings with voices steadied by a tailor who had taught them both fit and **f**airness**.** And in the years after my father's transfers blurred into one sentence, my own walk learned a kind of discipline: go where the work is; do it; don't demand applause; plant again if they take your grove. A tailor's town and a soldier's son—each carrying forward habits we didn't choose but now practice on purpose.

Sometimes I think of the day their lines almost met: a Saturday with wind off the hills, a market bright with tin and vegetables, a rumor of a match starting late because the referee had to help a bride try on her dress one last time. Picture my father on the back of a truck heading north, his cap at a tilt, a hand at the small of his back. Picture Gash Ali adjusting a sleeve, then jogging to the pitch with his whistle in his mouth. One man leaving order to enforce order elsewhere; the other keeping order so young men would go home as teammates and not enemies. Two uniforms, two ethics, both forms of service, both paid for in ways the state does not always count.

When the eucalyptus trees were taken into the language of the state, I returned to that football field to learn a different lesson: property is not the only permanence. A child can lose a fence and keep a standard. We did not own the land anymore, but the trees still cast shade. People walked there after market in the heat of the day and stood in the cool. I decided to count that as a win. Somewhere, I told myself, Solomon's father would have whistled the day back into play.

Years later, when we met as grown men and boys we knew were carrying their own fathers' shadows, we tried to rename our inheritances. Solomon said his father taught him that the best politics is preventing a fight. I said mine taught me that mobility is a skill, not a fate—that there are seasons when the only decent thing to do is to move and pay attention. Between us we built a practice: if a room needs a referee, we'll be quiet and fair; if a job needs a suitcase, we'll pack without drama; if a field needs trees, we'll plant and accept that names come and go.

So I keep both men in the same chapter. One stitched people into themselves and to each other; the other stitched weeks together somewhere far away so wages would reach a house that learned to wait. One taught fit; one taught endurance. If I have done any good, it is because I hold them as two rooms in the same house—one with a mirror and a careful hand, one with a calendar and a packed bag. Between them is a boy who learned that love can be local and portable, that work can be rooted and moving, and that a tree planted without papers can still make shade for strangers.