

A Priestly Apparition

“We are close now.”

The words have become meaningless. Mohamed, my guide, has been saying them every five minutes for over four hours. I swallow a sarcastic response; his shy smile and widely spaced eyes give him an air of trusting innocence that I cannot bear to disturb.

This moment is symbolic of my time in Ethiopia. The country whispers that beguilement and adventure are just around the corner, but they never arrive in the form that you expect. Up to this point I have spent most of my time either waiting for a bus or vomiting copiously into any nearby receptacle. Today, I have decided, my luck will change. Today I will discover the ‘true’ Ethiopia—the proud, fiercely uncompromising nation that I have dreamt of during the sweaty tedium of my London commute.

Head down, I continue to slog up the hill. The monotony of the rough, terracotta rocks is punctuated only by pockmarks from the sweat drops that plop regularly from my forehead. The landscape pulsates with the sort of bone-frying, mind-fugging heat that makes you forget that it is possible to feel cold.

A dusty goat, her hip bones jutting from her slender back like miniature copies of the ridge above us, watches us contemplatively. How can she survive here? I haven’t seen water, or the faintest hint of green, since we left the car.

Just as I conclude that we must be doomed, Sisyphus-like, to climb this slope for all eternity, we are out of our narrow gully. We stand on the edge of a plateau that rolls up to a dagger-shaped peak. Thankfully, this is not our target. Instead we slide right through a crack in the rock and arrive at a small iron-bound wooden door.

“He is not here.”

I cannot believe it. Have we come all this way for nothing? Too dispirited to speak, I flop into a precious patch of shade and sip tepid, metallic-tasting water.

Suddenly Mohamed lets out a cry, and points back the way we have come.

A dark figure, clad in a long, flowing, white robe, is striding towards us. My rational mind knows that he has just followed us up out of the gully, but I cannot shake the conviction that he is a guardian spirit, manifested in the form most suited to the relentless blue of the sky and the barren landscapes that surround him. He carries a gnarled wooden staff in his left hand, and his greying beard is blown over his right shoulder by a breeze that seems to have sprung up precisely for that purpose.

This apparition is, of course, the priest. As he reaches us, he sinks both of his hands into his robe. With one he pulls out a large, rough-wrought key of exactly the type that should unlock a seventh-century cave church.

With the other he pulls out an iPhone.

“My cousin saw you start and called me.”

His accent is American. I think I detect a faint Boston twang, and feel rather cross. This is not the flowing Amharic of my imagination.

We follow him into the cool of the church, and immediately my churlishness vanishes. The interior is primrose-yellow, and completely covered with biblical paintings. The three wise men ride their camels across the vaulted ceiling in search of a distant star. John the Baptist preaches the good news to a crowd that entirely covers one of the six monolithic pillars. And Jesus himself, his dark eyes almost cartoonishly large, stares down at us from scenes depicting each of his triumphs and disasters

Reed matting deadens the sound of our footsteps as we wander the aisles. By unspoken agreement we do not speak; the silence is so absolute that breaking it would feel like an act of violence. I focus on absorbing as much as I can and feeling the delicious prickle of sweat drying on my back.

Outside, the priest invites us to share his meal. We squat on our haunches—some of us more elegantly than others—and use the tips of our fingers to scoop up spongy parcels of yesterday's injera bread from the communal pot. The spice hits my tongue with eye-watering force, and I feel my face redden as I try desperately not to cough.

Here, finally, is the Ethiopia that I have been searching for. Few travellers, I am sure, will have made it up to this high, deserted plateau and into the perfectly preserved Church behind us.

As we turn for home I notice some oddly straight lines on the ground. They trace the shape of an H. The priest notes my quizzical expression.

“Helicopter pad. George W. Bush was here just last week.”