

Mabrat Yellem

'Yellem'.

'There isn't'.

I'd learned the word as quickly as the Ethiopian greetings. In a more buoyant mood I'd speak it with acceptance, but it would take on a bitter tone when the small privations of life became too much. Abandoning attempts at conjugation, I'd weave loosely it into conversations with my friends. In our lazy hybrid of English, Amharic and Italian left from the brief occupation, it had come simply to signify 'absent'.

Anything could be *yellem*; rain in the dry season, sun during the rains, milk or meat during the long fasting periods. But mostly it was *mabrat*, the 'light', the electricity. At first, as the dry season had lingered, turning the highlands to dust, there had been no warning. Lightbulbs had suddenly flickered and died and fans had stopped whirring. People would mutter '*mabrat yellem*' before returning to their tasks; little of any importance depended on a power supply. It would return eventually, and I'd frequently wake in the night to a glowing lightbulb above the bed.

For the past few months we'd been on a government 'schedule': a one-day-on, one-day-off approach to the electricity supply, which alternated between the two sides of Gondar town. There was a certain acceptance in simply knowing when we would and wouldn't have power.

But tonight the lights had gone out at dusk and the injustice of it had stung: it wasn't our turn. My housemate, Reiza, and I had stumbled up the track to the kiosk on the corner. Yassin, the owner, was a man of very few words indeed. I liked him for this, and for his uncomplicated acceptance of us, the foreigners in his neighbourhood. Our interactions were simple: I would ask for an egg or a cone of tea wrapped in a page of a discarded schoolbook and he would hand it over with a grunt. No niceties were necessary: '*oncolol*' or '*shay*' was enough. There was a word for 'please' but no-one ever used it.

His kiosk was behind a hole in the stone wall, sheltered by a yellow tarpaulin and usually lit by a single bulb. Above the hatch was an Amharic word in the Fidel script, a series of loops and squiggles I wasn't able to read. I supposed it might have been 'supermarket', a misnomer that graced many a small neighbourhood shop.

Tonight Yassin was standing in the remains of the day, communing with the neighbours and watching the children play. Seeing us approach, he vaulted through the hatch into the blackness of his shop, catching the hanging pens and packets of soap with his heels.

'Uh?'

He turned to greet us with a barely perceptible raise of his eyebrows, the international expression for 'what can I get you?'

Reiza and I turned to look at each other. We must have known the word for 'candle' in this world where darkness was absolute, but it seemed that our memories had failed us.

'*Mabrat yellem*', I tried.

'*Yellem*', Yassin agreed, shaking his head. He inhaled as he spoke, in that peculiar manner used by Ethiopians when communicating regret, as though sucking the word back in and swallowing it would somehow mean that it wasn't true. He'd entirely missed my point.

Clutching an imaginary matchbox in one hand, I struck it with the other, and held it against an invisible wick. He stared for a moment before thrusting a small packet of cheap biscuits across the hatch. I shook my head and struck the matchbox again, harder this time with a flourish and a 'zhhhh'. He looked at me without comprehension, proffering some tissues as the light faded further.

Beside me, Reiza sprang into action and leapt into the air, swinging her arms in wide circles. This was 'light', apparently. She jumped and I struck, but we couldn't make ourselves understood.

The spectacle of two gesticulating foreigners began to draw a crowd. Children abandoned their games and gathered round, giggling and shouting objects at Yassin as though it were a guessing game. Teenagers slouched against the wall in casual observation, and women returning from church in their white robes chuckled as they passed.

A youth shambled by and established what it was that we wanted, and a gasp of realisation went through the bystanders as he communicated it to Yassin.

Of course. '*Sham-a*'. Almost the same as the word for 'shoe'.

So, we had light but it might be many hours before the electricity returned, and the thought of lighting a kerosene stove to cook dinner was suddenly a little too much. I turned back to Yassin.

'*Biscoot*', I pointed to the biscuits with the too-pink filling, still lying on the counter.

'And beer', I added as an afterthought.

This time he understood. Some things are universal.