

# CRY OF THE GIRAFFE

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

JUDIE ORON



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## PROLOGUE

Every year on February 21, I phone her. And every time, I ask her the same question: “Why are we still alive?”

No matter how many times I ask, her answer is always the same: “Because there was a wind.”



My name is Wuditu. When I was 13, my father took our family from our Ethiopian village to another country, Sudan. From there, we hoped to get to a place we called Yerusalem. While we were in Sudan, my little sister Lewteh and I were taken from our family. Not too long after that, I had to leave my sister. At the time, I thought it was the only way to save her. I was wrong, and my life was changed forever.

But I don't want to start my story there. I'll begin instead before that, when I was still a child in my village. I was

nine years old, and it was Fasika, the Passover holiday for my people. We call ourselves the Beta Israel, which means the House of Israel in our language, Amharic. Hundreds of years ago, a foreign army came to Yerusalem. They defeated our people and destroyed our Holy Temple. After that, our ancestors fled our ancient homeland and followed the Nile River into Ethiopia. They settled in the highlands, where we have lived ever since. But even though our bodies are here in Ethiopia, our hearts have always longed to go home. This is where my story begins.

Part One

*The Village*



## CHAPTER 1

Dibebehar, 1985

*Wuditu, 9, and Lewteh, 6*

“Aiee! Lewteh, what are you doing?” I called, my voice cracking with nervous excitement.

In only a few hours it would be dark, the first night of Fasika, and all through the last weeks we’d been rushing to get everything ready. Our men had woven the cloth for everyone’s new clothes. All our earthenware pots had been thrown away and our women had made a whole new set. Even the baskets we used for serving our meals were thrown away and new ones woven specially for the feast. Our Christian neighbors had come by to wish us a good holiday and to assure us that our animals and pastures would be well looked after during the eight days that we rested. Soon, everything would be ready!

We do all this to remember that in ancient times our people were slaves in Egypt. A great leader named Moses helped us to escape and led us to freedom in the land we call Yerusalem.

Since then, every year at Fasika we celebrate the fact that our forefathers were delivered from slavery. They were in such a hurry to leave that they couldn't wait for their bread to rise. They had only flat, unleavened bread to eat and so, on Passover, we do the same.

This morning, we'd swept our houses clean and burnt all the leftover leaven, and for the whole eight days of Fasika we would be eating only flat bread, called *kitta*. It doesn't taste very good. But that's all right. It's important to remember these things.

"Lewteh!" I called again. There was still so much to do before nightfall. "Where is that girl? It's just like her to disappear right about now!"

Of all my sisters, it was Lewteh whom I loved the most. When she was little, I pretended that she was my baby. I carried her around on my back in a special pouch called an *ankalba*. From the moment she began to walk, she followed me everywhere on fat little legs. Now that she was older, though, she had become such a troublemaker! Where I was responsible, and a bit timid, she was always getting into trouble, and I was usually the one getting her out of it. Who knows what she'd gotten into now?

After searching everywhere for her, I ran around to the back of the house, where my mother had put all our discarded cooking pots. And there was Lewteh—sweet, tiny, her eyes sparkling with excitement—surrounded by a mess of broken plates, holding an impressively large pot high over her head and practically teetering under its weight. Then I watched, speechless, as she hurled the pot, nearly knocking herself over in the process.

“Stop that right now!” I shouted. “You’re going to get us both in real trouble!”

“Wuditu!” she called to me gleefully. “It’s fun. See?” she said, reaching for another pot. “Don’t be so good for once. Come on,” she coaxed, both arms stretched toward me, holding out my mother’s clay frying pan. “Try this one.”

I crept forward, longing for once to misbehave, to be a child like Lewteh. I took the *mgogo* from her hands, held it over my head, and threw it on the ground with all my might. *Crash!* The frying pan broke in pieces at my feet. Lewteh was right—it was fun! Excited, I threw some cups after it. “I never knew it could feel so good to be bad.” I laughed.

“Ooooh, I’m going to tell on you, Wuditu,” Lewteh teased in a singsong voice.

We each picked up more—pots, cups, plates—and before we knew it, every bit of pottery was lying broken at our feet. I plopped down beside her, suddenly exhausted. Looking at the mess we’d made, I realized that this was the first time in my whole life that I’d dared to be anything but responsible. I marveled at my little sister’s bravery. Where did she get such courage?



We sidled into Melkeh’s house as though we’d just left. Melkeh is Lewteh’s mother and my stepmother. Like a lot of children in my country, I have two mothers—my birth mother, Rahel, and my stepmother, Melkeh—and one father, Berihun. I lived with my mother and my older brother, Dawid, and my father lived nearby with his second wife,



Melkeh, and their children, all of them girls. Unlike our quiet home, their house was always busy and noisy and full of activity. My mother and I spent most of our time there. Melkeh and Rahel got along so well that if you didn't see us going to sleep at night in our separate houses, you'd think we were all one family. We ate our meals together and shared most of our chores with hardly an argument.

Like the other houses in the village, our two were round and made of mud, with a thatched roof leading upward to a spiky peak. Some people decorated their inner walls with pictures cut out from magazines, but I liked what my mother and stepmother had done much better—they'd dipped their hands in paint and pressed their palms all over the walls, giving the houses a look of hands flying upward toward the sky.

As usual, Melkeh was running from one task to another and didn't seem to have noticed our absence. My mother was here too, helping Melkeh to make the Fasika feast. She gave me a sharp look but said nothing.

Even when she had a mad face, my mother was beautiful. She had light green eyes and she was very tall and graceful, taller even than my father. People tell me that she used to be the prettiest girl in the village. I hope that people will one day say that about me.

Lewteh saw my mother's suspicious look and burst into giggles. "What are you laughing about?" My stepmother smiled at her and tweaked her braids with one hand while stretching out the other to reach the frying pan before the *kitta* bread burned. As usual, no one suspected Lewteh of anything.

“I’ll do that, Melkeh,” I offered. I took my place at the *mgogo*, adding the newly fried piece of *kitta* onto the pile that had already been cooked. I concentrated on pouring the batter onto the sizzling pan. Relatives would soon be arriving, and much food would be needed.

“There’s a good girl, Wuditu.” Melkeh smiled at me and turned away to another task.

Looking at the large jug of batter still waiting to be fried into Passover bread, I sighed. I could hear the sounds of guests arriving for the feast and I wanted to greet them. But after breaking all the pots I felt that I should make up for it by staying at the fire and finishing the cooking.

“Wuditu, how you’ve grown,” came a deep voice from right behind me. I turned around with a wide smile and, as expected, was lifted high into the air. On the way down my arms stretched out to reach around the enormous figure of my favorite cousin.

Daniel was the largest person I knew. He had a big round belly and when he laughed—and he laughed a lot—he was so heavy the ground shook! Like my father, he was a metal worker, and he always said that he was as strong as the metal he worked with and as hot as the fire.

Whenever Daniel came to visit he always brought music with him. He’d sit on a three-legged stool with his *masengo* between his knees, scratching his bow across its single string and singing in an unexpectedly thin, high voice. We’d all join in singing and dancing until late into the night.

Daniel and I had one thing in common. We loved to climb to a high point and look out over the fields. From

high up you could see rivers of golden *tef*, our local grain, growing beside patches of bright red peppers. Daniel said that such beauty always made him burst into song. But then, it seemed that almost everything made him sing, which was one of the things I loved about him.

Sometimes we'd spot a special bird that had no name. We called it the bird from Yerusalem because it always came from the west at the beginning of the year and then flew back again after the holidays. That was where our ancestors had come from. Whenever we'd see that bird, we'd sing out to it, a song that my mother had taught me—

“*Oh, you've come from Yerusalem,  
You've been to Yerusalem,  
Oh! Lucky bird!  
When you go back, give our love to Yerusalem!*”



Washed and dressed in my beautiful new *kemis* and *netela*, I was sitting in our tiny, one-room *mesgid*, waiting for Kes Sahalu to arrive. Right before sundown, he would go from house to house and check that there wasn't a crumb of leavened food anywhere in the village.

I sat on the ground of the synagogue with the other children, Lewteh curled up in my lap. And then, here he was, dressed all in white like me, and carrying the Orit, the ancient Bible that had been in his family for generations.

“Don't move and don't speak!” I warned Lewteh, anxious not to miss a single word. I loved to listen to Kes Sahalu, with his deep, mesmerizing voice.

In a solemn tone—but one that could still be heard, even by those who'd come late and been forced to stand outside the *mesgid* walls—he began. We all waited to hear the story of how Moses had led our people out of Egypt. But this year, his words were new.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said. “Last week I received a special book from Israel.” He laid the Orit down and lifted a much smaller book for all of us to see. There were pictures on the cover and I wished that I were sitting closer so I could see it better. But then Kes Sahalu surprised us again by handing the book to my brother, Dawid!

Everyone in the room murmured in shock—for a young boy to be given such a privilege on the eve of the most important holiday in the year, and he not even the son of a *kes*? But Dawid deserved this honor. He longed for Yerusalem, so much so that our father had sent him to Hebrew school in a nearby village called Ambover.

“This year is truly special,” Kes Sahalu smiled, “for not only did we receive this book, but we have here three of our sons who can now read the Hebrew in it. It’s the same book that Jews all over the world will be reading tonight. Surely that’s a sign that next year we’ll be celebrating Fasika in Yerusalem!”

I listened, spellbound, as Dawid and two other boys read from the book.

After Dawid had read, Kes Sahalu stood in silence, stroking his fine white beard as though deep in thought. Then he said, “We Beta Israel, we do not belong to this land of nettles and pain.”

We all grew quiet, and even the little children settled down, their parents shushing them or gently rocking the fussy babies. This was the story that he told us year after year, the story of Fasika and its special meaning for our people.

“Many generations ago, our people dwelled in a land called Yerusalem,” he began. “We were a great nation.”

“Wuditu, look at Dawid.” Lewteh giggled, waving her hand right in front of my face.

“Be quiet!” I hissed, tightening my arms around hers. It figured that she would be the one to speak up when even the babies were silent.

Still, I threw a quick glance in Dawid’s direction. Every Fasika he looked like that—transported, as though the *kes*’s words alone could carry him away to Yerusalem. He was more convinced than any of us that one day we’d all be together in the land that God had promised us. To me, Yerusalem sounded more like a dream than a real place. But I, too, felt swept up in the *kes*’s story.

“Listen well, all of you!” Kes Sahalu said, struggling to his feet and pointing a bony finger. “I want you to remember what I’m about to tell you. When the time comes for you to go to Yerusalem, you must be ready to leave this land in the blink of an eye. And when you get there, your lives will be changed forever!”

To this day, when I look back to that time I feel a terrible longing, wishing that I could change what was to come.