We played on a red dirt court. Every morning some unseen worker must have come into the tennis arena and meticulously brushed out our footprints from the day before, because it always looked brand new when my PE class arrived. I had only played on cement courts in the States, but they used dirt in Ethiopia. It was the best court in the city because it was housed in the International Community School.

Like the tennis courts back home, these had tall chain link fences surrounding them. Right outside the fence were tall eucalyptus trees, sardined together to block visibility to the world beyond. This American school worked hard to cocoon us in a make-believe world. But Addis Ababa was dry and the trees were sparse enough that small street children could squeeze between the low branches to watch us. Their little dark faces and thin bodies were hidden in the shadows, but their teeth and eyes glinted their presence in the sunlight, silently watching us play.

Tigist squatted down a little, holding her racket out in front of her in a ready stance that showed her tennis training. She wore matching Adidas shorts and shirt, and her dark hair was plaited into a crown on her head. I theatrically wiped my brow in the hot sun and threw the ball up in the air, trying to perform a serve like Ato Terrefe, the eighth-grade PE teacher, had just demonstrated. The ball made it over the net, but it was a lazy volley and my Ethiopian friend decided to take advantage of
the easy bounce by trying to spike it back at me. Once I saw what she was going to do I wrapped my arms around my head, hoping not to get pegged. She hit it so hard that I could hear the ping of the ball against the chain-link fence before I even turned to see. Instead of bouncing back, the yellow ball was perfectly lodged in one of the chinks.

"Nice," I said, and we shared a laugh.

As I went to retrieve it, there was a face on the outside of the fence peering in at me. Little dark fingers reached through the wire and started violently working the ball so that it would pop out on his side. He was a small boy with no shirt to speak of and ragged pants, maybe six years old, maybe seven. I remember his eyes, wide and coffee-colored; they were glued on me as his hands continued to work, pulling back and forth. I stopped walking towards him and we watched each other. He rapidly pulled the ball out on the other side, and for the first time he broke our gaze to look for an escape route. He scooted backwards under the tree and then ran wildly to the street, jumping and shouting to his friends with the ball in the air. It seemed so vibrant compared to the landscape he carried it into.

I looked back to Tigist. She sighed as she dropped her racket on the court and sauntered off to get us a new ball. Despite our different backgrounds she and I got along well. I was at ICS by the grace of the U.S. government—she was there because her father owned Phillips Electronics. All the wealthiest Ethiopians sent their children to ICS since it was the best and most expensive school in Addis, which actually didn’t say much. The rest of the students were Americans, black and white, and Europeans whose parents worked in the city. We walked out of class together as a fat rain started to fall.

"Do you want a ride home?" she asked Britishly.

"Why not?" I said. I lived only about a block from school, but I was lazy. We strolled into the school parking lot, where her driver was waiting with the family Mercedes Benz. It was identical to the other fifteen Mercedes Benz’s; the rest of the cars were typically Toyota Land Cruisers. The ride was painfully slow, but nonetheless jarring, because the city pavement consisted of dirt, rock, and ditch. Anyone who cared about their car didn’t go over seven miles per hour, slow enough for kids in the street to race along side the car, whipping their heads back and forth between looking at their course and looking into the windows of the car. I tried not to watch, but I always did.
The driver spun his back wheels hard to get over a particularly stubborn rock and as I looked back, a gray-bearded old man, holding his grass-loaded donkey aside, bent his body down to the rut the tire had just created and put his lips to the rain that was collecting there. I quickly turned back in my seat.

"Having money isn’t a bad thing by itself, Mindy,” my dad had once observed, “it’s just a bad thing when some people have it and others don’t have enough. That’s a big problem here.” If I had understood him correctly, our having money was a bad thing. After puzzling over this paradox for a few minutes, my thirteen-year-old mind would move on to easier, more pleasant ideas, like boys or basketball.

As long as we were careful not to contract malaria, we could take weekend trips as a family into the countryside and beyond. These excursions were food for my soul because the city was such a grim place. The breadbasket of Africa was starving and had been for years. The tourism industry and expatriate community, however, were thriving. From where I now stand, it seems to me like I had stepped into an old National Geographic, where bare-breasted women were acceptable, even intriguing, because they were brown. Only in Africa could a city such as Addis Ababa be called exotic. For Victorian England it was called the worst age of history on Earth, but I guess Ethiopians don’t have a Charles Dickens to say it so people will listen.

In the country the people seemed untouched, unaffected by the world at large. They had oxen, donkeys, farms, and little green thatched tukuls. They made art—baskets and beautiful jewelry; things to make a tennis ball look about as exciting as a napkin. The people outside the city had stories.

They let me make pots with them, or, I should say, they let me try. And after I had been sufficiently examined, my hair handled and my skin pinched, I could play sock-soccer in the street with the kids. They didn’t call me “white” in Amharic—they called me “clear.” And that was probably a better description. Even my friends at school noticed my particular whiteness. Ahmed, a boy who grew up in Colorado but was actually a Muslim from Yemen, sang to me one day, “Mi-i-i-indy, the friendly ghost,” snorting at his own witticism. When I told him I was offended he said, “No, no, no! You can just sing back—’A-a-a-hmed, the burnt-up toast!’—see?” I wasn’t sure that I saw.
Still, I felt better about that than I did about some of the things my Black American classmates would say. They were always busy letting me know that “black is beautiful” and “the difference between us is we got soul and y’all whites don’t.” But they seemed basically apathetic about Ethiopian culture—if we ever went out to eat, they picked the one KFC in the city, but I would put money on the claim that it was not real chicken. And I always went bowling if I hung out with them. Even at the bowling alley though, it was Ethiopian. After each bowl, a small man in a dirty jumpsuit would cautiously peak out from behind the pins and reset them by hand.

Saturday morning was my mom’s appointed time for downtown ventures and our favorite spots were complete dives. Literal holes in the wall were stuffed with boxes full of artifacts worthy of the British Library and selling for less than a stick of gum. As one of the earliest Christian nations, Ethiopians have ancient scriptures, hand written and illustrated on leather pages, bound with wood worn from a century of use. Silver jewelry is also a big industry for the shopkeepers—that and Italian war vestiges. My mom once bought a bracelet that was made entirely of bullet shells melded together in a row and shaped to fit a wrist.

We also took interest in the Saturday bazaar at the Mercato in a field downtown. My sister, Erin, came to visit from college in Boston for a couple weeks and she loved a hard bargain. One time as we made our way through a Saturday market, she almost traded me away. An older man, with crusted eyebrows and eyelashes had spread out a blanket in the dirt, on which he displayed beautiful woodcarvings. She asked the artist how much they were. He gave these two blond American girls a toothless grin.

“I will take your sistah!” he enthusiastically told Erin.

“I can’t give you my sister.” We smiled.

“She will live nice, my wife, in the desert. I give you beautiful camels!”

“No thank you,” Erin said, and she maneuvered me by the elbow away from his blanket.

He shouted with a big gravelly laugh as we walked away, “I like her hair!”

The natives were always having a party as they set out garish blankets with Coptic crosses, painted icons, silk, and silver. There was always
food—big injera makers frying up the fermented bread—and music, mostly Bob Marley, blaring on little boom boxes set in the grass. The foreigners bustled around, looking for which wares would look good on a living room wall.

If you could take an aerial view of the field it would have looked like a crazy quilt with little ants marching over the top. What a place, what a place, in the horn of Africa; the breadbasket, thirteen months of sunshine, the bird-watching capital of the world.

On our next visit Erin found a gorgeous bugle made from a ram’s horn that she wanted to bring back to her trombonist-fiancé. She bartered with our sunglasses, a calculator, and a little money in coins—he could pick, she said. Personally, I was irritated that she was risking our calculator. It helped us to make quick computations into American dollars. The vendor seemed skeptical but he did gingerly pick up one pair of shades and as he put them on he struggled to explain in English:

“My son, his head . . . hurt, he has headache. This might help?” He looked up toward the sun with them on and moved them up and down a few times by the earpieces, absorbed in the possibility. Erin’s eyes widened and her face immediately flushed red. Blinking quickly, she pushed the money, the other pair of sunglasses, and the calculator across his table to him. The man pulled off the shades and stared perplexed as she pressed my shoulder to leave. I don’t even think she took the bugle, though I can’t remember.