

**ERMIAS**

Also by **WALTENEGUS DARGIE**

*The Eunuch and the King's Daughter*

*The Reason for Life*

# ERMIAS

WALTENEGUS DARGIE

A Novel

LAMSI PUBLISHING

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*To Samantha*



Part I  
Gottingen





## Chapter 1

Aster was twenty years old and a second year economics student when she gave birth to Ermias. He had been conceived in a hotel room in Nairobi at the same time as she had been competing in middle distance running representing her country—the one and only time she competed internationally. The father, who was twelve years older than her, was heading the accompanying medical team.

The couple had known each other for three weeks when Ermias was conceived. The paternal grandmother was persuaded that Aster became pregnant deliberately in order to *trap* her son, but this was doubtful, for the pregnancy was both humiliating to her and disruptive to her study, which she esteemed and put above everything else. But Aster was

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determined to keep the child and there was no pressure from the father to pursue any alternative course of action.

Two weeks after the exam season was over, the child came into the world, on the eighth of July, so that Aster did not need to interrupt her study. She gave birth on the outskirts of Addis, in the paternal grandmother's spacious house. The child was nursed by his mother for the first three months of his life, afterwards she would take care of him only at weekends and during holidays and semester breaks, since she had taken a dormitory at the university, refusing to marry before she had graduated.

She did not marry two years later when she graduated with distinction. Instead, she accepted a job as a teaching assistant in a small college in Nazareth, a city located 120 km south of Addis. A bitter quarrel ensued between the grandmother and the mother, because the former insisted on adopting the child and refused to let him move to Nazareth with his mother. The mother won the battle nonetheless and Ermias moved with his mother to Nazareth. The father had seldom seen his child when he was living with his grandmother, but now he saw him even less often, because he, along with four of his friends, had just opened a medical centre in Addis. Besides, his voluntary occupation at the National Athletic Federation frequently brought him outside of the country.

The couple managed to marry six months after Aster had moved to Nazareth, on the condition that the grandmother dropped her quest to adopt the child. By then the mother was expecting news of a scholarship to Delft University in the Netherlands. After the wedding, she resigned from her college

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post and moved back to Addis, where the couple rented a house not very far from the grandmother's house and the three of them lived as a family, the mother now fully devoting her time to her child. The nine months leading up to her departure to Delft was the longest period in which the couple lived together during the first ten years of their child's life. Then at the end of September, when Ermias was three years old, his mother moved to Delft and he moved back in with his grandmother.

The grandmother's house stood on a 1500 square metre plot of land on the outskirts of Addis, the compound being surrounded on all sides by a high brick wall. The main house had separate living and dining rooms and five bedrooms. Two of her maids, a guard, and a gardener lived outside of the house in a row of service rooms. At the back and the sides of the house, she grew different types of fruit trees including orange, lemon, banana, mango, avocado, and peach, and kept a modest garden where she planted aromatic grasses and vegetables.

She was twenty-five years old and her son, Dawit, five, when the communists murdered her husband in broad daylight in front of his office. She never remarried but enjoyed a relatively happy and peaceful life, always surrounded by many servants and a host of fearful and admiring neighbours. Ermias too had a happy life with her, roaming around in the orchard and learning how to plant and climb trees. He stayed indoors only when the weather was bad, during which time, however, he would go inside his grandfather's study room, remove tons of books from the shelf and pile them up on the ground and study

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the pictures for hours. These were pictures of ancient emperors and empresses, kings and queens, respected diplomats, bishops, and gallant warriors.

The following summer, shortly before his fourth birthday, his mother came to Addis for the summer break. Addis was as usual cold, rainy, and muddy. Moreover, the mother was exhausted from her study abroad and from missing and constantly worrying about her child. So, the family spent much of the time at home, sleeping long hours in the morning and cuddling in warm bed, listening to the interminable rain.

When the mother returned to Delft by the end of September, Ermias experienced the first real pains of separation. He was overcome by sadness and was unable to sleep for many days thereafter. Then his grandmother decided to send him to preschool, even though he already had a private tutor who came twice a week to prepare him for school.

But December brought him his first real Christmas surprise, which was a trip to Delft with his father. They stayed abroad for three weeks, mostly travelling across the Netherlands and to Germany, and returned home with the hope that the mother would join them in Addis in less than six months and that there would be no more separation.

But in July she wrote a letter telling her husband that she had accepted a coveted, full-time PhD position at the University of Gottingen. She begged him to support her. Dawit took a long time to think about his wife's request, but finally agreed to support her, knowing how much education meant to her. The grandmother, on the other hand, was furious. She once again begged her daughter-in-law to forfeit the child and carry on

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with her life. The mother was equally furious and in less than two weeks she was back in Addis.

But the grandmother refused to admit her into her house and denied her access to her son. A rough custodianship battle had been raging for three months when Ermias accidentally heard from a maid that his “wretched” mother was in Addis, distraught and depressed. The bad news distressed the child greatly. He became overtly sullen and withdrawn in the subsequent days, so that the grandmother was obliged to soften her stance and to allow the mother to visit him.

Eventually the mother won the battle once again and this time she was determined to keep her son with her at any cost. Her husband, who had kept himself out of the battle, now wished to show his commitment to his marriage by moving to Germany with his wife and son, but he also saw a great opportunity to advance his medical centre by acquiring medical instruments from Europe.

Now that he knew and understood the significance of moving to Europe with his parents for an extended period of time, Ermias was deeply ambivalent. He was ecstatic, on the one hand, about the prospect of being with his mother and his happiness was reinforced by the knowledge that his father too was coming with them. On the other hand, however, it pained him to leave his grandmother to whom he was deeply attached. Mother and son travelled to Germany in January the following year and the father followed three months later.