



Yoni Medhin

AN ETHIOPIAN
FAMILY'S
JOURNEY OF
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
IN THE US

A Story of Determination,
Resourcefulness, and Faith

The Emergent Entrepreneur

Collection Editor
DREW HARRIS

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

This memoir chronicles Yonatan Medhin's entrepreneurial journey in founding Grain4Grain, a startup aiming to upcycle brewery byproducts into sustainable ingredients. It begins with Yonatan's family background as Ethiopian immigrants and follows their journey in the US and his entrepreneurial journey. He details securing initial funding, many pitches, partnering with customers, the impact of Covid-19, scaling production, and ultimately the failure and wind-up of the business. Throughout the ups and downs, Yonatan reflects on mistakes made and lessons learned about financials, business systems, investors, customers, and many other themes and points. He concludes with encouragement for future entrepreneurs to pursue their passions despite the inevitable challenges of building a business.

Keywords

Sustainable business; immigration; community; identity; lived experience; trauma; success; challenges; inspiration; real estate

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I want to thank my Dad, Mom, Bethel, Nati, and Jen. Dad and Mom, you two are special people and the world has become a better place because of you two and your dedication to us and God. Love you all.

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Learning objectives

1. Analyze the key strategic decisions and pivotal moments that impacted the trajectory of Grain4Grain.
2. Evaluate the leadership, management, and personal qualities exhibited by Yoni throughout his entrepreneurial journey.
3. Examine the process of developing and scaling a novel production technology and bringing it to market.
4. Assess the viability of sustainable/upcycling ventures and strategies for overcoming barriers to adoption.
5. Synthesize lessons learned from Yoni's entrepreneurial failures and successes applicable to business and leadership roles.
6. Examine the challenges and opportunities Yoni's parents faced as Ethiopian immigrants building a life in the United States.
7. Analyze the strategies and investments Yoni's parents used to accumulate assets and build wealth over time.
8. Evaluate the role of faith, community, and values in shaping Yoni's family's business ventures and approach to entrepreneurship.
9. Assess how Yoni's parents' entrepreneurial example influenced his ambitions and mindset as a founder.
10. Synthesize lessons from Yoni's family's journey about opportunity, sacrifice, risk-taking, and creating value as immigrants and entrepreneurs.

1

Why am I doing this?

How Grain4Grain almost collapsed because of Covid—fall 2020 to winter 2020

As of now, I have probably met over 100 entrepreneurs, and the age-old adage that you will face challenges that will test your deepest resolve to continue forward has never been truer during my tenure as CEO of Grain4Grain. I co-founded Grain4Grain in the summer of 2018 with the vision of making sustainable ingredients affordable and accessible for everyone. For me, along with the rest of the world, Covid-19 was a glaring exposé for Grain4Grain. It exposed everything we knew with greater perception and clarity, and it also exposed things we did not know. Before Covid-19, I thought I knew what I was doing. I was highly focused on growing our consumer packaged goods (CPG) brand, networking for our seed fundraising round, and hiring at our facility to help offload manufacturing duties. However, Covid-19 exposed realities that I wish were untrue. Here is a list of just a few of my realizations during the summer of 2020:

2 An Ethiopian Family's Journey of Entrepreneurship in the US

- Having many deficiencies, ranging from a poor management skill set (which has improved) to a classic case of people-pleasing, has inevitably caused numerous issues.
- Trying to start a food technology manufacturing firm with only \$160,000 of starting capital is really, really hard.
- Working with a co-founder who is part time and has already expressed the desire to quit is not the most brilliant idea.
- Having a board that is only interested when things are going well or when things are going bad can be incredibly isolating.
- And many, many more.

As the summer continued, my co-founder inevitably did use the opportunity to leave and pursue another career pathway, and the ensuing difficulty of supply chain constraints plus lack of financing crippled the CPG business. For example, due to the difficulties of maintaining a presence on shelves, many flocked to online channels. However, when everyone is suddenly rushing to a channel not optimized for that level of traffic, prices increase. And boy, did they increase a lot. Suddenly, advertisement costs increased by nearly four to five times. So, as with any business that is barreling toward bankruptcy, you pause your advertisement spend, and voila, almost all the revenue is gone. Grain4Grain went almost two months with nearly \$0 coming in. So, let's rewind to the late summer of 2020 when I was walking in the dog park, contemplating winding the business down. I quickly thought through a few reasons why. For months, Grain4Grain had been operating on a razor-thin margin of working capital. Strategic decision-making had been simply due to immediate necessity rather than strategizing for potential long-term payoffs.

Finally, Grain4Grain had been facing the impending day when our last remaining amount of cash would run out.

Fateful phone calls

At the dog park, I worked through the quick math of what Grain4Grain's outstanding liabilities included and determined the priorities for what needed to be paid before we attempted to liquidate our equipment. As I wrapped up the somewhat futile attempt to reconcile the books with my phone calculator, I received the first of two somewhat life-changing calls. The first call was from an organization called LiftFund. LiftFund is an organization that exists to help small businesses attain more traditional financing (traditional for the sake of this book = interest-bearing financing; think bank loans) through local and federal mechanisms that are there to encourage entrepreneurship and small business growth. About six months prior, when Grain4Grain was getting our products onto shelves, we had the opportunity to take out a loan with LiftFund at a very favorable rate. Several examples of financial assistance available through LiftFund include, but are not limited to, 0 per cent interest loans (artificially depressed through funding from the city or county), Small Business Administration (SBA) loans (loans that are partially or majorly guaranteed by the federal government), and loan forgiveness via eliminating the note altogether, in effect turning it into a grant.

Before diving into the call with LiftFund, it is important to understand the financing options available throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, there was a wave of stimulus from the Federal Reserve and our lawmakers to help aid

companies during the lockdowns. These included the Paycheck Protection Program, better known as the PPP loan, and the Disaster Relief Fund. Through these two mechanisms, thousands and thousands of businesses that had their landscape change for them overnight (whether through immense disruption or outright shutdown) were able to request funding. Yet this funding had very finicky standards of distribution. For example, the PPP loan generally operated like this: Company A, which had 100 employees and was forced to shut down during the initial and subsequent outbreaks, was allowed to request funding through their bank. Their bank would then check their request and disperse enough money to cover the paychecks of Company A's employees. For Grain4Grain, however, our employees were considered independent contractors, due to the nature of our work, and unfortunately we found out that this disqualified us from applying to any PPP loans during the pandemic. The second option of relief, and the more variable of the two, was the Disaster Relief Loan. This, like the PPP loan, was a stimulus given to banks and lenders that were tasked with helping the businesses that banked or worked with them in some sort of capacity. About six months prior, we had the opportunity to take out a loan with LiftFund when we were getting onto shelves with our first products at a very favorable rate at the time. Now LiftFund was also offering payment delays to many of the notes they had issues with during Covid-19, including ours. Keep in mind, this was very common at the time, and was also a tactic deployed by commercial landlords, including ours, knowing that businesses that operated physical locations could and mostly were severely impacted by the pandemic. While that loan had payments that were delayed, our first payment was approaching.

In fact, it was two days from when I was at the dog park that day in late summer 2020. But the call I received from LiftFund was not anything I expected. The very kind woman over the phone began to describe that, through an “internal determination” by their underwriters and loan officers, coupled with the availability of funds through the various Disaster Relief Funds that were issued in San Antonio, Texas, and federally, Grain4Grain would be granted full forgiveness for our loan. In essence, this converted our loan from a liability to grant income. The phone call concluded with me saying thank you, going back to my “what we owe” tab, and deleting the now forgiven loan. Essentially, what I was thinking is that, if we decided to stop Grain4Grain, we would owe nothing, and would have equipment that we could liquidate and walk away unscathed. I had been doing this for almost two years with relatively good press and good overall progress that I was pretty proud of. When it became clear that we were potentially closing our doors, I started using a vague metric called “what pops up when you google me or the business”, and by having more positive and real results, I felt the chance of me getting into a higher-caliber MBA program or a coveted job at a leading company after closing down Grain4Grain.

While still at the dog park, I received the second of the fateful calls that would change the course of my life. A newly made friend from the startup community reached out and asked me if I would be interested in entering a pitch competition. If there is one thing I do well, it is my uncanny ability to convince and command an audience from a stage. So, I was intrigued. He proceeded to describe a “tech” competition known as TechFuel. The city of San Antonio and the influential Bexar (pronounced

“bear”) County, desperate in its attempts to attract budding tech entrepreneurs from the alluring, startup ecosystem of its not-so-far-away neighbor Austin, earmarked funds to be utilized as a grant to be given in a competition. The amount being given out was significant when compared to previous grants, with the top prize being \$50,000. I was intrigued with the pitch competition, but also skeptical. Until this point, I had not thought of Grain4Grain as “tech”, or at least not in terms of the established understanding of digital and information technology. Sure, we operated a unique manufacturing technology (which I will share more about in Chapter 3), but we did not develop any new types of software or applications. I had some ideas for that, but I was barely affording our dumpster company, so these were pipedreams at best. What my friend encouraged me to do was to reframe Grain4Grain as a company utilizing proprietary technology to enable a brand-new process and ingredient into the market—rather than the more traditional CPG food business we normally described ourselves as. And that was it. Grain4Grain’s greatest strength was not the brand, the recipes for our products, or the personalities that operated the business. Our greatest strength was the fact that we could turn almost any byproduct into a food-safe ingredient with a process that had already gone through the scrutiny of food safety regulators and professionals. That has tremendous value, and at the heart of that value was our technology driving the vision of making sustainable ingredients affordable and available. He said there would be an initial “quarter-finals pitch” that he would get me a spot for, then after that, it was up to me and my people-coaxing skills to take us further. “Remember, you are tech”, he said as he hung up.

As I concluded my alarmingly disorienting morning at the dog park, I made some calls to a mentor and (now former) co-founder to discuss the conversations we had. As I arrived home, I immediately dug up all of Grain4Grain's pitch decks and began the dredging and beer-filled nights of redoing what I had spent so much time last year making. The TechFuel competition had some difficult constraints (that I can now appreciate). The first constraint was that the pitch could not exceed three minutes. Within a total of five minutes, introductions, the pitch, and Q&A must be completed. Well, sadly, our most recent deck was very long relative to the standards for the competition since it had been used for a potential investment offer and an application to an accelerator. As I began to trim the presentation, I found myself struggling to find the main and simplified point (a deficiency that I continue to improve upon). But the beer helped. I was able to trim it down to what amounted to a deck that required me to speed talk through major points of our story, margins, vision, and team.

Pitch night

The setup for the quarter-finals of the TechFuel competition was simple enough. The city had gathered a litany of businesses to send in, via Zoom of course, to a virtual pitch hall, where the various entrepreneurs would enter competing pools and compete for the top two slots per pool. Now, keep in mind, most of the businesses barely existed or were still in the ideation phase. We had actual paying customers, a fledgling retail presence of close to 200 stores, and some future potential to expand, given we had the funding. So, the quarter-finals presentation came and

went a couple of weeks after that first phone call, and we found out fairly quickly that we would be heading to the finals. For several reasons, it was clear that our pitch, while good enough to make it through the quarter-finals of the competition, would be inadequate to make it through the finals stage. Our primary audience was changing from professionals in various fields to the general public across a variety of social media platforms. This new audience, I figured, was less interested in the facts of our technology, the advantageous margins it created in the market, or the various specifications that made us more efficient than our competitors. They wanted a story. Everyone wants a story. A tangible start, an exciting journey, with the conclusion being a triumphal end. The setup for the finals would be that there was a panel of judges, similar to the judges we had during the quarter-finals, with comparable backgrounds and professions—however, the main difference was that these judges carried no weight in their votes. There would be an audience that would tune in during the competition, and at the conclusion of every three-minute pitch, there was a two-minute Q&A with the judges, followed by a two-minute voting period online. The audience tuning in online were the ones carrying out the vote and deciding the winner.

Because of how fast the pitch and Q&A would be, we needed to transition our pitch into a quick story that would help explain the business and value prop to folks that presumably had no background in food or food technology. I engaged with a few of my advisors and mentors and created a story that would help the viewer first understand what the byproduct was, follow the journey of that byproduct through our system, and eventually

see how it ends up at their neighborhood grocery store. While the story was simple, it seemed promising enough to end up being what we would submit for the finals. While I would have liked more time to practice, I had only two weeks from the quarter-finals to the final pitch competition, and after ten days of rewriting and practicing, I submitted what I felt was a decent shot. On the night of the finals, we were given limited information about the setup, which was probably for the best. As I walked into the hallway that led to the green room I was given for some last-minute practice, I caught my first glimpse of the competitors in their rooms. Some seemed very relaxed and were chatting with their next-door neighbor, while a few others looked incredibly nervous, with one in particular pacing hastily back and forth in his room. Once I got to my green room, I had a few minutes to brush up on my new pitch deck before they announced that we would all need to be ready for sound check in a couple of minutes. One by one, they called us to the auditorium where we would be going on stage for the real pitch.

Walking in, I was blown away by the production effort for the evening. There were at least 20 people buzzing around, focused on who knows what. But what truly caught me off guard was the sheer size of the auditorium and how few people were in it. The organizers had booked the auditorium in the summer, assuming that Covid restrictions would have subsided by the fall. The auditorium could easily fit 750 people but was essentially empty for the evening. Additionally, due to the restrictions, all the judges were phoning in. At the end of every pitch, we couldn't see the judges; we would only hear their voices resonating into the empty auditorium. The order of the presentations was picked

randomly, with Grain4Grain going in the first group of three. I already explained how fast the setup was, but actually sprinting through it all was another experience entirely. It felt like I was on stage for only 30 seconds. Once I was on stage, I had to find someone or some people to get visual feedback as I pitched because there was no audience to gauge how well my words or movement on stage were resonating. Luckily, I made eye contact with a masked audience member who I later found out, during a post-event interview, was a reporter who felt that my eye contact was entirely too much. As soon as I finished pitching, I was then left on stage to answer the questions from the judges. Unfortunately, due to the whole event being broadcasted online, there was an inevitable delay during which I would begin answering a question as the judges were impatiently asking, "Yoni, can you hear us?" This, as you can imagine, was eating away at any precious time I had left. I was able to eke out two answers before hearing "TIME" and hurried off stage so that the announcer could introduce the next contestant. With that, I was escorted to where the audience would have been seated and joined the other 20 people in the vastness of empty chairs as the next sets of contestants came and went off stage at a fairly efficient pace. What I noticed though, by the end of the last set, was that my presentation truly was something special. I never realized the power of telling stories, even after reading famed business gurus like Simon Sinek and Donald Miller. But this was the first time I realized just how potent it was. Listening to the various founders, who had amazing ideas, which in some cases, I would argue, were better than mine. When it comes to communicating those concepts, in a tight time domain, it becomes imperative that the

details are left to the side, and the story of why this is important becomes the forefront.

With the last of the presenters finished, we were given a break as the online audience utilized a Facebook voting feature to nominate the first- and second-place winners, while the judges determined third through fifth. Speaking as humbly as possible, I thought we were at least a shoe-in for third place, and maybe even second. The announcer decided to name the winners from last to first. "In fifth place was" ... I don't remember. The important thing was that it was not us. This meant we either didn't make the top five, which I gave a 50 per cent probability, or we were in the mix of the top four. As each place was named, I tried to act nonchalant while the other founders reacted nervously, but deep inside, I was also very nervous. The reality was that we were running out of money, and this was our chance to get some publicity and money to keep the lights on and explore the pivot I had presented on. I mentioned that the audience chose first and second place, blind to us as competitors, until the last second when the host walked on stage, marking the end of the voting session. As she pulled out the envelope to announce second place, I realized I was standing, clearly letting go of any show of confidence I had earlier. "And second place in the 2020 Tech Fuel Competition goes to..." still not Grain4Grain! I sat back in my seat, pretty distraught. I couldn't believe we didn't even place. I started texting my family and friends who voted, thanking them and expressing some sadness that we didn't win. As I finished writing out the generic text to send to everyone, one of the producers annoyingly shook me, covered in wires and wearing a headset. I presumed he was one of the producers, and I almost

angrily responded, "What are you talking about?" Before I could say anything, I heard, distantly at first, but steadily getting louder, "Grain4Grain" and the word "winner". I stopped my momentary outburst to glance at the stage, and there was the host signaling almost annoyingly for me to hurry up and get on stage. A massive check with \$50,000 was written out with our "G4G" logo next to her. It finally dawned on me. We won.

I almost tripped running on stage. I shook the announcer's hand, grabbed the check, and took a few photos. All the while, I was beaming ear to ear with the disbelief that I had pulled this off. That same producer who got my attention walked on stage alongside a cameraman and conducted a brief interview with the host of the event asking questions. I wish I could remember the questions or even the contestants, but the rest of the evening was a blur. By the end of the interview, I was brought to one of the organizers of the event and was asked, "Who do we make the check out to?" Confused, I asked, "What do you mean?" They explained that because the event was delayed, the funding had already arrived, and I would receive the money that day! I told them our legal company name, signed a couple of papers, and was walking out the door with a massive check (which we still have), a trophy, and a real check for \$50,000. It took me a second to compose myself, as I was alone in front of the event center in downtown San Antonio. Due to Covid, downtown felt like a ghost town. And here I was, standing with full hands walking to my car, in the emptiness of the city, realizing that what I held in my hand was a second wind to keep up the fight for accomplishing my grand vision.

2

Origin stories

Dawit and Elizabeth's escape from a communist Ethiopia—1975 to 1982

At 12 years old, my dad, Dawit Medhin, was a young kid in war-torn Ethiopia. Generally, he would have been considered an unassuming kid: well-behaved, asked inquisitive questions, and always looking to play soccer with the neighborhood boys. Physically, nothing much has changed since then. Always the little brother in his family, he was also the shortest one in the group. But as with many kids in that era, Dawit carried a heavy heart of loss that would translate across any border as horrific. A year prior, in 1975, when he was 11 years old, the country was beginning to enter into political turmoil as the former dictator and king, Haile Selassie, was overthrown by a new political faction named the Derg. The Derg was the emerging power in a growing Marxist–Leninist era of uprisings in a variety of countries that were influenced by direct and indirect indoctrination from the Soviet Union. Similar uprisings could be witnessed all across the world, from Latin America and Southeast Asia to other countries in Africa. The people's or workers' revolutions were underway, and they were incredibly violent. This time period would add to

the already astonishingly high number of people killed in the deadliest century of all time in the history of mankind. Rulers that embraced Marx and Lenin would do so with incredible cruelty, leading to the most widely recognized revolutions to this day, ranging from the ideologies of Mao and Ho Chi Minh in China and Vietnam to Castro in Cuba. In Ethiopia, a particularly gruesome individual began to emerge as the leader of the Derg party in 1974, Mengistu Mariam. His form of inciting violence in order to create the instability required to overthrow the existing monarchy was a form of political killings, torture, indiscriminate killings, and targeted propaganda.¹

The morning that changed everything

One fateful day that year, Dawit, a friend of his, his three older sisters, and his parents were enjoying breakfast together. The prior evening, it was known that violence was beginning to spread in the city, with shooting and deathly screams being heard almost nightly. As they were eating, my dad, one of his sisters, and his mom were in a separate room when they heard a loud thud, which sounded like a door being kicked in by a boot. In almost an instinctual move, his mom moved my dad and his sister into various hiding spots in the bedroom and joined them, but at that point, the first shot had gone off. They could hear yelling and screaming in the other room and felt absolutely helpless. And as fast as it started, it ended. The soldiers could be heard yelling at each other from both the hallway and inside the room. While it was unclear what they said, they had left the home and were nowhere to be seen. His mom came out of the hiding spot

first, and my dad and his sister quietly followed into the kitchen to a frightening scene. Both his father, one of his sisters, and his friend were all killed by the gunman. It was clear they needed to move quickly though, leaving the grieving for later. They did not know if this was the only time the soldiers would be coming to their home, and so within one day they moved out of their home and stayed with nearby friends who had heard about the killing. It was clear though that for my dad and his two sisters, living in that town where fighting had grown to an incredibly dangerous level, they would need to move to a different city. Within a couple weeks, my dad's mom was able to sell a large majority of their possessions and home, and used that money to help the family move to another town called Mendefera, Eritrea, where they would stay for a month.

Now, my dad's story, and in many ways my own too, is evidence of both the power of faith and the power of community. To many, faith is an abstract concept associated with belief in some sort of deity or deities. Faith, in the presence of great trauma and hopelessness, is the fuel for perseverance. It helps people make it through incredibly dark times and the worst of situations. Community, when expressed appropriately, is the sharing of burdens and victories with each other. It's the authentic connection that helps one maintain faith to continue persevering in life. When one member of the community reaches the mountaintop, they all experience the victory. And when one is in the depth of despair, the community helps carry a portion of the burden to lift them up.

My dad is great in many ways, but he will be the first to tell you that he is a product of his community. He was the product of

many people throughout his life who contributed to his eventual success many decades later. From people praying for him, to people giving him and his family shelter as they continued to escape the ensuing war, to people advising him to make it out West where democracy and opportunity lie. As my dad and his remaining family were making it through the first year after the killings, the fighting began expanding into neighboring cities, including the secluded towns where they were staying. Once again, for the safety of the children, my grandma was searching for a way out. A distant cousin of my dad, who would later also settle in the United States, had heard about the killings from others a few weeks after the incident. He quickly began following their footsteps from town to town via word of mouth for a few weeks. Communications were sparse at the time, with no cellphones or emails to reach them. From his point of view, which was informed by news stations like the BBC and other programs that were tracking the now escalating uprisings in the region, the family needed to relocate to a new city. There, they would find some more stability to begin rebuilding some semblance of a life. My dad's cousin knew that it would be extremely difficult to travel by car to their destination, as all the major roadways had blockades where people were being routinely killed or hauled off into prisons. So they decided to travel by foot for several days to bypass the major blockades and make it into the main city centers. After mulling over the risks, which ranged from being caught by a patrol unit to dying from the elements like the heat or wild animals, they decided that if they were to stay where they were, the fighting could escalate and trap them. So my grandma rounded up her three remaining children, strapped the money they had left to her undergarments and her body in case they

were stopped, and with the little belongings they had, they were led by my dad's cousin across the wilderness for three days.

During the journey, their biggest worry became a reality: patrollers were able to find them. But in the wisdom of my grandma, she had taped the money to her body, preventing them from finding anything within their belongings. They were allowed to pass to the next town unharmed. While this stark example may have been good fortune, to my family and me, this is just a small glimpse of the providence and protection that would be a theme in my family's story for the next several decades. The town they settled in, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, was called Adi Tigrat.

Once there, they settled into a new home with the money saved up and began rebuilding their life, one day at a time. My dad was able to attend a Catholic boarding school which, after they heard about his ordeal the last couple of months, was free for him to attend. Keep in mind, he had not been attending school for the last two to three months and, worried he would fall behind, his cousin was urging that he go back to school in whatever way he could. My dad's sister was still in shock, but she was able to return to some semblance of a life and worked a bit here and there. And this was their life for a few years—they had some momentary peace and time to grieve. My dad was able to have some stability, which allowed him to begin excelling in school. My grandma had to assume the role of both parents, which is obviously hard in any context, but being widowed and losing children makes it an especially jarring reality. However, and as is still the case today, she was sharp and very wise. She made sure her remaining kids were taken care of and was prepared to make any necessary sacrifices.

My father's escape out of the country through education

As the fighting escalated, it became apparent that their town may succumb to the war next. Things began to slowly shift in areas where the war grew. For those aware of how towns changed during World War II and the Nazi expansion, towns would first start to lose people going out to fight the war. Then certain high-profile or powerful people would begin to turn in favor of the opposition or leave the city. From there, with resources and people slowly depleting, a town was ripe for takeover.

This was being experienced within Adi Tigrat as the fighting started to escalate in the outer regions of the city. More and more of the city's protective service members were being sent to fight, leaving the town defenseless. It became so bad that, at one point, they handed my dad a rifle and made him patrol the school at night, forcing him to walk around the perimeter until sunrise. However, as the fighting grew worse, it was the Ethiopian communists that were gathering young boys to shoot. My dad would recall a battle against the Liberation Front, where they trained him and his friend for three weeks on basic combat, and then trucked them out to battle. My dad was incredibly distraught by this and immediately began searching for a way out of the city before he would be sent out to fight again. His older sister worked for the Ministry of Agriculture and, in secret, helped my dad get processed for a school transfer to Addis Ababa. The timing was unbelievable. Once my dad's transfer was complete, he received word within a couple weeks that his friend was killed in a battle, along with many other young boys. While the city of Addis Ababa had undergone a communist uprising, it was still

relatively safe compared to other cities in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The family had a distant relative in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, who would also immigrate to the United States. They agreed to take my dad in until he finished his last two years of high school at the age of 18. So, at the age of 16, my dad would be separated from his family and would not resume any extended period of time with them for the rest of his life.

Addis Ababa at the time was more stable compared to other cities undergoing conflict, but it was far from an easy life. An example of just how difficult the environment was to learn in is that, due to limited resources and availability of material (e.g., textbooks), limits were imposed for accessing the library materials. For example, say you were preparing for a chemistry exam. Unless you were wealthy and had the disposable income to buy a copy of the book, you were forced to wait for the next available one at the library. Usually, there would be a long line at the library to check out the book, and there was a time limit for using the book. Additionally, because of the scarcity of material, they would not allow you to leave the library with the book. So here's my dad and several other students, preparing for an exam and only being allowed to check out a book for a couple of hours. While this situation would be untenable in the United States, the reality forced the students to savor their study time and maximize any time they had. There are many examples of the scarcity my family and so many others in that time period experienced. My dad had excelled time and time again, and when it was time for the university entrance exams, he would perform well in those too. For many, the exams were simply a way to continue schooling within Ethiopia, and more commonly, one of the universities in

Addis Ababa. My dad, and several others, looked to the exams as a way out. The mechanics of trying to get out were tricky and very risky. Once you took the test, you were allowed to do one of two things—either use the score and submit it to a university within the country or take the chance to forgo that and see if a university in a different country would take you in. Here is where it became risky: you couldn't change your mind if you didn't get accepted abroad and try to resubmit your scores to an Ethiopian university.

This was a mutually exclusive decision.

At the time, the Soviet Union, while showing signs of disruption and instability internally, was still far and away the other superpower of the world. And, most impressively, their universities had surpassed the United States in several categories within STEM fields. The USSR at the time had signed numerous agreements since the end of World War II with various countries in the Horn of Africa. The agreements resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars (adjusted for inflation today) helping with a variety of categories, including agriculture, military training and bolstering, infrastructure, and education. As part of these agreements, the USSR agreed to train several hundred thousand people in Africa and also agreed to train and educate Africans within their own universities. Most of these students would study in STEM fields for five years, receive a master's degree, and return to their countries. The program, in the Soviets' eyes, served multiple purposes. One, the United States had already begun conducting operations in Africa and other regions that began to be heavily influenced by the Soviets after World War II. This was a way to not only fight the United States in the form of a proxy

but also to win the hearts of the countries they were in. This did not always work out—think Afghanistan and other countries in that region where the instability of the two world powers' interference still continues to bring echoes of the past turmoil today. But in many cases, the programs worked to help build the USSR's international influence and turn the tide in many cases in their favor. Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, etc. are all examples of this being done remarkably well.²

For students like my dad, there were limited spots to get into one of these programs. So, my dad put his name into the ring and opted to go to the USSR if his test scores were selected. Every year, they would only select a few hundred students out of the thousands that took the university entrance exams. To reiterate, if you were not selected, you would be unable to continue on to university for a whole year. While the risk was there, my dad was confident he would be selected—and selected he was! I can only imagine the feeling after all the years since his dad died and coming to this moment where he would finally have an opportunity to do something meaningful with his life. There were other motivations for going to Moscow as well. He had become a Christian a couple years back and knew that communism was highly hostile to his newfound faith. He also had aspirations of succeeding in business or some form of owning property, and that too was treated hostilely under communism. At least in Russia there would be a chance to escape to Europe because it was close by; whereas, in Ethiopia, the chance of getting out without any support was near impossible. A few years later, one of my dad's sisters attempted to cross into Sudan in order to escape the violence, and would sadly end up dying because of

hunger and exposure to the harsh desert environment. So, with no other choices for a better life present, he moved to Moscow for the start of his education in the USSR.

My mother's escape from the country to the West

Now, my mom's story is thankfully less traumatic than my dad's but is also fraught with grief. As a young teenager growing up in Addis Ababa, there were not many options for future growth and potential as a woman. While women were able to grow in professional careers, it was very rare, even after the communist regime took over. During that time in the city, as earlier described, various officers and party enforcers would shut down businesses and other private entities as they would either become controlled by the central party or be removed altogether. There was also the beginning of a war against the region up north, which would soon become Eritrea. The communist party began killing and imprisoning people that were Eritrean as a way to protect their power. My mom was one of six kids in her family, and her dad worked as a truck driver in the city. Her family was Eritrean and had moved to Addis prior to when she was born. When the communist regime began its crackdown, they found out my grandfather was placed in prison for three years as a form of intimidation. At the time, there were no official ways of leaving the country, meaning going through a designated port where you are checked prior to leaving (e.g., airport, port of entry for a car or ship, or train station). Most people would escape in caravans that were usually on foot or through smuggling routes. Others would lie upon leaving certain ports and would not