

The night was rough. The room we slept in was infested with fleas called *qunchi*, and it was very cold. Although it was a sleepless night, I fell in love with the fighters and became even more determined to join their ranks.

In the morning, the fighters told me that fighting requires physical strength and that I was not up to the task. To prove their case, they asked me to carry the full military gear that a typical fighter would put on as he runs through the hills for days. I was very excited to carry the bullets, hand grenades, foldable AK-47, and a spare RPG rocket. I felt like Rambo! Too bad selfies weren't a thing back then! The fighters must have been both bewildered and sorry for such a young boy to come out of the city alone in search of fighters. Knowing the truth about living as a freedom fighter and the hell they went through to stay alive, I can only imagine, their hearts must have been filled with sadness at my naïve dreams.

It didn't take long for the commander to decide I needed to return home. But, given my exceptional desire and eagerness to work for them, he didn't want to let this opportunity go either. So, he said that I could work for them from within Asmara. To get a detailed plan which suited my age, they asked me to come back a week later to meet the man in charge of Asmara operations.

After a night with the fighters, returning to Asmara once again was a huge disappointment, but I felt very proud this time. At least I had stayed a night outside my home demonstrating my commitment to join the fighters at whatever cost. With tears streaming down my cheeks, it was time for me to leave Adi Shmagle and return home. The commander walked me to the edge of the town and suggested that I avoid the Woki Duba observation post since the Ethiopian soldiers monitor the location using binoculars.

As I began the walk down the winding road leading toward the checkpoint at Asmara, I was deeply immersed in planning my next trip and how to best convince the fighters to take me into their fold. As I got closer to Asmara, I also began thinking about how my return home would go. Would my mother beat the hell out of me for

refusing to obey her orders the day before? Or, would she be shocked and thrilled that I was back home?

As a mother, she must have been terrified to lose her child in such a silly way. Now that I am a father of three daughters, I cannot begin to imagine the pain she must have gone through to lose her son for two days while her husband was gone and in a city where killing was a daily occurrence. After my father was relocated to Addis, raising seven kids as a single mother was already very difficult for her. I was the second-oldest kid and the oldest boy in the house, and by threatening to disappear I was in no way helpful.

As I approached our neighborhood, many kids who had been terrified by my disappearance were elated to see me back again. Some of them ran toward me and others ran to my home to tell my mother the good news. I am not sure what I was thinking, but I remember entering our home flanked by many young boys full of curiosity. I felt very proud of what I had accomplished, but at the same time ashamed that I had returned home with nothing to show for my trip — again.

My adventurous behavior had impressed my friends. As for my mother, she was relieved and very happy to see me come home after two days. I knew her subdued reaction hid so much pain, agony, and a sense of helplessness, but I was also fighting a demon in me that didn't care about her feelings.