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opening extract from

The Garbage King

written by

Elizabeth Laird

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Elizabeth Laird first travelled to Ethiopia in 1967, when the last Emperor, Haile Selassie, was still on the throne, and the dark days of war and famine were yet to come. She lived and worked in Addis Ababa, the capital city, for two years and travelled all over the country, on the tops of lorries, on buses, on horseback and on foot. She made many friends: farmers and their families, soldiers, students, teachers, street children and even princesses.

During the next three decades, Ethiopians suffered all the horrors of a long civil war and a devastating famine. But when peace came at last, Elizabeth went back. She revisited some of the places she had known and tried to find old friends. Some had fled the country, others had died, but she found several, including two happy and successful men who had begged from her when they were children on the streets. They showed her that sad stories can have happy endings.

Since then, Elizabeth Laird has often returned to Ethiopia, travelling from one end of the country to the other. She has made friends with many more people, among them a group of street children who live rough in Addis Ababa. They told her about their lives, showed her their 'pitch', introduced her to their dog and talked to her about their hopes and fears.

Glossary

Shamma – a thick white cotton shawl, used by men and women as an extra coat or blanket

Amharic – the national language of Ethiopia

Injera – a kind of flat pancake that Ethiopian people eat at every meal instead of bread

Ato – Mr

Tej – an alcoholic drink made with honey

Godana – a person who lives on the street; a beggar

1



There was no light in the shack, none at all, except when the moon was shining. Mamo could see chinks of it then, through the gaps in the corrugated-iron roof.

But the moon wasn't out tonight. Mamo shivered, pulled the ragged blanket over his head and huddled against his sister's warm body. Tiggist had been facing away from him, but she turned over to lie on her back, the bare straw mattress rustling as she moved. He knew she was awake. He knew her eyes were open, and that she was staring up into the pitch-darkness.

'What are we going to do?' he said.

'I don't know.'

It was a week since their mother had died. Mamo hadn't felt much about it. Ma had been either sick or drunk for as long as he could remember, and he'd kept out of her way if he could, scared of her sudden, violent rages.

Tiggist was the person he loved. Years ago, when he was little, she'd staggered around with him on her hip, though she was hardly more than a toddler

herself. She'd always looked out for him, saw that he was fed, picked him up when he fell over and screeched at anyone who threatened to hurt him.

'You're not going off, Tiggist, are you?' he said, his stomach suddenly contracting. 'You're not going to leave me?'

'I don't know,' she said again.

A black hole seemed to open up in front of Mamo. He wanted to push her, to force her to make promises, but there was a note in his sister's voice that he'd never heard before. It shrivelled him up. His skin was prickling all over.

'The rent's due next week,' she said. 'It's fifty birr. How are we going to find fifty birr?'

Fifty birr! Mamo had never seen so much money in his life.

'What'll they do,' he said, 'if we can't pay?'

'What do you think? They'll throw us out.'

'Where'll we go?'

'Oh, shut up, Mamo. How do I know? Work it out for yourself.'

The sharpness in her voice shocked him and made him feel even worse. He didn't dare speak again.

'I'll go to Mrs Faridah tomorrow,' Tiggist said at last. 'She got me to deliver stuff to her customers last week. She might give me a job. I could sleep in her shop.'

Mamo swallowed, and moved abruptly away from her.

'I wouldn't go without you, though.'

He could hear the uncertainty in her voice, and his fear turned to fury. He rolled right away from

her, taking the blanket with him, and clenched his fists.

'Well, what do you want me to do?' She sounded angry herself. 'Work in a bar? Paint my face up and do it with the customers round the back? What else is there?'

He hadn't thought about it. He'd assumed they'd go on like before, that somehow Tiggist would do what their mother had done, rustle up the money for the rent each month, and scrape together enough every day for something to eat.

'I'll work,' he muttered. 'I'll get a shoe-shine kit.'

She snorted.

'Who's going to pay for a shoe-shine kit? And how will you get a pitch? You know how those boys fight over them. You wouldn't stand a chance.'

He stuffed his fingers into his ears. He couldn't bear to hear any more. Tiggist pulled at the blanket and he rolled back towards her so that it covered them both again. The old straw in the bare mattress beneath them rustled as they moved.

'If we're not careful,' Tiggist said, in a voice that was barely more than a whisper, 'we'll end up on the streets.'

The sun had come up at last, bringing warmth after the cold night, and the smoke from thousands of breakfast fires, all over Addis Ababa, spiralled up into the bright morning air. Mamo pulled at the piece of sharp-edged corrugated iron which formed the door of the shack. It creaked open, and he stepped outside into the narrow lane, blinking in the bright light.

He stood uncertainly, watching people hurrying off to their day's work. He ignored the crowds of chattering schoolchildren in their bright blue uniforms, who carried piles of crumpled books under their arms. He'd only gone to school for a couple of years, and he'd left for good ages ago when he was eight years old. There'd been no money since then to pay the fees. He'd long since forgotten the letters he'd begun to learn there.

He was more interested in the adults. There must be someone, among the clerks in their cotton-drill suits, the motherly women off to market, and the young secretaries and shop-girls with their bright knitted sweaters – among all these people there had to be someone who might help him, who would know what to do.

Tiggist had been gone at least half an hour by now. She'd washed her face and hands, tidied her hair and tried to scrub some of the stains out of her old skirt. Then she'd gone off to see Mrs Faridah. He could tell, watching the stiffness in her back as she walked quickly away from him down the stony lane, that she was tense with nerves.

Usually, Mamo went down to the street corner in the morning. He knew some of the boys that hung around there. They spent the long hours commenting on passers-by, or playing games on a chipped old game board, or begging off anyone well-dressed who walked past. Sometimes he went the other way, to the music shop. He'd sit on the wall outside, drinking in the melodies that poured out through the open door, singing along with them

under his breath. Today, though, he felt too anxious to go anywhere.

He realized suddenly that he was hungry, and went inside. Tiggist had left some bread wrapped up in a plastic bag on the only shelf in the shack. He reached up for it, then poured himself some water from the jar in the corner. He sat down on the little stool beside the dead ashes in the hearth, which was in the middle of the earth floor, and began to eat.

The light streaming in through the doorway was suddenly blocked out. Mamo looked up, and saw the silhouette of a man. It was impossible to make out his face against the glare outside, but Mamo knew at once that he was a stranger.

'Hello,' the man said, stooping under the low lintel and stepping inside. 'Are you Mamo?'

His voice was high and light, almost jaunty.

Mamo nodded cautiously.

'Where's your father?' the man said.

Mamo could see him properly now. He was wearing a suit jacket over a green-and-brown striped shirt, and his shoes were made of leather and well shined. When he lifted his hand, a big watch on a loose bracelet strap slid up his wrist.

'My father?' Mamo repeated, puzzled. 'He's dead, I think. In the army. Years ago.'

The man smiled. His face was thin, and his lips were twisted by a faint scar that ran down his cheek. His eyes were darting round the inside of the shack.

'Who are you, anyway?' Mamo said. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

The man turned his smile on him again, and it broadened.

'I'm your uncle. Don't you know me? Your mother's brother, Merga. Didn't she tell you about me?'

'No. She never said.'

Merga had crossed the floor with two strides and was running his eye along the shelf.

'Where did she keep her things?'

'What things? She didn't have any things.'

Merga bent down and lifted a corner of the mattress.

'Don't get cheeky with me.' His voice was hardening. 'Her radio. Money. Gold jewellery. Anything. Don't tell me this is all she had. One mattress. One stool. One blanket. A water jar. A couple of pans and spoons and glasses.'

'I told you,' said Mamo, backing towards the door. 'She didn't have anything. Nothing.'

'Who's going to pay me back, then?' Merga straightened up and stared down at Mamo.

'Pay you back? What for?'

'The money I lent her.'

'What money?'

'Last month. She came and begged 100 birr off me.'

His eyes had shifted sideways.

He's lying, thought Mamo, and took another sideways step towards the door.

Merga's hand shot out and caught his wrist. He smiled again, and the hardness left his voice. It was soft again. Affectionate, almost.

'Look,' he said, 'it's all right about the money. You're only a kid. I don't expect you to pay it back. I didn't come about that, anyway. I want to help

you, see? I'm your uncle. I want to see you right. What are you planning to do? Now that she's gone?'

Mamo breathed deeply with relief, and felt his shoulders relax. He'd been wrong to be suspicious. This man was family. A relative. Someone he could trust.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Get a shoe-shine kit, maybe.'

Merga laughed and shook his head.

'Polishing shoes? Na – you can do better than that. I'll get you a job. A proper one. Decent food and nice people. What do you think about that?'

Mamo's heart, which had weighed heavily inside him since he'd woken up that morning, suddenly felt lighter inside his chest. This was like a miracle! He'd been looking hopelessly at the passers-by only half an hour ago, dreaming of a chance like this, and it had walked right in through the door.

'You mean it? You really can? Get me a job? Where? What would I have to do?'

'You'll see,' Merga said. 'Come on. I'll take you there now.'

Quickly, worried in case this heaven-sent stranger should change his mind, Mamo reached into the corner behind the water jar and pulled out his shoes. They were nearly too small for him, and he didn't bother to wear them most of the time, but they'd make a good impression, maybe, on his new employer.

He put them on, tied the laces, and stood up.

Merga was looking at him critically.

'How old are you? Ten? Eleven?'

'I don't know. Thirteen, I think.'

'Bit small for your age, aren't you?'

Mamo tried to straighten his back.

'I'm strong,' he said anxiously. 'I can carry a good load.'

'All right. Come on.' Merga took a last look round and shook his head. 'What a dump.'

Mamo's heart was beating fast with excitement as he followed Merga outside. He pulled the door shut on its protesting hinges and fixed the padlock. Merga was already setting off up the narrow lane when Mrs Hannah came out of the little house next door.

'Are you all right, Mamo?' she said kindly, hitching the baby, who was tied to her back, further up towards her shoulders.

'Yes, my uncle's come,' Mamo said proudly. 'He's got me a job. We're going to see about it now.'

'Your uncle?' Mrs Hannah looked at Merga with surprise. 'That's good. I hope it works out. Come and tell me about it tonight. I'll have some supper for you both if you like.'

'Mamo!' Merga had walked on, and was calling back sharply.

'Tell Tiggist if she gets back before I do!' cried Mamo, and he ran after Merga, up the lane.

'Who was that?' Merga said, when at last he'd caught him up.

'Our neighbour, Mrs Hannah. She's really kind. She—' began Mamo.

'And Tiggist, who's she?'

Mamo's eyes widened.

'My sister. Didn't you know?'

'Of course. I'd forgotten.' Merga looked pleased. 'How old is she?'

'Older than me. Sixteen, maybe.'

'Where is she?'

'She went to look for a job this morning. At the grocery store. Mrs Faridah—'

'That'll do. Stop chattering.'

Mamo had been feeling more and more expansive, his feet, pinched as they were in his old shoes, skipping lightly over the stones. Questions were boiling up inside him, but he kept them to himself.

Rosy dreams were flowering in his mind. Perhaps he'd be working in a pastry shop, one with a brightly painted front, and he'd wear a little bow tie, and serve customers with those luscious cakes and steaming cups of coffee he so loved to smell as he passed their open doors. Or perhaps it would be in one of those furniture-making places, and he'd learn to make beds and chairs like the ones displayed on the pavement. More likely, he told himself, trying to be sensible, he'd be a porter in the market. Well, he could manage that. He was strong, whatever his uncle thought of his size.

It wasn't long before he was away from the familiar streets and lanes where he'd always lived, and a little shoot of anxiety began to sprout in his chest. How would he find his way home? He began to look carefully around for landmarks, noticing big buildings, colourful signs in shop windows and brightly flowering shrubs hanging over fences.

'Is it far?' he said at last, looking timidly up at Merga.

A bus roared past at that moment, belching out

clouds of black exhaust, and Merga didn't appear to hear him. Instead, he grabbed Mamo by the arm and propelled him across the road. To his surprise, Mamo found himself in the crowded, noisy bus station.

Perhaps I'll work in the office, taking the ticket money, he thought, his excitement rising again. Or maybe we're going right through here to the garage over there, and I'll be the boy that does the petrol pumps.

He followed Merga through the ever-thickening crowd, dodging between groups of long-distance passengers and their bulging bundles, trying not to bump into peanut sellers and ticket touts.

It happened so quickly that Mamo had no time to react. One moment he was squeezing past a big red-and-gold bus, half deafened by the throbbing of the engine, and the next moment, he felt Merga's hand close like a vice on his collar, and he was being thrust up the steps into the bus, and pushed down the crowded aisle to a couple of seats at the very back.

Merga pushed him down into the seat by the window and sat down beside him. Mamo turned a shocked face towards him. He couldn't understand what was happening. He was only aware of a frightening cold feeling that was growing in the pit of his stomach.

'Where are we going?' he said. 'This isn't an Addis bus. It goes out to the country. Where are you taking me? I want to get out. I've got to get back to Tiggist.'

But Merga's grip was tighter than ever. He was holding Mamo down in his seat. Now he thrust his

face right into Mamo's, and Mamo smelled for the first time stale alcohol and a waft of old tobacco.

'Want to make a fuss?' he hissed. 'If you do, I'll tie your hands and feet. I'll say you're a runaway. You'll shut up if you know what's good for you. You said you wanted a job, and that's what you're going to get. You ought to be damn grateful, you snivelling little beggar.'

The throb of the engine changed suddenly to a deafening roar. The conductor slammed the door shut, and it began to move, turning quickly out of the bus station on to the main road out of Addis Ababa, away from everything and everyone that Mamo had ever known.

In another part of Addis Ababa, just off the magnificent avenue, blazing with flowering trees, that sweeps down the hill past the president's palace, another boy was sitting on the edge of a swimming pool in the grounds of a big hotel, dangling his legs in the water.

All around, children were playing and splashing noisily. A boy from his school, lithe and handsome, ran up behind him, leaped high into the air, his slim brown legs working like scissors, and landed in the water with a gigantic splash, swamping the boy and the other bobbing heads nearby. He surfaced and shook the water out of his eyes.

'Dani! Dani!' he chanted, looking mockingly at the boy. 'Fat boy! Can't swim!'

Dani hunched his plump shoulders and stared down at the pool. The sun, sparkling on the water, shot out almost painful sparks of light. He looked

sideways. There was a shallower pool nearby. Meseret, his little sister, was strutting through it. She was wearing a pink bathing costume, and a pair of waterwings clung to her arms like giant puffed sleeves. Her hair, tightly plaited all over her head, was decorated with orange bobbles.

'Look, Mama!' she called out to the woman lying motionless nearby on a lounger under a striped umbrella. 'I'm a crocodile!'

Dani looked over his shoulder at his mother. She had raised her hand and was waving it slowly at Meseret. Then she tucked it back under the shawl that was wrapped round her shoulders. She must be the only person beside this crowded pool to feel cold on such a hot day.

Zeni, the maid, had been sitting next to her on an upright chair. She got up quickly and went to the edge of the paddling pool.

'Don't disturb Mama, darling,' she said to Meseret. 'She's resting.' Then she looked over towards Dani.

'Are you going to sit there all day?' she called out loudly. 'Why don't you go in?'

Dani's face felt hot with shame. Reluctantly, he shifted his bottom closer to the edge, then forced himself to slide over the side into the water. He sank immediately and kicked out wildly. Mercifully, his feet hit the bottom of the pool at once and he righted himself. The water wasn't very deep. It only came halfway up his shoulders. He began to move his arms, pretending to swim, while keeping one foot on the bottom.

He reached the far side of the pool and hauled

himself out again. Then he took up his old position, sitting on the edge with his legs in the water. At least he was on the opposite side from Meseret and Zeni now. There were fewer children on this side too.

Several European women were lying out in the sun, grilling their pink oiled skin, their straw coloured hair looking brittle and stiff. Beyond them, in the shade of a tree, sat two Ethiopian women, talking with their heads together.

Dani let his mind wander away into a daydream. The sounds of the pool, the splashes, the squeals of children, the occasional trilling of a mobile phone, the bursts of laughter from the adults lounging around the pool enclosure, and the murmur of waiters circulating among them, faded away.

He was standing in front of a burning building. Flames were shooting out of the windows, and smoke was billowing up into the sky. His father was calling out, 'They're in there! Meseret and your mother! They'll burn to death!'

He was dashing into the building, fighting his way through the heat and smoke, braving instant death. His mother and sister were cowering in a corner.

'Come with me,' he said. 'You'll be all right.'

He was picking Meseret up now, and pulling his mother by the hand. As they emerged, choking, into the open air, his father ran forward.

'Dani! You've saved them!' he was crying. Then, as Dani sank in a dead faint at his father's feet, he heard him murmur, 'I'm sorry, son. I've misjudged you. That was the bravest thing I ever saw.'

His mother's name jerked him back to reality.

'Ruth,' he heard someone say.

He looked round. The two Ethiopian women were looking across the pool towards where his mother lay on her lounger, wrapped in her shawl. The pool had momentarily almost emptied itself, the noise had died down, and he could suddenly hear their conversation quite clearly.

'Yes, that's her. That's Ruth,' one of them was saying. 'Poor thing. Look at her. You can see from here how sick she is.'

'What is it? Cancer?' said the other one.

'No. Heart, someone told me. She needs an operation. She'd have to go to Europe or America for it.'

'But that would cost a fortune!'

'Oh, there's plenty of money. Paulos has done all right. I'm glad I'm not married to him, though.'

'I know. He scares me stiff. Those eyes! Every time I see him I feel I'm in court, up before the judge. He probably thinks poor little Ruth should pull herself together and stop malingering.'

'Oh, I don't know. My cousin's great friends with Ruth. She says he absolutely adores her, in his starchy sort of way. He'd take her off abroad tomorrow for treatment, only he's scared she won't survive the journey.'

'That bad? Sad, isn't it.'

'Yes, awful. Waiter! Over here! We ordered a club sandwich and a couple of Pepsis at least half an hour ago.'

The pool had filled up with children again, and Dani couldn't hear the women's voices any longer. He didn't want to, anyway. What did those stupid cows know about his mother? They'd only been

gossiping. Women would say anything once they got going.

He looked over towards his mother's lounger. Zeni was bending over her, holding out a plateful of snacks. Without being able to hear, he knew she was coaxing his mother to eat.

Then he saw someone else. His father was walking in through the entrance to the enclosure, past the guard, who was standing to attention in his gold braided uniform as if he was a soldier who had just seen a general. His father had spotted his mother at once, and was walking towards her, his firm tread radiating power. His tall, spare form was immaculately dressed in white tennis clothes, and he was carrying a heavy sports bag from which the handle of a racket was protruding.

Silently, Dani levered himself down into the water, and pretended to swim again, making purposeful movements with his arms. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that his father had reached his mother's lounger, and was standing still, looking down at her.

Dani reached their side of the pool. He could hear their conversation from here.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes. Fine.'

'What about your headache?'

'It's nearly better.'

'Did you eat something this morning?'

'Of course. I've been stuffing myself on all these snacks. And I walked all the way down to the pool without any help.'

She was trying to please him. It had taken two of

the hotel staff, one on each side, to get her down the steps and through the hotel gardens.

'Good. Well done. Where's Dani?'

'In the pool. He's been swimming for hours. He must be worn out.'

Dani's heart glowed with gratitude. She always stood up for him. He looked away, and tried even harder to make it seem as if he was swimming. His father was frowning critically at him, he knew.

'Call that swimming?' He winced at the scorn in his father's voice. 'The boy's hopeless. I'd pay for a teacher only I know it would be a waste of money. Dani!' He had raised his voice. 'Come on out. It's time to go home. Zeni, get Meseret. We can't waste the whole day lounging around here.'

Dani floundered to the ladder at the side of the pool and climbed up it. He looked up briefly into his father's eyes, then looked down again. If he let his father read the fear and resentment in his face it would only make things worse. He picked up the towel and his bundle of clothes, lying on the grass under Zeni's chair, and moved off towards one of the changing rooms, a pretty booth made to look like a typical rural Ethiopian farmer's hut.

I hate him. I really do hate him, he muttered guiltily to himself, as he pulled on his T-shirt and shorts.

As he left the booth, he looked up at the sky. A fan shaped cloud was blowing up across the vast expanse of blue sky, and a sudden sharp breeze was stirring the red hibiscus flowers in the hedges by the entrance to the pool. It almost looked as if it might rain.