Another Day in Ethiopia
(Travel writing - written in August 2012)

I wake up at 7 (late by Ethiopian standards) walk to the store down the street, buy some oranges (they're green, but ripe), bananas and bread, walk back to the house and prepare breakfast. Lele, the Italian anthropologist with whom I'm now living (at least for a few days) wakes up, shares breakfast with me, then we both pay 1.5 birr (about $0.06) for a shared taxi to the university. We arrive at the university, walk past the beggars, walk past the rifle-armed security guards (they only do pat-downs on people with dark skin), and enter the university's hospital complex.

I cross paths with my "colleagues," all men, all Ethiopian, all ages 30 to 40. Many of them are walking together, hand-in-hand. That's normal here. They're the first generation of educated Tigrayans. "Salem" (hello) and the standard hand-shake for everyone.

I run into a white guy. As is always the case when two white guys meet in a place with such few white guys, we stop and ask the requisite "why?" He's a Cuban biochemist, sent here for two years by his government to do service abroad. We have a cup of coffee and joke about Cuban-American relations. "The only complaint that the US has about my country is that we have 15 political prisoners who are being held without trial on our island," he says. "And guess what? The US has 50 political prisoners being held without trial on our island."

I say goodbye to the Cuban and go to the hospital bathroom, which has no soap or running water (you have to flush by scooping water out of a bucket and pouring it into the Turkish-style squat toilets). I'm sick, of course, and so I carry a roll of toilet paper in my backpack for frequent trips to the toilet. You know that scene in the movie "Trainspotting" where the main character encounters the worst toilet in Scotland? Well, every toilet in Ethiopia is worse than the worst toilet in Scotland.

I go to the office, enter hand-written data from health centers into a database, run statistical tests on that data, summarize the tests, show the results to my co-workers on the same hall, send those results to colleagues in Sweden. I get comments from the Swedish, thousands of miles away, within hours, sometimes minutes. The Ethiopian researchers, mere inches away, rarely respond.

The electricity goes out. Everyone takes a break from work.

I walk back to downtown for lunch. I pass the beggars, again. Breastfeeding mothers, semi-clothed toddlers. I pass a man on the side of the road wailing in pain - he must be from a tribal region, judging from the whitish-yellow paint on his face. He probably doesn't speak Tigrinya or Amharic; he definitely doesn't speak English. He's by himself, covered in flies, skinny as hell, and he's crying. It occurs to me - this guy probably walked a few hundred miles to get to here, thinking he could get

help. And now he's probably resigned to the fact that he can't. He's just lying there, on the side of the road, waiting to die.

I walk through some side streets, none of them paved. Kids coming running out of their homes shouting "Ferenji!" (foreigner) or "China!" (the Chinese do most of the road construction here, and many Ethiopians assume all foreigners are Chinese). Some shout nonsensical English phrases like "what is my name?" or "where are you fine?" When I'm feeling playful, I'll shout nonsensical answers like "your name is Yordanos and I'm fine right here, thank you very much!" And they just stare.

I walk by the "Online Café" (which sells only crackers and rotten vegetables, and has neither internet nor coffee). I eat lunch at a traditional Ethiopian place, scooping up meat covered in spicy red sauce with my bare hands, and downing it with a dose of injera.

In the evening, I go on a run. It rains, of course, and the trail I'm on gets slippery, then muddy, then it becomes a river. I fall, scrape up my arm a bit. Irun by a church on the top of a big plateau, and all around the church are these little wooden huts, and people are moaning or chanting from inside these huts. There's hardly anyone outside because of the rain, but there's a young girl, maybe 13 or 14 years old, carrying a bunch of sticks on her back. I ask her "why are they singing in the huts?" She doesn't understand me. I point at the huts and say "kemey" which I think means something like why or how. She smiles and she says, " for God." And then she gets serious and asks me "ferenji God?" I think she wants to know if foreigners also believe in God, so I inhale deeply and quickly, which is how they say "yes" in Tigray.

The girl points at my scraped-up arm and says something in Tigray, and I say "no thanks" and keep running. I get back to the house, take a warm shower (we have hot water at the Italian's place), and get ready for dinner with the dozen or so ferenji of Mekele, all of them doing humanitarian, non-governmental or research work. We eat bruschetta and salami, and we drink a few beers, each one worth about a day's wages in Ethiopia. And I have a pleasant evening eating European food, flirting with Italian girls, talking with the heads of NGOs. And I don't think about the tribal guy dying on the side of the road even once.