

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

The Storyteller's Beads

“Too often tragedies, such as the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s, are lost in numbers. How can anyone comprehend a million deaths? Jane Kurtz has made the tragedy devastatingly real with her superb adventure of two courageous girls who overcome prejudices taught to them from birth.”

—Nancy Farmer,
author of *A Girl Named Disaster*

“Jane Kurtz has re-created a world with such fine textural detail that the characters’ lives touch our own poignantly and powerfully. . . . This story of grace and dignity lends new meaning to friendship and courage.”

—Suzanne Fisher Staples,
author of *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*

“The spare, lyrical writing that evokes the strength and challenge of the Ethiopian countryside is still echoing for me. . . . The wonder of this novel is the author’s ability to create the world in which her well-realized characters act. . . . The events unfold against the vivid scenery, which itself seems a character in the story.”

—Judy O’Malley, editor of *Book Links*

“Jane Kurtz has crafted a story out of history with love, and makes familiar a world that is—for most of us—as unfamiliar as a fantasy land. It will linger long in my mind and heart.”

—Jane Yolen,
author of *The Devil’s Arithmetic* and *Briar Rose*

Ages 10 to 14



www.pjourway.org

Sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation



The Running

Sahay leaped up, tangling the thread she had been so carefully smoothing. The pounding of bare feet made her stomach chew on itself with fright. That sound! It was like the terrible day of running a year ago. . . . She pushed the thought away and stooped through the doorway of the house, still clutching the spindle from her spinning.

The fields in front of the house were too brown for the twelfth month, Nahase. By this time, the gray green barley should look like light cotton cloth blowing in the mountain winds. But this year—the year of Sahay’s sadness—the rains had not fallen to wet the fields.

The man running toward Sahay through the fields was her uncle. Sahay’s insides began to beat so loudly in her ears that she felt as if she must be running, too. She dropped the spindle to the ground, not noticing

that the dust curled up to make the white thread brown.

“Hurry.” Her uncle was panting so hard that the words came out in gasps. “We must leave this place.”

Sahay tried to speak, but her throat felt choked and dry, and no words came out. She turned back, blindly, and stooped through the doorway.

The hot, peppery smell of supper filled the *tukul*. In the darkest back part of the house, the *saweh* simmered in a pot that sat on three stones over the fire. But Sahay could not think of hunger now.

Her uncle ducked through the door after her. He picked up the traveling basket and pushed it into her hands. It was the basket he used to carry his food when he went to the faraway Gondar *markato*. “Put the meal in this.” He rushed to where his walking stick leaned against the wall.

Sahay knelt, trembling. The fire popped and a spark flew at her. She brushed it away. Once, when she and her mother were cooking, Sahay had asked, “Why do we always cook where it is so dark?”

Her mother didn’t like Sahay to ask questions. But that day she did answer. “So the evil eye of a stranger cannot fall on our food.”

“But no stranger ever comes here.”

Her mother had poured the *arab* on the griddle, and they watched it start to bubble. “May it always be so,” she had said.

It was not always so. As the Red Terror that started in the south spread, the strangers came: first *shiftas*, thieves who before had stolen only from travelers on the roads. Next, as war and famine seized the lands to the north, came soldiers and people looking for new lands.

“Let them take Falasha lands—not ours,” Sahay’s father had shouted then. “The Falasha were not even allowed to own land until these new, evil times.”

Her uncle had agreed. “Let the strangers from the north take Falasha land.” But the strangers tried to take everybody’s land.

Don’t think about that now. Sahay laid the *arah* in the bottom of the basket, scooped the *saweh* onto it, and then closed the basket. Her fingers shook on the straps she knew so well. For the same reason she had been taught to cook in the back of the house, she had also been taught not to let strangers see the food the family carried.

Aii! Her mother had been right about evil strangers. She put her hand to her mouth to stop the sound that burst out.

Her uncle rushed over and shook her gently. “Quickly,” he said. “Put some grain and dried meat into a cloth and tie it tightly. I do not know how many days we will have to travel.”

Many days? Sahay had never slept any place except in these beds her father had made from trees and strips

of leather. Except for the pots and iron things made by Falashas, everything in this house had been made by her mother and father.

Her uncle was tying some coins into a cloth. "Hurry," he said again.

Sahay scooped up a handful of grain, spilling a little through her shaking fingers. A chicken ran up and pecked at it. Most of the chickens had been eaten or sold, but a few were still alive. "Shall we take the chickens?" she asked. It was the first time she had spoken since her uncle came home, and her voice sounded strange to her.

"We have no time to run after chickens." Her uncle grabbed his walking stick. "I have a little money and two *gabbis* for warmth. Give me the basket of food and see if you can find any more. I'm going to make sure the way of our path is safe. Be ready to leave when I return."

Sahay stared after him. Where could they possibly go? Were there other of her people, the Kemant, living in a safer place, a place strangers hadn't found yet? Her grandfather had told her of visiting the strong stone castles at Gondar. Right now, she would like to be inside some place strong and made of stone.

Sahay spread a cloth and added what little dried meat they had left from when her father had butchered one of the last cows more than a year ago. Then she scooped a handful of chickpeas from a storage basket. How much food did they need? When the strang-

ers came before, it took all of the Kemant people around this area a whole day to drive them off. One long day of fighting. This time, it might take even longer. How long?

Sahay filled the cloth with chickpeas and knotted it tightly. Part of her wanted to cry out that she did not want to go, did not want to leave this house where she had always lived. But another part was as dried up as the dried peas. *What does this house matter?* that part whispered. *Now that your mother and father are not here, anyway?*

She ran to her father's walking stick beside the door. Whenever he was going a long distance, he used to take his walking stick. She would look at him and think how strong and bold he looked standing at the door. "Father, may your walking stick give me some of your strength," she said aloud. But she did not feel strong and bold as she stepped out into the cool evening air.

The light was very dim now. It was the time they should have been lighting the beeswax candle that leaned out from the pole in the center of the *tukul*. Sahay could barely see the animal huts, empty because the animals had either died from hunger or been sold to buy food. Beyond the huts were the dark shapes of the eucalyptus trees her grandfather had planted for her and her cousins.

Sahay shivered and listened carefully. All she could hear were the small animals and birds that call at dusk.

Then her uncle was standing beside her with his walking stick in his hand. "We will do well," he said, "if we leave now." He started off quickly without looking at the house, so Sahay did not look back either. She followed him down the path, trying not to look over her shoulder to see what might be coming behind, keeping her eyes on the white of his *gahbi* as the dark pressed down.