

SEEING THE LIGHT AND  
OTHER STORIES

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## PREFACE

My first attempt at fiction-writing produced a thirteen-page melodrama that took me exactly three two-hour sittings to finish. My latest piece took me over six months to complete. The euphoric feeling which I experienced after I had written down the last word of the first story was a far cry from the doubts and hesitations I often had as I grappled with the second. And when the earlier story was torn to bits in the workshop, I felt let down and resentful, while I welcomed critical comments on the latter. All this means that I have learned an old and, though sometimes disputed, obvious lesson: that writing is not a ready-made gift from God, but an art that needs a great deal of care. Like all arts, it has to be coaxed and cajoled; it has to be evaluated, improved, reevaluated; like all artists, the writer has to persevere and sharpen his skills.

And much of the credit for that goes to Dr. Gordon Weaver, without whose comments and advice I would not develop the necessary discipline or acquire the skills of fiction-writing. I would also like to thank Dr. Edward Walkiewicz and Dr. Mary Rohrberger,

who, in the course of classroom discussions, have helped me understand and appreciate some of the great literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The setting of the four stories that follow is the eastern Horn of Africa, in a society whose traditional culture and history are quite different from those of the West. The events and characters in the stories, perhaps inevitably, reflect the mood of that society, Somali society, as it reacts, positively or negatively, to the often traumatic experiences of the last hundred years, experiences that have, in successive phases, included colonialism, nationalism, and post-independence disillusionment. A closer examination of these experiences would throw the following features into relief: old, established traditional value systems coming in contact--and often in conflict--with newer, more dynamic ones; paradoxes born out of personal, national, or moral identity; questions of socio-political philosophy to deal (very often in vain) with the grinding economic problems and the adverse effect they have on the fabric of society.

These phenomena are not unique. African societies, and indeed those of the rest of the third world, are reeling under problems of transition, transition from the status quo ante of pre-colonial times to the level of a more efficient, technologically advanced modern society.



Nevertheless, as will become clear in the following brief discussion of some motifs in modern African literature, the nature of the responses has varied, depending largely on regional and historical factors.

The Francophone countries of West and North Africa, for example, have generally acted--or reacted--differently from those peoples who came under English colonial domination, and the Southern Africans, with their varying backgrounds and persistent ethnic and racial problems, have provided a distinct type of response that is wholly their own.

On another level, the largely sedentary Nigerians, with their multiple languages and religions (there are Muslims, Christians, and animists in this mammoth of a nation), have been different in their response from the culturally homogeneous Somalis, who are mostly nomadic pastoralists. A detailed analysis of Somali society will show a people whose traditional norms produce impulses that do not always work in harmony, as might be expected, and whose social fabric has been (indeed is being) subjected to a great deal of strain, a strain that, as mentioned earlier, began with the advent of European colonialism.

Colonialism: it is a cliché and, like all clichés, it is difficult to get rid of. In the first chapter of his book, Africa in Modern Literature, Martin Tucker

raises the question of what should constitute the literature of that continent.<sup>1</sup> He gives four possible, equally unsatisfactory definitions that involve works as diverse as H. Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines and Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Richard Wright's Black Power, Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King and Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters.

It is obvious, of course, that any claim that Conrad or Wright are African writers is less than convincing, but the fact also is that these writers draw upon colonialism in Africa. They deal with such conflicting attitudes and perceptions as Conrad's obsession, "the necessity of traveling to the dark places of the earth in order to bring light on one's self," and Leopold Senghor's equally preposterous concept of "Negritude."

And yet while it is difficult to defend either motif, it is perhaps at least understandable in a historical sense that the idea of "Negritude" came into existence in the late 30s and appealed to many artists and political and social activists throughout the 40s and 50s. At a time when the African peoples were beginning to challenge colonialism and people of African descent in America and in the Caribbean Basin were becoming increasingly aware of their roots and recreating the identity they had lost in the New World, "Negritude"

became a watchword, a "nationalistic and spiritual concept [that came] to mean. . . the acceptance of one's 'Negroness' and all that acceptance brings with it in the sphere of comparative culture."<sup>2</sup> Even then, however, the concept was limited to French West Africa. Even though the idea had in it echoes of the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s and 30s, the word "Negritude" itself was coined by the Martinique poet Aime Cesaire, but it was the Senegalese Senghor (he later became the first president of that country after its independence) who popularized it among liberal French intellectuals and Africans who wrote in French.

Most of the Africans who wrote in English, however, did not like it. Some of the motives behind their objections may not have been admirable: there is a possibility, as Tucker suggests, that, though they never said it publicly, some of those writers attacked Negritude simply because it had originated and taken root in a Francophone culture. Whether one makes that embarrassing assumption or not ultimately may not matter, however, for the arguments against the concept are legion. Negritude, in its purest form, is not any different from old-fashioned racism. Besides--and this is even more serious for the artist--it champions cultural insularity and bigotry. One of the less palatable, if imaginative, conclusions reached by Senghor, for example, was that

"African" civilization, as opposed to "European" or other civilizations, was based "on the senses," rather than, say, on the intellect.

In the end, great literature rests on other, more formidable foundations, and Senghor and other proponents of Negritude will be read and enjoyed by readers both inside Africa and outside of it only in so far as they transcend the dictates imposed upon them by their ideological position. Then and only then will they have succeeded in avoiding Kipling's fate, a fate which Conrad, a much greater writer, almost suffered too.

As I have already indicated, those Africans who wrote in English, especially those from West Africa, have been less judgemental, less extreme in their treatment of the colonial experience and of the problems of transition. A good example is Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian whose fine novel, Things Fall Apart, is the best-known--and perhaps the best--work on that subject to come out of Africa. Set in 19th century Nigeria, it is a dispassionate record of the gradual erosion of traditional authority under the impact of the technologically more advanced onslaught of English colonial rule. It is also the story of one man, Chief Okonkwo, whose death at the end of the story marks the tragic end of an era. Achebe treats the contemporary scene in Nigeria in his other novels. Such other Nigerian writers as

Wole Soyinka, an iconoclastic dramatist and novelist who writes with extraordinary facility and innovation, and Cyprian Ekwensi, as well as such other Africans as Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana), James Ngugi (Kenya), and a host of younger authors, have all treated the same basic problems faced by African society in modern times: colonialism and the post-colonial era. But they have done so without grinding any ideological axes.

Colonialism has prompted yet another type of response, one which reflects the vast problems and tensions embedded in the psyche of a deeply divided society: that of South Africa. There has been a solid literary tradition in the white (English-speaking) community since the late 19th century, but the black writers are relative late-comers, most of them having established themselves over the last twenty years. Some have been advocates of "apartness," like Olive Schreiner, and Doris Lessing; others have preached the philosophy of co-existence and forgiveness; they include Alan Paton, Peter Abrahams, and Nadine Gordimer; still others are "leftist" revolutionaries (William Plomer, Laurens van der Post, and Harry Bloom are among these.) But whether they are black or white, these writers have produced a literature over which, in Tucker's words "hangs the ugly shade of color." Tucker adds:

No other national or regional literature is as infested with the racial problem . . . [and this] concern has become almost paranoic. Practically every book . . . treats the color problem in one or more of its aspects.<sup>4</sup>

By far the best-known of these authors (at least outside South Africa) is Paton, whose novel, Cry, the Beloved Country, though somewhat marred by sentimentalism, must be ranked among the great literary works of the world. The plight of Kumalo, the main character of the novel, an old minister looking for two of his relatives who, through poverty and degradation, have become a prostitute and a killer, is not only that of a black South African family, but that of humanity. The reader sees human beings in difficult situations. But he also sees colonialism.

The point, then, of this discussion of colonialism and how African artists have reacted to it is to show that the cliché will not disappear, even if the actual practice of colonialism as an active institution has almost disappeared (South Africa is, of course, an embarrassingly conspicuous exception). The cliché is now a dead horse that will be beaten by posturing demagogues in various capitals of the world, but more important, it is a fascinating and compelling subject that, like Original Sin in Christian theology, will draw the artist's attention again and again.

The artist will continue to use it, or aspects of it, if only to put matters in perspective, to understand why the present is what it is.

The present does not offer a very encouraging spectacle. And artists are even more concerned about it than they are about colonialism. The post-independence euphoria of the early sixties has given way to disillusionment in most African countries, partly because nearly all the civilian governments that replaced colonial rule (many of which were corrupt and inefficient anyway) have been toppled by brutal military juntas who have little regard for human or civil rights and even less for economics.

The bitterness of the artists is compounded by the sad fact that these regimes are kept in power for decades mainly through the support of cynical Western or Eastern governments--governments that often loudly declare that they are founded on the principles of human dignity and freedom. Finally, the strain brought to bear on the institutions of societies in transition in the modern world is great indeed, a fact that would have to be faced even if the vagaries of geopolitics and the ineptness of domestic politics did not add to it. Traditional economic systems have gradually broken down, and with them old value systems; as a result, sights of

abject poverty have become commonplace in overcrowded slums in many African (and all third-world) cities. This poverty in turn creates a lumpen element that thrives on crime.

This is the subject of most of the modern African literature written in European languages, a subject which I have also drawn on in this collection of stories. And, as will become clear in the rest of this discussion, my own approach to it has been shaped largely by the requirements of the almost unique history and culture of the Somali people.

Let me make a digression in the form of quotes at this stage, a digression that will also, hopefully, partly explain what I mean by "unique."

He who devotes himself to the holy war and  
is garlanded with flowers,  
He who turns against the English dogs  
And who wins the victory and glory and  
the shouts and songs of praise. . .<sup>5</sup>

--Mohamed Abdulla Hassan

Oral Somali is used, particularly in the form of poetry, as an extremely important medium of communication. The power of the tongue and of the spoken word in spreading hostility and enmity, in countering it, or in broadcasting messages, in ruining reputations or praising men to the skies is very evident in Somali culture.<sup>6</sup>

--I. M. Lewis

The oryx does not bring her young  
into the open,  
Why are you doing this with  
your thigh?



A flash of lightning does not satisfy  
 thirst,  
 What then is it to me if you just  
 pass by?

When you die you will enter the earth,  
 Let not the preacher then turn you  
 from your love-song.<sup>7</sup>

--verses from the Balwo, songs  
 on "Radio Somali"

The evil Balwo songs came, bringing  
 corruption and spreading sin,  
 And God was displeased with those who  
 wrought such wrongfulness.  
 They wasted their substance in frivolity  
 and dissipation,  
 They gathered together in debauchery  
 and hungered after what is prohibited.<sup>8</sup>

--Sheikh Mohamed Hassan

These quotes capture the essence of Somali society,  
 each emphasizing one of the many impulses that have  
 gone into the making of a nation that is in many ways  
 related to both the largely Arab North Africa and  
 Middle East on the one hand, and black Africa south  
 of the Sahara on the other (the classifications are  
 clearly somewhat deceptive, but I shall let them stand  
 for the present discussion). But it is a society that  
 is also distinct from both in important respects.

This distinction shows itself in a number of  
 ways. Somalia is perhaps one of the few countries  
 that can truly qualify as "nation" states: the  
 people are ethnically homogeneous; they all have the  
 same religion; they all speak the same language.

And yet the element of divisiveness among them has historically had disastrous consequences. The vast majority of the five to six million Somalis are nomadic pastoralists who tend large herds of camels, sheep, and goats in a generally dry and hostile environment. This has often resulted in the past in intense competition among the various clans, competition for pasture and water. It also helped create a warlike tendency among the Somalis, as well as a fierce pride and love of independence that have sometimes been characterized (mistakenly) by Western scholars as "pastoral democracy."

It is this love of war (the Somalis have fought not only amongst themselves but also against their neighbors, the equally warlike Gallas, Abyssinians, and Afars) that is referred to by Lewis in the quotation given above. But it is the divisiveness nurtured in the culture that ultimately prevented the Somali clans from taking a common stand, towards the end of the last century and early in the twentieth century, against their old enemies, or against the European colonialists. When the resistance came, as it eventually did, it was due to an entirely different impulse, as we shall see. The result was that the Somali lands were carved up into five pieces, ruled by France, Britain, Italy, and Ethiopia. Only two of these territories, those under the British and Italians, reunited in 1960 to form the

Somali Republic, and the intense feeling of nationalism among the Somalis today is partly due to this division, and the sense of betrayal they had after they realized what had happened.

In the same quotation, Lewis refers to the language of the Somalis and the extraordinary power it exercises over the people, both as a tool of clan (and, today, national) politics, and as an artistic medium. One wonders why. After all, it was always an oral language--that is until very recent times. Too, Arabic was--and still is--an important written language among the Muslim Somalis, a fact that partly explains Sheikh Mohamed's response above--in the last of the four quotes--in Arabic to the evils of Balwo love songs that were aired on the radio from the 40s onwards.

But, even though the Somalis are all Muslim, and even though contact and a limited process of inter-marriage between the Somalis and people from Arabia have continued since at least the tenth century (there is evidence to believe that contact pre-dated Islam), the fact is that Arab influence has not been deep enough for their language to supplant Somali as a vernacular--as was the case with the languages originally spoken in most countries in today's Arab world. These languages were either like Somali Hamitic (ancient Egyptian and the Berber languages of

North Africa were among them) or Semitic (like Aramaic and the other languages of the Levant and Mesopotamia), and were all related to Arabic--itself a Semitic language. Once the Arabs came and settled with a superior, more dynamic culture, there was already enough similarity for Arabic to take root and ultimately replace the original languages and cultures. This did not happen in Somalia.

Nor was the Somali experience similar to that of much of black Africa, where Arabic, even though it was not extensively adopted, nevertheless became either itself the medium of a good deal of religious literature written by the Ulama (religious scholars) or otherwise acted as a strong stimulant for the writing of the local languages and the establishment of an Islamic Ajami (as opposed to Arabic) literature. This happened among the Fulani and Hausa in northern Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the Somalis did not share the experience of the rest of the East Coast, where Arab communities settled, intermarried with Bantu-speaking Africans, and produced a peculiar tongue, a hybrid of Arabic and the Bantu languages today known as Swahili (the term itself is an Arabic word meaning "tongues of the coasts").

What happened in Somalia was that Arabic remained an important religious language. It also became a

language of written communication, which was also to some extent spoken by mixed communities in urban centers on the coast. But it never challenged Somali, a literary language in its own right, a language that, like classical Arabic, has its roots in a nomadic culture, and that, like Arabic, has come to be considered an art form by the people who speak it. And this, paradoxically, is where both the strength of Somali and its weakness lie: it remained essentially an oral language, with all the implications that has for the establishment of a recorded, long-term literary tradition; but it is also an otherwise poetic language that, so to speak, did not allow Arabic, respected though it has always been, to sink its own literary roots among the Somalis either. The same also goes for English, Italian, and French, which have always had ambiguous associations for the Somalis--somewhat awe-inspiring and even appealing as the languages of those colonial whites, with their incredible magic of technology, but also despised and hated by good Muslims who wanted nothing to do with those infidels.

Today, seven years after the Somali government decided to use Latin orthography, an event which prompted a good deal of anguished outcry from a good many Somalis and Arabs who preferred the Arabic script, Somali seems to finally be realizing its potential.

Besides poetry and drama (the popular theatre is almost a national obsession), several novels have been written in Somali, one of which has been translated into English and French. But, after over one hundred years of exposure to Western influence, the amount of literature published in European languages remains negligible.<sup>10</sup> Even more curious, but ultimately also understandable in the light of the above discussion, writing in Arabic remains religious in character, even though Arab influence is pervasive in many ways.

(This has in modern times resulted in the creation of an ambiguous relationship between the Somalis and the Arab world--a relationship that has put us in the embarrassing position of being the only non-Arab member of the Arab League. Most younger-generation Somalis hate it, while most Arabs wonder why we don't speak Arabic if we are an Arab people.)

I said "Arab influence," while a better term should be "Islamic influence." As I have already said, the Somalis are almost one hundred percent Sunni Muslim, and that, more than anything else, has been the one single factor that has molded whatever tenuous cohesiveness and unity which the otherwise competing, warlike clans had. Over the last five to six centuries, an awareness gradually developed among the various clans that, first of all, they belonged to some loose grouping

of people called "Samaale" (there is debate over the origin of the term), and that, second, the important distinction between themselves and the inferior "Habashas" (Abyssinians or Ethiopians) to the west was that they, the Somalis, were among God's chosen Muslim Umma, while the others were infidels and enemies of God. This, coupled with the reciprocal feeling on the part of the Ethiopians, who incidentally have nearly 2,000 years of Coptic Christian culture behind them, has been a source of continuing conflict and struggle in the Horn of Africa over the last six centuries.

The conflict still continues: the last war was fought over the Ogaden, a Somali-populated region ceded to Ethiopia by the British, in 1977-78 (hence, of course, the story "Shadows in the Ogaden"). And it was this attachment to Islam, rather than any strong sense of nationalism, that prompted the Somalis to rally behind the warrior to whom these words belong:

He who devotes himself to the holy war  
and is garlanded with flowers,  
He who turns against the English dogs. . . .

words which have already been quoted above. Mohamed Abdulla Hassan, whom the British nicknamed the "Mad Mullah," fought against the English colonial forces for twenty years (1901-1921) with a rag-tag army of about 10,000 men, which he called dervishes.

Finally, the religious sensibilities of most Somalis

are often offended by what they consider the moral looseness and venality of certain elements among the communities of the large urban centers--evils that are seen, rightly or wrongly, as by-products of the Western cultural impact.

This, then, is the Somali society whose culture I have drawn upon. It is a society that, like most other societies in Africa, and, especially, in the Muslim world, has experienced, over the last hundred years, events that have shaken it to its very foundations, and whose painful re-awakening and re-appraisal of itself I have tried, partly, to capture in Seeing the Light and Other Stories, stories which are ultimately about a test of such old and cherished institutions as courage, honor, religion, morality, patriotism, love, and human sympathy.

My aim in all of these stories has been to create sympathetic characters who face difficult situations which test one aspect or another of their integrity--the most serious challenges usually concerning moral integrity. I followed, as far as possible, the basic principles of fictional realism in these stories, all of which are related by limited view-point, third-person narrators, who are, generally speaking, close to the main characters.

Perhaps an in-depth analysis of the individual



stories, tracing how the events taking place in them relate to Somali society, is redundant. I hope that is clear by now. The poignancy in the case of the 60-year-old man who sees his authority, honor, and rhetorical prowess overwhelmed by the cold dictates of changed times speaks for itself. To add insult to injury, his son defects to the enemy camp. It is indeed the end of an era. Likewise, the predicament of the young doctor whose professional honesty is tramped upon by the ubiquitousness and the inscrutability of modern totalitarian politics represents an all too familiar phenomenon today. Ultimately, it is also clear that the society whose culture I have discussed above provides the ambience that informs all these stories in one way or another.

One final note on conventions, which is obviously outside the limits of this historically and socially oriented discussion. Perhaps the most important single fictional product in all stories is irony. However, I have tried to avoid (though I don't know how far I have succeeded) the easy irony that lacks depth and involves texture alone; I have also tried not to indulge in the O. Henry trick, that simplistic irony that depends on a surprise ending. In a sense, there is some feeling of surprise involved in all stories, but there are indicators along the way, and thus the irony

ultimately deepens. The final punch is delivered after a good deal of struggle on the part of the main character, a fact that, hopefully, justifies the tragic finality at the end of the story.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Tucker, Africa in Modern Literature: A Survey of Contemporary Writing in English (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.: New York, 1967), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Tucker, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Tucker, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Tucker, p. 159. Nadine Gordimer, a distinguished South African novelist herself, dwells on the causes of this obsession with color and bewails the implications it has for literature and culture at large. In her article, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," in African Writers on African Writing: Studies in African Literature (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1973), pp. 33-52, she concludes that South Africa is not actually a nation, not even a community. It is composed of a number of competing (not cooperating) ethnic, linguistic, and racial communities that never produce a common literature. Such an atmosphere is not conducive to the growth of a healthy culture, and this pre-occupation with the color issue inhibits--rather than helps--the growth of a really great literature.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Albert S. Gerard, African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary

History of Sub-Saharan Africa (Three Continents Press, Inc.: New York, 1981), p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Gerard, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Gerard, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> I am also indebted to Gerard for the information on the influence of Arabic on these African languages.

<sup>10</sup> There is an exception. Nuruddin Farah, a Somali who writes in English, has written two novels, one of which I have, unfortunately, not been able to get hold of. From book reviews, I have gathered that the later work, The Naked Needle, is quite a departure from the first-love theme of the earlier novel. From the Crooked Rib, which was written in 1967, was the story of a young girl growing up in a culture that inhibits sex feelings among girls. Nuruddin was not wholly successful in this short novel. The later novel is in a more complex vein, covering contemporary social issues in Somalia. The novel deals with the problems of cross-cultured marriages and with the political scene in Somalia.

CHAPTER II

SEEING THE LIGHT

Ahmed knocked on the door and waited for Amina, his wife, to open it. He could hear his little four-year-old daughter announce "Pappa has come" and run towards the door to meet him. She always tried to open the door and let him in, but the latch was too high for her, so mommy would come to her aid. Children, sweet little things, Ahmed thought. Amina opened the door and he stepped inside.

"How is the old girl?" he said light heartedly.

"Hello, Ahmed," she said, but without her usual radiant smile. He looked down at his daughter, Safia, picked her up, held her in his arms.

"Look Pappa, I have dressed up my doll," she said with a little smile.

"Oh, really? Let me see it," he said and walked into the living room, carrying Safia in one arm, holding the little doll in the other. "It is beautiful, my little one," he said and sat down in the armchair.

It was cool inside, quite different from the stuffy August afternoon heat outside in the dusty Mogadishu streets. He pulled off his boots and relaxed; Safia lisped to him about all the little things she had done that day. Amina went back in the kitchen to help the maid, and he could hear the

soft clatter of utensils. He could tell from the aroma emanating from the kitchen that she had prepared his favorite dish today: broiled mutton laced with curry powder and pepper, and millet bread.

Amina came in with plates and set them on the dining table to his left. The maid, Fadumo, also came in with a bowl. She greeted him and then retreated into the kitchen.

The couple and their little daughter settled to dinner. After eating in silence for a few minutes, Amina said, "Ahmed, two men looking for you came here this morning."

"Two men?" He looked up at her. She nodded. "What did they say? What were they like?"

"I had never seen them before. They wore dark glasses and they said they were your comrades. I said you were at work in the hospital." Amina stopped. Her beautiful dark eyes showed a touch of apprehension, and her voice had a worried edge to it. "One was tall and dark. He had a big moustache. The other was short, stocky and brown." She stopped and began eating. "They didn't look like doctors at all," she said after a while. "They had a new Fiat 124."

Ahmed didn't know anyone fitting those descriptions, but he said, "I think they're men from my clan; you haven't met all of them, you know." He

wanted to reassure her.

"Oh, no. I don't think so. I've met most of your kinfolk, except those in the country. And these men had the Mogadishu accent. They were city men."

"Look, Amina, don't worry about them. They're probably just friends." He could see Amina was not convinced; he himself did not know what to make of the visit; he tried to dismiss it.

Dinner was over, and he went into the bedroom for the afternoon siesta. He dozed off. Safia played with the doll and sang little lullabies to it; Amina and the maid washed up in the kitchen. His ears half-willingly caught the soft hum of the town, half-asleep under the glaring gaze of the hot afternoon sun, the Fiat cabs on Hodan, Mogadishu's main street. The rumble of an Izuzu truck, the hooting of a horn, or the high-pitched shrill of the traffic policeman's whistle occasionally punctuated the monotony.

He dozed off--and heard the whistle. The whistle. The police. Men in uniform. They were there, in front of him. Men in uniform, with whistles, and without whistles. In uniform and out of it. Out of uniform and in dark glasses. Dark glasses. There was one wearing glasses. There he was, tall, in uniform, military uniform, and wearing glasses, coming towards him. There he was, in Ahmed's uneasy dream, walking



a gawky walk towards him, extending a hand, a hand with long, claw-like fingers. And his little daughter chirped a little song, a lullaby--no, a cry! She cried a little sharp cry, and he woke up, sweating despite the cool room.

"What's the matter?" asked his wife, who sat on a mattress beside the bed, sewing. He looked at her, and then at his little daughter, still singing her lullaby.

"Nothing."

In the evening Ahmed took Amina and little Safia to Cinema Nasr, where an Indian Shash Kapoor film, a favorite of his wife's, was being shown. A cool breeze, laden with a mixture of ocean scent and the mustiness of Mogadishu, gently blew over the audience sitting in the open-air theater. But there was the mild threat of Hagayo in the air, that troublesome little drizzle that soaked you in two minutes and then suddenly let up. Tiny drops already settled on their faces, and little Safia said, "Pappa, there is rain." Amina's spirits seemed to rise again. She commented on the sweetness of the song the hero sang to the silk-clad, demure, smiling beauty who danced away from him along the flower-ridden bank of the clear stream, only to be overtaken by him again. Amina was enjoying herself. But Ahmed was not, even

though he did not show it.

His mind reverted to the two men who had visited his house in the morning. Who were they? They certainly weren't men he knew. And what did they want? Were they from the Ganaf? And why would Ganaf men be after him? After all, he did not cross their path; he was sure he did nothing to upset them. Well, what could they do to him anyway, even if they were Ganaf? He'd wait and--

"Oh, Ahmed, see him, see him." This was Amina. She was excited, as the whole audience was. A huge, phantastic giant swaggered up to the happy, singing pair, picked up the heroine like a doll and made off with her. The heroine cried for help. The hero seemed dazed for a while, but he recovered and took after the giant, who was already entering his cave at the foot of the mountain.

The audience, mostly women and children, gave a peal of applause. But the rain got heavy, and the audience were on their feet making for the main doors, some booing, some cursing, all disappointed.

Ahmed held Safia in his arms to guard her from the pressing crowd and slowly made his way to the door, Amina following him closely. The rain wet them, but it stopped suddenly as they got into their old car and headed home. Five minutes later, it started all over again.

The intermittent showers continued all night, always starting and stopping suddenly in a way that made you believe the rain was being deliberately mischievous, playing tricks on you. The showers continued next morning as Ahmed set out for Dig Feer General Hospital; water filled the potholes in the bumpy dirt road that led to the hospital, and he had to drive carefully to keep his battered Fiat 600 from breaking its axle. He usually came to work earlier than most other hospital staff members, spending about twenty minutes in the main office, but this morning Hawo, the Party representative, had come earlier. Her Mercedes Benz was parked outside the main gate.

Ahmed parked his car, stepped out of it, walked towards the main gate. He greeted the gatekeeper, a sinewy old camelman called Geele, who had lost his herd in the famine of the year before.

"Peace be upon you."

"Upon you be peace, Ahmed. It seems there is a lot of Hagayo today," said Geele.

"Yes, indeed." The gatekeeper spoke nostalgically about the rain, the countryside, the camels he had lost. He stroked his grey beard as he reminisced. Ahmed respected the old man and lent him his ear for five minutes before escaping.

Hawo stood in the main lobby, folded parasol in hand. She watched him as he walked up the terraces in the front yard of the hospital.

"Good morning, Bowe Ahmed." She added her mysterious little chuckle.

"Good morning, Hawo. You're early today."

"Yes. I have to prepare the staff for the upcoming Congress, you know. I am a busy woman." She chuckled, looking him in the eye. As usual, she talked about the plans of the Party--the efforts it was going to make to enlighten the masses, to create a paradise on earth. She dipped two fingers into her handbag and pulled out a packet of Benson & Hedges and a lighter. She lit a cigarette, drew at it, blew the smoke into the damp, morning air.

"The Revolution has been launched, and it will never stop," she said with a flourish. "And we should all keep up with its march forward." She chuckled and there was a flicker in her eye.

Ahmed nodded and said "Yes," but didn't go beyond that when she talked that way.

Hawo was thirty, divorced, and not bad looking; a typical Mogadishu girl, she had an elementary education, liked soccer and Italian westerns, chewed gat. She walked with those slow, easy, assured and yet slightly elfish steps that marked the urban female.

Since the overthrow of the old civilian regime, three years ago, she had become valuable to the Revolution, and was a member of the Party cadre. Hospital gossip had it that she had kinfolk in high places, which meant even more respect for her. And she addressed him, Ahmed, with the somewhat intimate term, Bowe. Ahmed felt uncomfortable when she said Bowe.

Once she had invited him to dinner at her parents' home, but he had politely declined. Another time, she suggested that she introduce him to some noted personalities in the Party, and when he beat about the bush, she urged him, saying, "It is a good thing for a revolutionary doctor to have good friends." He had reluctantly accepted, and after telling his wife that he would be late because of some important business, he and Hawo drove in her Mercedes Benz to a large suburban villa with an iron gate, a high wall and a well-tended garden decked with bougainvillea, daisies, and roses.

They were let in by a maid. Ahmed found himself in a large ante-room beyond which lay a luxuriously furnished living room. Hawo introduced him to a rather colorless short man whom she called Guleid and who grinned and said huskily, "Welcome Comrade Ahmed. I've heard Comrade Hawo often talk about you." Ahmed returned the greeting. A broad grin sat on Guleid's

face. Ahmed wondered what it meant, that grin. The lady of the house came down from upstairs, a stout, hearty woman of forty who had a loud voice. She pumped his hand and said in English, "Glad to meet you, Comrade Ahmed."

Later tea was served, and the conversation that followed covered the divine blessings of the Revolution, the upcoming national athletic meet, the shipment of furniture that Guleid's family was expecting from Rome, and the hard time their darling son, Guure, was having, living on only eight hundred dollars a month at Yale.

When, after two hours, Ahmed left, he felt numb, and from that day onward had politely excused himself when Hawo invited him to another party.

The two now stood in the lobby, Hawo talking about the Party Congress and the great achievements of the Revolution. "Thank God," she said, chuckling. "Our Father, the Father of the Nation, is a genius. Without him, we wouldn't get anywhere."

Ahmed looked at his watch. It was time for him to start today's work; he could see to his right the patients waiting in the corridor.

"Look Hawo, I have to go," said Ahmed, as he started walking towards his office.

"Wait, Bowe Ahmed," said Hawo, getting closer to

him. "Do you know what I have done?" She was chuckling. "I mean concerning you?"

"No, what?" Ahmed was a bit anxious, but tried to look calm.

"I have recommended you to be a Party member!" She delivered the piece of news with widened eyes, a beaming face, and a chuckle.

"Oh!" Ahmed uttered this automatically; he didn't add anything, but stood there, staring at her.

"Isn't that wonderful, Bowe Ahmed? Actually, your name heads the list of four I've sent to the Party headquarters. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh, yes." He smiled, sort of.

She came closer to him, looking to the left and then to the right, and said almost in a whisper, "Bowe Ahmed, I've always considered myself a good friend of yours, you know. I think you're a good revolutionary doctor. That's why I want you to be a member of the Party."

"Of course, of course. Thanks. I must go, Hawo. I am five minutes late." He walked quickly to his office.

An hour and a half had passed. He sat in his small office, writing a prescription for an old man with watery eyes and a white goatee. A nurse came in and told Ahmed that a man was waiting for him in the

main office.

"Tell him I am busy." The nurse hesitated, but then withdrew. She came back almost immediately. Ahmed looked up at her and said, "Oh, he has sent you back again? Well, what did he say?"

"Doctor, he says he can't wait," the young nurse said. She was somewhat nervous.

"Can't he wait till I'm through with the patients?"

"Doctor, I have told him, and he says it's urgent."

Ahmed shook his head and said, "All right, Halimo. Tell him I'm on my way."

"Yes sir." Ahmed finished the prescription and told the old man where to buy it and how to use it.

"God bless you, my son," the old man said. Slowly he rose from the bench, using his staff, and shuffled towards the door.

Ahmed stood up, took off his physician's white uniform coat, went out. Outside there was a long queue of patients stretching out into the corridor, some of whom had been there more than three hours. Drably dressed, faded, these gaunt hollow-cheeked men and women waited patiently, their tired eyes turning in unison to the doctor as he stepped out. Ahmed glanced at them and walked away, praying for more physicians. He knew it was in vain.



The main office was a spacious room with a long conference table flanked by collapsible wooden chairs. Its large glass windows opened out into the terraced front yard of the hospital, and the grey walls were decorated with four large framed black-and-white portraits of the Father of the Revolution, Major-General Budleh. He blessed the conferees with his eternal gaze and the wisdom emanating from his august brow.

The man sat directly under one of these portraits. He was not alone. Hawo was seated on the other side of the table.

"Ahmed, meet Comrade Addow," she said with a chuckle. "He is an officer of the National Security Bureau and he would like to have a talk with you," she said. Comrade Addow did not rise, but Ahmed shook hands with him and sat down across from him. Hawo, chuckling and holding a lighted cigarette in her hand, excused herself and left.

So he had been right, Ahmed thought. They were from the Ganaf, those two men. Obviously this was one of them, the dark one with the handlebar moustache. Ok, Ganaf, why are you after me? Let's hear it.

Comrade Addow took off his dark Bersol glasses and cleaned them with a small piece of cloth he fished out of his pocket, meanwhile examining Ahmed

with a pair of protruding, dull, cold eyes. The right one responded to a tic that gripped the right side of the face every once in a while.

The Ganaf man put his glasses back on, lit a Benson & Hedges. He pulled his chair up and cleared his throat. "Comrade Ahmed," he said, drawing at the Benson & Hedges. His voice was hoarse and grating. "Your full name is Ahmed Hersi Warmooge, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ahmed.

"Comrade Ahmed, I would like you to answer me a few questions. They do not directly concern you, but someone close to you." He puffed away smoke. "They involve your wife."

"My wife?" Ahmed said. "What about her?"

Comrade Addow pulled a small notebook out of his shirt pocket, put it on the table, and opened it. He pointed with a Biro pen to an underlined name in a list.

"Your wife is called Amina Haji Ismail, isn't she, Comrade Ahmed?"

"Yes," said Ahmed, "but--"

"Wait a minute, Comrade Ahmed." Addow leafed through the small notebook until he found another page. Then he continued, referring to the notebook: "Your wife Amina, Comrade Ahmed, used to work at Hodan Intermediate School as a teacher. But then she was

expelled for anti-Revolutionary activities, isn't that so?"

"No," said Ahmed. "She did not do anything anti-Revolutionary."

"Oh, yes. She refused to sing the Eternal Song of the Glorious Revolution." Something in the way he said "Revolution" suggested he was actually saying Don't interrupt me! "The Father of the Revolution strictly stipulated that all teachers should tell their students to sing the song before starting classes." Comrade Addow stopped and looked up at Ahmed. He drew at the Benson & Hedges and said, "Comrade Ahmed, your wife refused to do that. What is more anti-Revolutionary than that?"

"I won't allow you to talk about my wife like that, sir," Ahmed said. He felt hot inside, but he kept calm. That was a weakness of his. His small chin, which he always shaved clean, his large eyes, and his generally delicate features made him look handsome, kind and gentle, but did not impress his opponent when he was angry.

"Whether you allow me or not, Comrade Ahmed, that is the truth, and it cost her her job," Addow said. He leaned forward on the desk so that his massive head and shoulders were less than one foot from Ahmed. "Now, there is something even

more serious than that," he continued. Ahmed felt a slight shudder. He looked away from the fixed stare directed at him from behind those dark glasses. His eyes drifted and met those of the Father of the Revolution, who seemed to rebuke him and his wife from the wall. The wide mouth seemed to open; the brass emblem on the cap, the medals on the military uniform, and the constant stare seemed to accuse him of unspeakable crimes for having such a wife. His wife! And what had she done? He looked at Comrade Addow.

He was puffing away at his Benson & Hedges. He cleared his throat and said, "Your wife has failed to attend the neighborhood's Political Orientation and Guidance gatherings." Comrade Addow drew at the cigarette, flicked off the ash, and then said, "And that, as you know Comrade Ahmed, is a most serious crime against the Revolution." The Comrade delivered the last words with assured emphasis and relish. There was something cold and remote about the stare behind those glasses, punctuated by the tic.

Ahmed didn't say anything for a while. He was too bewildered.

"Comrade Addow," he said finally, "I am sure my wife hasn't missed many orientation gatherings. She may lately have missed several because she has been busy at home. But I'll talk to her. And I assure

you she'll be there next time." Ahmed then casually looked at his watch and said, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back to my office. There is a long line of patients waiting."

"No, wait," said Comrade Addow. Ahmed sat down again. "Comrade Ahmed, this is more serious than you think. Your wife has not been to any of the last ten rallies. Now that won't do." Comrade Addow sat back on the chair and lighted another cigarette. He drew at it deeply and exhaled the smoke in rings. "Now then, the Father of the Revolution and other Party members spend all their time and energy on the welfare of the masses of the Somali people, and here ungrateful anti-Revolutionaries come along and disrupt their efforts. Well, Comrade Ahmed, that won't do." Comrade Addow stopped and watched Ahmed for a few minutes. "Your wife, Comrade Ahmed, will have to defend herself before a Revolutionary court. This is the only alternative she now has. The word of law says that."

"What did you say?"

"You heard me, Comrade Ahmed."

"No, that's impossible, you---." Ahmed was on his feet now. His hands were clenched.

"Sit down Comrade Ahmed, please. I don't think losing your temper helps the matter in any way. It

will only make things more serious. Please sit down."

Ahmed sat down, but did not say anything. He was too overcome to say anything.

"Comrade Ahmed, please be reasonable--at least for your own sake. We have great confidence in you. The government understands that you are a Revolutionary doctor. And you should not ruin your career over this." Comrade Addow drew at his cigarette; his tic was now violent. "Now then, Comrade Ahmed, I take leave of you on that note. We'll contact you and your wife very soon. Until then, good day." Comrade Addow rose and walked out.

Ahmed stared down at the table. A feeling of silent rage and frustration engulfed him--a feeling bred out of the inability to react and say no to the indignities and cruelties carried out in the name of the blessings of Revolution. He knew it was all lies, lies through and through. He knew that the frenzied, four-hour long harangues delivered to crowds of ragged, hungry, woe-begone wretches who, in their delirious applause, did not know they were being swindled and fed with wind--he knew these harangues were lies from A to Z. He knew that petty tyrants, party functionaries, lickspittles with big paunches, puffy faces, spindly legs, and hare brains, who would sell their own mothers to the devil to get

small gains--these men would embellish the lies and multiply them tenfold. And he knew that thugs, bullies, and snakes like Addow made sure that everybody swallowed those lies.

Ahmed thought he had not reacted appropriately to Comrade Addow's insulting attitude. The best thing would have been to hit him in the face and tell him to get out. The next best thing would have been to tell Comrade Addow that his wife was his wife alone and that it was no one else's business to tell her what to do and what not to do. Moreover, why should she waste time listening to a lot of rubbish at the Orientation Center? But Ahmed did not do that either.

Somehow he had tried to satisfy the Ganaf man, though he did not know why. Was it because he was saving his neck? Was he afraid that he might lose his bread, or his freedom? Was he afraid for his wife and daughter, afraid that harm might touch them? Maybe so. But if so, was he a despicable coward or a clever pragmatist? These questions revolved in Ahmed's mind.

Somebody opened the door, but he didn't look up.

"Good morning again, Bowe Ahmed." It was Hawo, who chuckled as she sat down in the chair vacated by Comrade Addow. "It looks like you and Comrade Addow have had a not very pleasant little talk." Ahmed

looked at her; her small eyes were fixed on him. They always reminded him of those of a cat.

"Yes, we have." Ahmed, a bit calmer now, told her what had happened and she nodded frequently, her chuckle never very far from the surface. There was something at once disturbing and attractive about her chuckle. Narrowing her small cat's eyes and baring a set of small, even, slightly smoke-stained teeth, and accompanying this with a soft appealing little purr, she looked like someone who had a small secret but was not about to divulge it. Ahmed wondered why a hospital should need such a Party representative.

When he finished, Hawo sat back on her chair, and said, "I am sorry about that." After a while she added, with a show of concern, "But don't you think, Comrade Ahmed, you should have married a Revolutionary girl in the first place?" Ahmed looked at her for over a minute without saying anything to her. Hawo said, "I mean, you're a good doctor and you don't need a woman who might cause you problems in your career." She chuckled.

Ahmed didn't answer. Looking at his watch, he said casually, "Speaking of doctors, I think the patients need me now." He rose and walked towards the door. At the door he stopped and looked back at Hawo and said, "Hawo, Amina happens to be the one



woman in the world I have loved and will ever need to love." He went out.

Ahmed spent more time than usual in his personal office, filling out prescriptions until late in the afternoon. His normal daily load of concern--too many patients and too little help for them, too much work, lack of hospital maintenance, hygiene problems, shortage of trained personnel--were now compounded by what he had experienced today. When he drove home in his old Fiat 600, exhausted and still angry, very late in the afternoon, and Amina asked if anything was wrong, he didn't have satisfactory answers ready. He briefly told her about the incident at the hospital and told her as casually as possible not to worry.

But he himself was worried. As she sat beside him in the bed, with Safia in her lap, he studied her beauty, the beauty that had captivated him seven years ago when he was a student at Afgoi Medical College and she was a trainee at the nearby Lafaole Teachers College. He remembered the shy young girl of eighteen with the clear lovely eyes, straight nose with slightly flaring nostrils, full lips that parted in a contagious, dimpled smile. Her fresh, smooth dark brown face and high forehead softly blended with a luxuriant growth of hair which she always did in the current Afro fashion. He remembered too how he

had courted her secretly for a while, taking her out to dinner in Mogadishu and Afgoi restaurants or to Indian movies.

And then she had insisted that they should get formally engaged lest her father come to know about their relationship. He remembered the engagement, the happy marriage and honeymoon, and the long wait of two years when he was studying in Cairo. And he remembered the birth of their little daughter and the settled family who, though not completely free from troubles, nevertheless were contented. They had tried to cope with the financial problems created after the government fired Amina. They somehow managed with only his pay to buy the old Fiat, to pay their monthly rent and cover their other needs, and even to help some of their relatives in the countryside. So he had thought that things were fine with them.

But now, as Amina sat there, lovely as ever, but with a more matured countenance and a more subdued hairstyle, and as their little Safia played with her doll, he wondered for the first time in his life whether he would be able to protect them from the silent, hostile forces about to be unleashed.

Ahmed sat up in the bed and forced a smile, embracing Amina and kissing her on the cheek. "It's going to be all right, Amina," he said. "Cheer up.

You've done nothing, and these fools--I'll take care of them. Besides, I have talked to Captain Moge and he says he'll try his best." Captain Moge was an old friend of his who was in both the military and the Party. After a while, he said, "Why don't you call on your father and tell him about this?"

"All right," she said with a smile. He was sure it wasn't the old smile he knew, but it soothed them both. He went over to the record player and played Mohamed Suleman's "The Wind of Rain." It was his favorite song.

During the next three days, Ahmed was busy completing a report on the spread of malaria in the Lower Juba region for a WHO Commission that was touring the country. He had been working on it for several weeks, compiling statistics on the reported cases and deaths, making estimates of the amount of money spent fighting the disease, and what steps should be taken to keep it in check.

Ahmed and the commission had come to the hospital and had just finished their first session, in which they had discussed part of the report. Leading the commission of three, he stepped out into the lobby to see them off to Shebelle Hotel where they were staying. Then he saw his housemaid sitting on a chair in the lobby, and his daughter with her. Little

Safia ran towards him saying, "Pappa, Pappa," and the maid, Fadumo, rose from the chair and walked in his direction. It was obvious that she had been crying.

Ahmed turned to the commission members and said, "Excuse me, gentlemen, I'll be back in a minute." He stepped aside with Fadumo and, half expecting the answer, asked, "What happened, Fadumo?"

"They have taken Amina away!"

"Please don't cry, Fadumo. Tell me when." And she told him that two men, not the ones who had come to the house earlier, but two other men, had visited the house in the morning. Amina said she would not go. They showed her identity cards and they said they were from the National Security Bureau. "I said I wanted to go with her, but they said no," said the maid, who was regaining her composure. Ahmed looked at his watch; it was now four in the afternoon. Then he came back to the WHO Commission, saw them off to Shebelle Hotel, and drove the maid and Safia home.

Twenty minutes later he was in the small dingy office adjoining the Jebel Jan Prison, where political prisoners were herded into special quarters separated from the main jail before they were tried and carted off somewhere else, usually remote fortress camps. A gaunt sergeant, stiff in his uniform, sat behind an old desk and leafed through a thick record book.

"Excuse me Comrade Sergeant, I would like to see a lady who was brought here today. Her name is Amina," said Ahmed.

"No, Comrade," said the sergeant gruffly. "No one can see prisoners here. They're security prisoners."

"Where can I see her then?"

"I do not know." The sergeant resumed going through the thick book. Obviously he is not willing to be of help, thought Ahmed, and walked out.

He was at a loss what to do. Amina had informed her father, a rice merchant whose small business had fallen on bad times, and whose influence on matters like this was not very great. His only hope had been his old friend, Captain Moge, who had promised to do what he could to prevent his wife's arrest. It was obvious he had failed, but he would see him again anyway.

Captain Moge was home, seated in a relaxed manner on a mattress and pillows, chewing gat, those mildly euphoric green leaves that anybody who was somebody used to wile away time and build castles in the air. He was also sipping beer while his wife prepared dinner. "Come in, Ahmed," said Moge getting up to welcome Ahmed, who could see from the Captain's face that he had heard the news.

"We're sorry about what happened," said Moge's

wife, Ambro, a buxom country girl. Ahmed wondered how her prudish rural sensibilities could stand this beer drinking army man. But then he always thought Moge stumbled into the military; he was a pleasant carefree fellow with the reputation of a dashing man-about-town.

Ahmed sat down, said nothing for a while. Then he said in a barely audible voice, "What happened, Moge?"

"What happened? Well, I don't know. I mean your wife must have done something very serious. I mean, besides what you've told me."

"What do you mean? She's done nothing. I know that," retorted Ahmed.

"Look here, Ahmed. I've seen those same Security Bureau people, I mean those two who came to your house. I know them both, Addow and Gowdhan. Wasn't Addow the one who interviewed you? The other one is his colleague. These two are always sent to handle big cases. I know them." Moge sipped his beer. "Will you have some, Ahmed?"

"No, thanks," said Ahmed. He did not understand why Moge always asked him this question when he knew Ahmed was a teetotaler.

"Well, you know what they said? She'll be in solitary."

"Are you serious? Why?"

"They say she's a threat to the Revolution."

"Goddamn them to hell! My wife in solitary?"

Ahmed's face was distorted with anger. He almost felt dizzy; he stood up, trembling, but began walking about, back and forth in the big living room, while Ambro looked on, and Moge tried to console him with an occasional "Ahmed, you've got to pull yourself together." Ahmed calmed down a bit and looked with embittered eyes at Moge, that easygoing old friend of his, who had the luck of being a soldier--for he wouldn't have become a Party member if he were not in uniform--the gullibility of the immature, and the innocuousness of the innocent. He sat there with his cheek bulging with green leaves that had found their way into his mouth since noon, five empty bottles and ten full ones beside him, and two packets of Rothmann's lying on the bundle of gat that waited to be chewed. He looks like a camel chewing its cud, Ahmed thought.

He sighed and said, "Maybe you're right. I should pull myself together, Moge." He started for the door. Ambro asked him to wait for dinner, but he said, "No, thank you," and walked out.

Solitary confinement. Ahmed had heard the all too familiar story of solitary confinement, mostly reserved for the enemies of the Revolution, men and women who were picked off the streets and bundled

into waiting cars, pulled out of their beds in the dead of night, manacled in their offices, always whisked off to a remote, unknown place without trial, cramped into tiny bug-ridden rooms, and kept there for months or years, sometimes never to be seen again. Ahmed knew that he wouldn't see Amina any time soon.

He drove home through the busy streets of Mogadishu, lighted up now, decorated for the upcoming celebrations to be held in three days in the big Hall of the Revolution. All around him, on each side of the double-lane Hodan Street, large posters lauded in blazing letters the Revolution's glories and condemned its enemies. Red and orange neon signs, outsize red and blue fluttering standards, huge murals and friezes, songs on radio and cassettes all combined to reveal the message to the faithful: Long live the Revolution! said one sign; Death to the Exploiters, threatened another; Father Budleh is the Teacher of the Nation, declared a third. And so the list went, and Ahmed drove home, knowing that Amina would not be there.

Ahmed's mind wrestled with all types of questions. What would he do now? Run over the first Ganaf man he met? Well, he did not know many. If only he could find that vermin of a Ganaf man! Where was Amina? Maybe she was already on her way to some remote underground fortress, a concentration camp.



To be taken like that, perhaps never to be seen again!

He thought that perhaps the best thing would be to wait and see what happened, and try to get information somehow or other. Perhaps then he could meet her, perhaps even defend her in court--but could he really? One thing was clear to him: he would have to wait. And with that thought, he turned in.

Next morning, he went to the hospital as usual. When the nurses and the other doctors came, it was clear to him they had heard the story. As he drank his early morning cup of tea in the main office, the first doctor to join him, Dr. Hersi, the surgeon, said, "I'm very, very sorry about what has happened, Ahmed. Do you think it is very serious?"

"Thanks, but frankly I don't know." He didn't think that his wife had done anything serious, but he didn't want to talk about it. Presently the other doctors and nurses came in and spoke words of consolation.

"By the way," said Ahmed, turning to the men, "who told you about the arrest?" The men looked at one another without answering, as if the question was an accusation. After a while, Dr. Bulhan said, "Well, I think a nurse told me, but I am not sure."

"Oh, yes, the nurses were circulating the story yesterday evening," agreed Dr. Hersi, "but I had

thought they had got it from you."

"Oh, no," said Ahmed, "but it doesn't matter. I was just wondering." Ahmed rose and said, "I have to go to my office."

"Oh, yes," said Hersi, also rising and looking at his watch.

Ahmed nearly ran into Hawo, who was just entering the office.

"Oh, Bowe Ahmed, I've been looking for you." She stepped aside to let Dr. Hersi pass, and then she said in a low voice, "Bowe Ahmed, I've heard what's happened. And I am sorry about it." Hawo said this without her usual chuckle.

"Thank you, Hawo."

She looked strangely innocent and somehow sad without her chuckle. She looked up at him and began to say something, but Ahmed looked at his watch and said, "Look Hawo, can't we postpone it until this afternoon? I mean after examining the patients?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "It's about the Party, you know."

"All right. We'll see." He walked off. Ahmed was uncomfortable. Here he was with his wife God knows where, and then comes along somebody talking about parties and congresses. Indeed, Party.

There was a relatively small number of patients

today and Ahmed finished the examination and prescriptions rather early. So he began reviewing the malaria report he had prepared for the WHO Commission, which he would meet tomorrow if possible. He knew that with his wife in jail he would probably not be able to do his job properly. But he would try not to disrupt his regular schedule.

It was two o'clock, and there was a knock on the door. "Come in," said Ahmed. The door was slightly opened and Hawo's face appeared, her eyes meeting his, holding them for a moment. "Come in, Hawo." She walked in, quietly closing the door, pulled up the other chair in the room, and sat before him.

"Bowe Ahmed," she said, her voice almost breaking with emotion, "Why don't you like me?" Ahmed could not believe his ears. Then he realized that he was not dreaming, and a deep sense of anger overwhelmed him. He tried to put his feelings under control.

He said calmly and in a very low voice, "What do you mean, Hawo?" She was now looking at him, into his eyes. Ahmed felt as if her cat's eyes were piercing into the depths of his soul. What made the look even more threatening was the absence of her usual chuckle. Ahmed looked down.

"Bowe Ahmed," she said in a calmer voice, "I've always been partial to you, but you have never shown

me any warmth."

"But--but you're mistaken, Hawo." Ahmed tried to defend himself, but could not find the proper words.

"I am not mistaken!" Hawo's voice rose. "And you know that you're mistaken. I've been willing to help you in any way I could, but you have never shown me any gratitude. You haven't even bothered to take advantage of the opportunities I've presented to you. I was going to make you---"

"Stop!"

"---a member of the Party---"

"Stop!" She did. "Listen, Hawo, you must make sense."

"I am making sense but--" she began sobbing. She got a silk handkerchief out of her handbag, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose. They were silent for several minutes; Ahmed rose and walked about in the office.

At last he said, "Hawo, do you know that I'm married?"

"Yes, I know," she said, looking down on the floor.

"And do you know that my wife is in jail?"

"Yes."

"Well then, why are you doing this?"

For a while she did not say anything; then she looked up at him and said, "Because I love you, and I don't want any other woman to be near you."

Ahmed could not tell whether he walked, ran or sprang, but the next thing he knew, he was beside her and slapped her hard across the face. "Get out!" he yelled, "get out or I will kill you." Hawo let out a sharp scream. Her eyes showed terror and she backed away as he advanced towards her with clenched hands.

"Get out!" he shouted again, and she hurriedly got up and retreated towards the door. She grabbed the knob, opened the door, and ran out of the office. That was the last he ever saw of her.

Two days later, two Ganaf men, one of whom he had seen before, walked into his office and marched him out.

CHAPTER III

THE END

"And God speaketh the Truth," said Haji Ibrahim, signalling the end of the Quranic chapter he had been reciting for the last half hour. He slowly folded the Book and, replacing it in its off-white calico cloth holder, respectfully laid it on the right-hand corner of his prayer rug. He then stood up to make sure whether the sun had disappeared behind the horizon. It had. The time for sunset prayers had come. He noticed the unusually red glow the twilight cast across the somewhat cloudy sky this evening, instead of the yellowish-orange color it normally had. He studied it for a while. But he got it out of his mind. There was the more worthwhile business of worship at hand.

"Omer, I think it is time to say the sunset prayers," he said, turning to his brother, who was absorbed in ablutions.

"I think so too," agreed Omer. The Haji took off his turban, baring his bald head, and put it near the Quran; he raised his hands to his ears and, facing Mecca, made the call to prayers.

"Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!" he announced in a clear, piercing voice, "Come to prayers, come to salvation!" After he finished the call, he did not start the prayers

straight away, but stood there, waiting for the other men to join him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the shapely domes of the hamlet's huts silhouetted against the glow of the sunset light. The subdued hubbub of the soft voices of the women; his two wives, his brother Omer's wife, and his daughter Fadumo, and those of the children coming from the huts mingled with the bleating of the big flocks of sheep and goats grazing near the hamlet. The Haji could also hear the ding-dong of the camel bells farther away in the bush as the herd headed home for the night. Haji Ibrahim stood there with the reassured sense of a man of power and wealth--power and wealth gained through his wisdom, his knowledge of religious tenets, and his position in the clan. And as he watched the hamlet with benevolent, fatherly eyes, the cool evening breeze gently blowing and bringing to his nostrils the grassy aroma of spring, Haji Ibrahim thanked God and felt serene, happy and proud.

Presently, his daughter, Fadumo, emerged from the hamlet, flushing a small flock of young sheep and goats out of a nearby bush, shooing them into their pen. The Haji's eyes settled on her, and his feeling of contentment began to wane, slowly giving way to a vague dullness, the new feeling he had now and again experienced during the last several days. A feeling of disappointment, of betrayal. This was the second



or third time he had seen her since her return home yesterday, and each time he had an urge to look away from her, as if she were no longer his daughter.

The Haji's train of thought was checked as Omer, having finished his ablutions, now spread his calico cloth behind him to join the prayers. The Haji could see Ali, his second eldest son, as he squatted several feet away, cleaning his rifle. Ahmed, his eldest son, was leaning against an acacia tree trunk, watching the hamlet.

Ahmed had arrived from town that day. He said he had come after he had heard of the crisis in his family. The Haji waited a little, but Ahmed did not join his father and uncle in the prayers.

"Ahmed, are you not saying your prayers?" asked the father.

Ahmed looked at his father and then looked down.

"I'll say them later, father." The Haji's face acquired an expression of severity. He had heard this same excuse from his son many times before, and each time his concern over Ahmed had increased. It slowly dawned on him that Ahmed was not what he used to be, and recalled with a heavy heart that day twelve years ago when he was persuaded to send his son to the infidels' place of learning, the "Isgool."

He wished, not for the first time, that the good

old days could come back once again; he wished he could once again be seeing the young, bright son, who at the age of eleven had beaten every other pupil in his group and memorized the whole Quran, mastered every lesson before the ink was dry, and won the praise of both teacher and father instead of the cane. He had seen the boy as his natural heir and groomed him as the future leader of his clan. But now the tall, slender young man standing there dressed in city clothes, with the strange haircut and goatee beard, bore little resemblance to his boy.

He wondered whether it was not, after all, his fault; instead of keeping his family together, he had sent Ahmed to Hargeisa during the drought so that he could stay with Uncle Yusuf. Two years later, when Ahmed came back to visit them, he had already finished one year at the "Isgool," and the signs of change were already there: he began to hesitate and stumble when the Haji asked him to recite chapters of Quran; he also said his prayers only occasionally. When the Haji, concerned that his son might be brought up an infidel, decided to keep him out of the "Isgool," Uncle Yusuf intervened.

"Wait brother," he had said. "Ahmed will not be taught the infidels' religion; he will only learn to speak their language and that's no harm. Besides, there is now a Somali government, and they will teach youngsters

only what is good for them in the future."

He reluctantly accepted this argument on the ground that young men who get an education will ultimately help their families.

But now he could see how mistaken he had been; Ahmed was still the same polite, respectful, loving son; he always said "father" when he was addressing the Haji, something his other son Ali, or for that matter any traditional camelman's son, would never say; Ahmed was also very energetic, and when he visited the family in the country during the holidays, he helped them in their daily chores. But he had gradually lost his religion; he forgot the Quran completely, and he no longer said his prayers. And the Haji was in serious doubt whether Ahmed would ever be the heir he had intended him to be. Yet he was still hopeful that Ahmed would see the light in the end and readopt the ways of his father and his clan.

The Haji turned from his son and started his communion with God. "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Benificent," he began as he folded his arms, his narrow, dark brown face set in the serious, meditative, yet relaxed, mood that fit the subject at hand. Omer silently recited the same words after him.

The Haji completed the process of recitals, bowings, and kneelings that the three rac'as of the sunset

prayers required. And as he knelt at the end of each rac'a, he tried to be very close to God in his heart, but today something was amiss. He could not concentrate; his mind was not touched by the words of God and his meditative countenance belied his troubled heart. He knew that his prayers were not complete as they should be, but he could do nothing about it. He also knew the same problem would be faced by any respected sixty-year-old man, born of a proud clan, whose honor had been abused through the rashness of his only daughter. And he knew that any such man would naturally avenge his honor, as he had done. But he also knew that times had changed, and that there was something called government.

These worldly thoughts passed through the Haji's mind, and mingled with those of prayers; the more seriously he tried to banish them, the more overwhelming they became.

After the prayers were over, the Haji relaxed from his kneeling posture and, assuming a more natural sitting position, turned around and faced his brother, who was now getting up to help round up the camels and sheep so they could be herded into their pens.

Then he heard the soft rhythmic thuds of running feet coming up from behind him. Omer, who was now standing up, was looking over the Haji's shoulder.

"Young Mohamed is running up to us. I wonder

whether he has penned the young camels," Omer said. Mohamed was the Haji's youngest son.

"Oh, Father! Father!" screamed the boy in an agitated voice. He came up and stood before his father. He was out of breath.

"What is it? What is the matter?"

"Father, I have seen askaris!"

"Askaris? Where?"

"On the other side of the hamlet. Me and Mother saw them. And father, they are three, and they have big rifles, and they talked to Mother, and Mother says to tell you," said the boy. He was frightened.

"There is no harm, Mohamed," the Haji calmed the boy as he rose. Ali also stood, slung his loaded rifle on his shoulder, and walked brusquely in the direction of the camels. The Haji followed Ali with his eyes until he disappeared into the bush. Then he gave instructions to his other sons.

"Ahmed," he said, "go into the hamlet and make sure the women herd the sheep and goats into their pens safely. Then, son, secure the four burden camels to their posts. Mohamed, hurry up to our hut and tell your mother to bring out our new mat, then fetch it to me near that bush. Quick."

As he was saying these words, the Haji folded his prayer rug, put on his cowhide sandals, and carefully

placed the Quran on his shoulder.

"I can see them," said Omer, who was standing near him. "They are coming towards us."

The Haji could make out three dark figures making a detour round the thorn fence of the hamlet and approaching in single file. He could already hear the thumping of their heavy boots, the twigs snapping under them.

"Let's meet them, Omer," he said. The two brothers walked off towards the guardsmen.

"Salaama Alaykum," a voice said.

"Alaykuma Salaam" Haji Ibrahim returned the greeting. Hands were shaken amid questions of "What is the news?" and answers of "Peace and prosperity." Haji Ibrahim studied the three men in the dim twilight, trying to see if he could recognize any of them. He did: a young sergeant with beady eyes from the kin Warfa clan.

"Aren't you Osman, the son of Haji Geele?"

"Yes, I am, Haji," said the sergeant respectfully.

"How is your family? I haven't met your father this last rainy season. How is he?"

"They are all fine, Haji." The conversation continued, establishing a sense of closeness. It had a relaxing influence on the Haji. He could at least get some consolation from the fact that there was someone he knew inside the uniform--that hostile, exotic monolith

carved out of a rough, grey, leather-shouldered, waist-belted jersey merging with stiff, ironed, dull khaki shorts that abruptly gave way to dirty-green stockings and heavy, thick-soled brown boots, the whole gloomy garb tapering upwards into a stiff collar and a tall pointed cap, armed with a Lee-Enfield rifle.

He, his clan, and indeed all other clans, had been at odds with men in uniform ever since he remembered. The askaris were a strange and unwanted presence; they would at any time set out from their camps in town, often in the past with their white-skinned infidel leaders, and prowl about in the countryside, interfering in the affairs of the clans, taking away their rifles in the name of what they called peace, jailing men they claimed had broken the law.

Haji Ibrahim recalled the first direct encounter he had had with askaris years ago, when he was a young man. A party led by an infidel visited Ibrahim's hamlet and said they were searching for ammunition and rifles; there had just been a skirmish between the Haji's Awale clan and the enemy clan of Raage, and the atmosphere was tense. The party of ten entered the compound and the infidel said something to one of his askaris; Haji Ibrahim, then only Ibrahim, his father, his brother Omer, and a cousin stood before them, guarding the entrance to one of the huts.

"The sahib says you should step aside so that we can search the hut," said the askari.

"No, we won't," said Ibrahim's father with decisive gravity. "And I want you to clear my compound right now."

"You had better do what the sahib says or you will be in trouble," the askari said; the askari, a tall gaunt corporal, said something to the infidel, who seemed to think for a while. Then he talked to the corporal and they went back; but the corporal looked back at them threateningly. The askaris were beaten then.

Now there was no white man; he had returned to his own far-off country, but the askaris were still there, still interfering. And they were here this evening, three of them. The Haji knew the reason they came all the way from the town, but he was determined to stand by his honor. He would welcome them as guests for the night, as he would welcome any man who had come upon his hamlet at such an hour; that too was a matter of decorum. It went without saying. But as far as the serious matter at hand was concerned, he would not back down, come what may.

Haji Ibrahim and Omer led their guests to a small clearing between the main hamlet and the camel pen, sheltered by a thorn windbreak erected by Ali specifi-



cally for the purpose. The herd of camels, over eighty already, now increased by the loot of yesterday, slowly and with good-natured reluctance trooped into its pen. That familiar, slightly acidic and pungent, yet sweet, odor emanated from the pen, as Ali, with whistles, threats, and endearments, coaxed the animals into the shelter. The Haji could hear the deep guttural roar of the rutting bull rise with authority over the softer motherly grunts of the milch females getting ready to suckle their cawing, impatient youngsters. The deep, almost baritone booming of the big wooden bell, worn by his favorite camel, Mandeeg, mingled with the sharper, high-pitched chiming of the smaller bells. On his left, the domes of the huts were now swallowed by the engulfing dusk, but the light commotion of the women, sheep, and goats that came from there set a contrast with the heavy presence of the camels.

Young Mohamed brought the mat, blankets, and pillows; Haji Ibrahim asked the guests to relax and a fire was built. Haji Ibrahim and Omer left the guests and walked towards the hamlet. The Haji's wife, a tall, thin woman of fifty, stood before her hut as the two approached. "Woman," said the Haji, "kill one of the two-year-old lambs and prepare a dinner for the guests."

"Yes, Haji," she said and walked into the pen, where he could see Fadumo milking the sheep. The Haji

and Omer were now joined by Ahmed and all three of them came to the camel pen. Ali was building a fire for the camels with one hand and holding the rifle in readiness with the other.

The four men stood around the fire without saying anything for a while. Then Ali, who was warming the milking pot, turned to his brother and said, "Ahmed, I want you to milk the camels with Omer tonight."

"Why? What are you going to do?" asked Ahmed.

"I am going to the other clan hamlets to bring reinforcements. I can muster at least fifteen men with rifles tonight." Ali spoke with enthusiasm.

"To do what?" asked Omer.

"Why, to face these askaris like men. Whatever is happening to our clan? No man ever got the better of us in the past and, as far as I am concerned, nobody ever will." Ali was almost screaming.

"Ssh, the askaris may hear you," Omer said.

"I don't care whether they do or not."

Haji Ibrahim deep down in his heart agreed with Ali. Yes, men in the past would face their foes; bravery and fair play were the mark of manhood. But now things had changed. One had to tread carefully, particularly where guardsmen were concerned. But he did not say anything now; he squatted and thoughtfully drew squares on the ground. Ahmed looked from his

father to his uncle Omer, who had now sat down near the fire, feeding it with sticks so that presently a brilliant orange flame erupted and showed their grave faces. Ali was standing, holding the rifle in his right hand. He was looking in the direction of the windbreak where the askaris were spending the night.

"The askaris have not come to fight with us, brother," Ahmed said, turning to Ali.

"Well, what do they want then, Ahmed?" Ali's voice had a sarcastic edge to it.

"We will hear from them soon, Ali, but anyway I don't think being hostile to these men from the government would serve us any purpose. And even if we shot them tonight, you know an army would set out from Hargeisa before tomorrow is out." Ahmed looked from Ali to Omer to his father, who was watching him with a slight frown. His eyes then settled on the fire.

The Haji did not like the tone of Ahmed's talk. He knew that he was right; fighting the guardsmen would ultimately not serve any purpose, but it seemed as if Ahmed did not feel the full weight of the shame that his sister had brought on the family and their clan. A woman of Awale clan had never done such a thing before, but Fadumo had done the unthinkable: she had married a man from the low, outcast clan of Gobyar, the blacksmiths. The Haji was sickened by the very

thought, but he did not want a discussion now. He said as he stood up, "I do not think it is wise to argue about the question before we hear what the askaris have to say. Omer and I are now going back to the hamlet to bring them food. We will come back to tell you what they have to say, but, in the meantime, you two, Ahmed and Ali, go ahead and milk the camels and send a pot of milk to the guests," he said.

Haji Ibrahim knew his importance. Tall and stately, he had a majestic frame that gave his talk and actions a sense of natural authority that made itself felt among the members of the clan and outside it. The narrow face, wearing a well-tended beard now flecked with grey, had the type of dignity, perhaps with a touch of austerity, that can be found only in a man who considers himself a born leader of his people.

He married couples and gave names to the newly-born; he blessed the ill and gave them advice; he headed the clan council to settle disputes, and in disputes involving other clans, the one thing the other clan leaders feared most was the cutting edge of his powerful oratory. His words, which he spoke with the slow, measured cadence of sure-footed eloquence, flowed smoothly, poetically, and by the time he had finished, a sense of finality reigned. No one dared challenge him.

He rarely indulged in anger, a feeling he thought below him, and he almost never smiled. His was the elevated domain of seriousness. Haji Ibrahim was a man of honor, more than anything else. And it was this sensitive issue that the Haji, his brother Omer, and the three government guardsmen had now to tackle.

The dinner was over now and the Haji had just taken the utensils back to the hamlet and had brought back a kettle of tea and cups to the guests. The Haji told Ahmed, who had brought a pot of fresh camel milk to the guests and seemed interested in the discussion, to go back to the pen and join his brother.

The guardsmen sat in a small half-circle on the mat, and facing them on the other side of the fire sat the host and his brother Omer.

"Thanks be to God, it was a good meal, Haji. The sheep must have been a fat one," said the sergeant, who was sipping a cup of tea. His beady eyes seemed set to bore holes in whatever they looked at.

"Yes, all my sheep are fat this season. We have had good rains, thanks be to God," replied the Haji.

For a few moments nobody said anything. Then the sergeant spoke again in a serious tone.

"Haji Ibrahim," he said. He seemed to weigh his words carefully. "These officers and I have paid you this visit this evening on a business of the most

serious nature. And I am sure that you are aware of it." He stopped and sipped the tea. Haji Ibrahim looked on the fire to which he added two more sticks; the flame first dimmed down a little and then leapt, its orange light showing the two half-circles of men around it. The flame reflected against the brass emblem on the forehead of the sergeant's cap. The Haji touched his turban to see that it sat well on his head.

The sergeant continued, "Your son has broken the law of the state." He sipped the tea again. "The government considers that taking away somebody else's wife and property, either by force or by other means, is an unlawful act. Besides, government law dictates that anybody who harms, or threatens to harm, the person of somebody else is breaking the law." The sergeant sipped the tea; he looked at Haji Ibrahim. Their eyes met and they looked at each other for a while. Then the sergeant looked down at the fire and began again.

"Now then, Haji Ibrahim," he said, "since your son Ali has been confirmed to have looted fifteen camels belonging to a citizen named Guleed Barre and, moreover, has taken away his wife Fadumo, and threatened him with physical violence, the government has been obliged to carry out the word of law so that justice can be done. Consequently, Haji, these officers and I

are here tonight to see to it that Guleed has his camels and his wife back." The sergeant sipped his tea. He looked up at the Haji and said, "Moreover, Haji Ibrahim, we are here to take your son Ali to Hargeisa so that he can stand before the court of law for possessing arms illegally and threatening to use them, endangering life, taking somebody else's property unlawfully, and forcing a married woman to leave her home. And I only hope that I have your cooperation in all this. That is all I have to say, Haji." The sergeant sipped his tea.

Haji Ibrahim attentively listened to every word the sergeant said, but he detected an unfamiliar ring in them. They were flat and dull. They contained no proverbs or aphorisms; they had no flourishes, no roundedness, no poetry--elements that gave rural council rhetoric its natural beauty and persuasiveness. Nevertheless, they were effective in a strange way.

If the speech did not move him, its intent was not lost on him. Obviously, the sergeant was serious. The Haji felt uncomfortable, something he seldom felt. He drew squares on the ground, and started. "In the name of God the Merciful the Beneficent," he said. "Young man, perhaps the world has entered the final stage of its existence; perhaps the Day of Judgement that is mentioned in the Book of God is drawing near, and perhaps because of that new phenomenon, it is

possible for us to witness the occurrence of the unheard-of." The Haji paused and stroked his beard. He began again, "For, unless that is the case, how can one explain the sad fact that a man so young as yourself, a man who is not much older than a mere boy, a man who has little wisdom or experience--how can one explain that a young man like you should take the liberty to address an old grey-haired man of my standing on such serious matters as this?" Haji Ibrahim stopped a moment and looked at the sergeant, who had finished the cup of tea and was putting it down. The Haji filled it again.

He started again: "Decorum, young man, decorum assigns the respective positions of the young and the old, and God, in His Holy Quran, rightly instructs us as follows: 'O Faithful, obey God, and His Prophet and those of you who possess wisdom.'" He stopped and looked at the young sergeant, who was sipping his tea.

The Haji, who had been squatting, now sat on his haunches, crossed his legs one over the other, and balanced himself by wrapping his white calico sheet lengthwise round his back and tightening it around his legs, just below the knees.

He began again, "The late poet Abdigahair, God bless his soul, was once vexed by a young pretender. This was his reply:



Take heed lest the awe of the sixty-year-  
old blind you, Even as the sensible infantry  
may not compete with cavalry.

That was fitting advice--and still is--for one willing to take it. There is a saying that a day will come when a dig-dig may occupy a post vacated by a lion. The day has come. However, the question as to whether the dig-dig may fill the post or not may be asked. Perhaps you can answer it." Haji Ibrahim looked at the sergeant, who still sipped his tea. The Haji added another stick to the fire and continued.

"Sergeant, there are certain matters that are reserved for men of consequence alone; this is one of them." He stopped to see the effect of his words. There was none. The young sergeant was still sipping the tea; he now looked at the Haji over the tea, his beady eyes showing no emotion at all. The Haji started again, his voice now rising:

"This question that you have discussed in total isolation, Sergeant, happens to be of extreme importance to my honor--indeed to the honor of my whole clan. Fadumo is my daughter, in case you do not know, and whoever has dared to soil her honor, has soiled my honor, and it is for me and my clan to do something about that." The Haji stopped and looked at the sergeant again; he still sipped his tea and a vague

smile hovered on his lips and in his eyes. Haji Ibrahim knew he was getting impatient. He concluded his reply.

"In such matters as this, therefore, you have no say at all whatsoever. And tomorrow, early in the morning, you shall return where you came from, and God be with you." The Haji stood up, followed by Omer, and prepared to go to the camel pen to join the others. The sergeant smiled.

"I will be expecting some more positive response from you, Haji," he said as the two brothers walked off. Haji Ibrahim felt troubled; for the first time in his life, he felt he had lost a bout of verbal sparring. He knew that his words did not have any effect on the askari. To the sergeant, they had made little sense. They seemed to bounce back against the cold, exact logic of the young sergeant's little speech.

As he and Omer, who had not said anything to the askaris, joined Ahmed and Ali, he felt a mixture of wrath and frustration--wrath, that type of superior anger reserved for superior beings, and frustration, that gnawing in one's stomach when he discovers the world will not bend to his will. The Haji had these two feelings together for the first time in his life.

"What did they say?" asked Ali as the Haji and Omer sat down. Omer related the story of the confrontation. After he finished no one said anything for a

while; the four men sat somberly, looking down at the fire. Then finally Ahmed spoke.

"Father, Uncle, Brother, you may not like what I have to say, but I think it is the most reasonable solution to the problem." His great brown eyes first looked from one to the other of his elder relatives, and then settled on his father, who had not uttered a word since he came back from the askaris and now watched the fire. There was a slight frown on his brow. Ahmed continued.

"Let us return Fadumo to her husband." All six eyes turned on him; for one full minute no one said anything. The silence that settled on the four men sitting around the fire seemed total; only the soft, rhythmic cud-chewing of the couched camels nearby could be heard.

"By God No!" This was Ali, who jumped to his feet, glaring at Ahmed with wild eyes. "That will never happen!"

"Sit down, Ali," said Omer.

"No, that won't happen, and Ahmed should be ashamed of himself!" Ali fumed.

"Sit down, Ali."

He sat down. There was silence for a while. The Haji had now turned his gaze from Ahmed and looked at the fire.

"Ahmed, do you realize what you are saying?" Omer asked.

"Yes, I do, Uncle."

"And what made you say it?"

"Because I think it is sensible under the circumstances." There was silence again. But Omer began to speak.

"Ahmed, perhaps you're too young or too careless to take the matter seriously, but I want to stress to you that we have never intermarried with the Gobyar clan." He paused for a while; then he continued with a slightly satiric tone, "Ahmed, do you know what honor is?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Well then, it is our honor that we must protect. That's why it is a shame to marry Fadumo to a blacksmith."

"Uncle, frankly, I don't see any shame in it. Honor is not something that breaks like glass. What's good and doesn't harm anybody is honorable. And if we insist on keeping Fadumo and the camels here, only harm will come. The government won't allow us to get away with it." As he said this, Ahmed looked around at the three men, one after the other. Ali seemed too angry to say anything. Omer watched him with a puzzled look. Haji Ibrahim looked at the fire; he seemed sadly impassive. Even his slight frown had

disappeared. Ahmed concluded, "Besides, aren't the Gobyar human beings?"

The Haji now looked up at his son. Their eyes met for a while. Then Ahmed looked away. The Haji rose without saying a word and walked about for a long time. At last he said with a grave tone, "Omer, brother, let the askaris take away the fifteen camels that were brought here yesterday. Also take away the young woman in my hut now. I don't want to see her; she shall not spend the night in my hut. Take her away and send her to her husband early in the morning." He paused and looked at the fire. It had lost its flame now and was dying down. The mound of ashes, the result of burning sticks on the same spot night after night, made a grey contrast to the little knot of half-heartedly glowing coals on top.

The Haji's eyes left the dim fire and settled on his brother. "Take her away," he said once again, and then he walked away.

CHAPTER IV

SHADOWS IN THE OGADEN

"Get down," Gahair heard the driver shout from behind the truck, down on the ground. It was stuck again. He knew it because he hadn't been asleep like the other passengers, and he had heard the old Isuzu engine whine in a futile struggle against the soft Houd soil and then finally give up and die in the mud with a gurgle. The young soldier cursed silently. He cursed the old Isuzu, the driver, the rain. Everything is conspiring to ruin my vacation, he thought.

The others woke up; he couldn't clearly see them under the rough canvas that was tightly stretched over the truck to keep out the rain that had battered them for the past three days, since they had set out from Mogadishu. He couldn't see them clearly from his corner at the rear end of the truck, but he could dimly make out the drab-looking forms of their bodies bundled up close to one another, legs stretched out at odd angles, heads pillowed up against alien shoulders, knees jutting in awkward positions, the whole boxed-up piece of humanity forming a lump, a mass that looked like a load of wet flour sacks.

Except they weren't sacks, they were humans, and they now stirred; they sat up, stretched limbs, yawned.

"Get down," the driver said again from below.

"Where are we, Salah?" a slightly hoarse, slurred voice asked from the front of the truck just behind the boot. The old man, Gahair thought.

"I don't know, Father." There was something reassuring about a son who always said father. Gahair wished his own father were alive.

"Take your head off me," the shrill, rasping voice of a woman said. "You're hurting me." The girl! The girl and that big hulk of a husband. They were the owners of the cargo of Coca-Cola that almost filled the truck, on top of which the people slept. The girl! Gahair smiled to himself, looking in the direction of her voice, narrowing his eyes to see her more clearly in the dim light; a vague outline, almost like an apparition, she sat up delicately, facing him as she touched up her hair and tidied herself. A whiff of eau de cologne and bukhur-al-buhri reached his nostrils, neutralizing for a while the musty, sweaty air.

And then he lost sight of her as the big, brooding shoulders of her husband clumsily heaved themselves up and filled the space between them. "Where are we?" The deep boom sounded like the growl of a wild beast, yet it had a hollow ring to it.

Nobody answered.

The driver opened the rear gate of the truck and



peered in. He was a thin, anemic-looking man, with intelligent, but sad eyes, and a small-upturned nose that reminded Gahair of a monkey. He chewed gat most of the time. "Get down. Let's get the truck out of the mud," he said.

"Where are we?"

"Never mind about that. Let's free the truck," he said.

"I think we're still in the Ogaden," the deep voice of the girl's husband said in despair.

"Yes we are!" Was she mocking him? There was more light in the truck now and Gahair could see her face clearly.

"Don't worry. We're safe from the Abyssinians here." The driver seemed confident. The girl looked at her husband with a slight frown. He seemed unaware of her; his large, protruding, lusterless eyes stared out of the open gate.

Gahair jumped down, his thick-soled military boots digging into the soggy ridge between the ruts with a thud.

Then the girl followed. She stepped down almost as gently and as effortlessly as a cat, straightened the creases of her red-and-green checkered silk dress that went down all the way to the ankles, wrapped her shawl round her waist, and bound her long curly hair

into a tidy knot at the back of her head with a nylon headkerchief--all in a matter of seconds. Small-boned and of average height, she little resembled his cousin, the tall girl he'd long ago lost but could never forget; she would never come up to the stature of Zahra, the girl he'd loved from childhood, with her dark, wholesome and full-blooded, if somewhat raw-boned, loveliness, that loveliness found only in the girls of the countryside.

And yet there was something very attractive about this woman. Was it because of her quick, darting eyes, the blackness of which was deepened by the Kohl on her lashes and brows--a blackness that markedly stood out against the copper-tinged dark brown, narrow face with slightly darker, full lips, a nose that seemed a touch too short, a high forehead? Or was it because of her exceptionally prim and clean appearance, untouched by the muddy surroundings of the last three days? Or was it something about her straight, small-breasted, narrow-waisted figure that looked at once boyish and feminine, at once firm and delicate?

There was an unassuming, matter-of-fact, even austere air about her, and yet when their eyes met, even casually, Gahair felt something well up from deep in him. But he also felt alarmed as he realized that the shy, God-fearing Gahair of four years ago,

who read the Quran in its entirety once a month, would have reacted differently. What had happened since then? A lot.

The girl's husband, who was one of the last to climb down from the truck, caught his eye as he stood a few steps from her. He looked about thirty or thirty-one, five or six years older than her, and his burly, six-foot frame must once have been erect and handsome. Somewhere in there, Gahair could almost see the perfect bearing of a soldier gradually gone to pot, an overgrown, paunchy, chubby-faced, animal who walked with a rubbery-legged, forward-leaning gait and clumsily sat on the ground as if to prevent himself from falling. He showed little of the hunger and hardship of the last three days. Why should he? He knew how to take care of himself at times like these. Anybody who had seen him gorge down food at that last station, two days ago, and then witnessed him find excuses for not working would know why. As Gahair watched him sit there on the wet earth and mop his face with a large, drab handkerchief, he wondered whether this soldier would ever stand up to the Abyssinians and fight it out with them over the Ogaden.

The other passengers, five women and a middle-aged man, were now all, except the old man, on the ground. His son, a boy of about twelve, stood on the step of

the hanging rear gate and kept looking over the Coca-Cola boxes into the truck to make sure his father sat as comfortably as possible.

The women huddled together, except for the girl. They looked gaunt and half-starved. A country woman tried to lull her crying baby; it was useless. The mother put the nipple of her dangling breast into the baby's mouth, but after sucking and tugging at it for a few seconds, the baby started crying again.

"If only I had some milk," the woman said in anguish.

"Will Coca-Cola be of use to you, sister?" the other girl asked.

"You mean that thing in the bottles?"

"It's harmless, sister." The woman shook her head; she sat there, vaguely suspicious, yet dignified and uncomplaining. Gahair looked away from her.

His eyes scanned the vast stretches of the Ogaden around them. The wide, slightly undulating plains, treeless except for an occasional galol that resembled an unfolded umbrella in the distance, and isolated clusters of brush, opened into the distant horizon, its huge coat of elephant grass and shorter dreemo, dry and brown after a long winter, spreading as far as the eye could go, but also scarred in places by bald patches of red earth. There was no water in sight even after

three days of rain. It had all gone under.

Gahair wondered why the owner of the truck risked his truck and the lives of the passengers. It was a shortcut; yes, they all knew that. Instead of taking the long Galkaayo-Garoowe route, the driver had told them they'd cross the Ogaden and cut the journey in half. And the fat owner of the Coca-Cola, though afraid of the Abyssinians, had welcomed the idea, since he'd sell his goods early. But then it rained, and no one could have predicted that. Even if they escaped the murderous Abyssinian soldiers that prowled about in the Ogaden and preyed on civilian trucks running between Mogadishu and Hargeisa, they could not evade the rain. The rain! It was good, and it brought forth grass and life, but it could kill them all now.

Gahair looked up. It wasn't raining now, but the heavy cumulous clouds still tumbled into one another and rolled westward, driven by a breeze. They looked turgid, pregnant with the load they threatened to release any moment. The thunder-ridden load of water would not fall in drops, but would pour down in sheets and flow on the ground in small muddy, frothy rivulets that disappeared into the red earth as soon as the rain let up, as if it wasn't real water, but a ghost, so that anyone who was thirsty before the rain remained thirsty after it.

He scanned the horizon carefully to see if there was any sign of human beings. There was none. It was still too early for the nomadic inhabitants to come back with their herds for the spring grass. They were still at the Abud Waq water holes.

Gahair walked around the truck; the front wheels were almost completely buried and the rear double-tires half-sunk into the mud, the axle touching the ground. The driver's helper, a tough-looking teenager in greasy overalls, was already under the truck, burrowing into the mud and tossing sizable amounts of it behind him, using his hands like shovels. The helper chewed gat and light-heartedly sang his favorite tune:

I once gave my love to a girl,  
She was big and fat and broad,  
She said I was broke and broke my heart,  
And now I give my love to nobody.

"Now let's get busy," said the driver. "Here--"  
He fished two axes out of the tool box and handed one to Gahair. "We'll need brush. Who will take the other?"  
He looked in turn at the middle-aged man and at the girl's husband.

"I'll get it," said the middle-aged country man. They'd picked him up the day before; he was from the Ogaden. He said he was looking for his lost camels and thought they may have strayed in the direction the truck was going. He was dark and stolid looking,

and had a calm brow that seemed unperturbed by what they had been through so far. He never complained, even though he had cut brush three times and helped get the truck out of mud several times before.

The driver did not immediately hand him the axe, but looked at the girl's husband and said, "Will you go this time?"

"I told you, I've never cut a branch in my life. I'm a townsman," he said in a guttural baritone as he went on wiping his face. His wife looked at him with something like disgust on her face.

"Do you want him to cut his leg off?" the young helper said. Everybody laughed. The big man looked at the helper with anger on his face; his young wife looked embarrassed.

"I'll get it," she said and reached out for the axe. The driver looked surprised, but kept the axe in his hand. The big man pouted.

"Why don't you go?" he asked the driver.

"Very good, clear the mud from under the truck."

"I'll go," said the middle-aged man and took the axe. The two men went in different directions in search of brush.

*From where he sat in the shade under the tree, counting the small pebbles he called his camels and*

herding them into the small, round pen made of sand, he could see from the corner of his eye his father's brawny arm rising, falling, rising, falling, the axe tap-tapping into the galol branch, the tap-tap resounding in the hills beyond as a duller thud. The branch cracked, crashed on the ground. His father got down from the tree. Gahair joined him, leaving his imaginary camels behind.

"Let me carry it."

"It's too heavy for you." His father was always curt and firm. The one never said "father," the other never said "son." It was a tacit understanding between them, between the big camelman and warrior and the little camelman, would-be camelman and warrior.

"When will I ever cut branches for the camel pen?"

"You won't have to. You'll be a man of the pen and the book." Gahair smiled.

"When will I start reading the Quran?"

"Soon."

"Are you all ready?" the driver shouted from the front seat.

"Wait," said Gahair. The helper was still arranging the branches of brush in the shallow depression they'd dug under the truck, just in front of the rear double tires.



"Hey, madman don't run over me!" he shouted half-laughing. He still sang his old tune and munched his qat:

I once gave my love to a girl. . .

"Ready," said Gahair as the helper crawled out, and the driver started the engine. The four men, Gahair, the middle-aged country man, the helper, and the girl's husband, now ranged themselves along the sides of the truck, two on each side. The girl joined them, standing between Gahair and her husband. Her silk dress raised somewhat to keep it clean, a pair of smooth, brown shapely legs exposed themselves. The same burgeoning feeling came up again; he forced himself to look away. What's the matter with you? he thought. He could read in his mind's eye: Thou art forbidden to look at a woman who is not. . . .

"Safi," the girl's husband said, looking back at her with loving eyes, "sit down. The men will work on the truck."

"If men can do it, I can do it too," she said curtly.

"Ready?" the driver shouted again.

"Ready!"

"Heave!" he shouted. They pushed as the humming monotone of the engine changed to a higher pitch and the truck lurched forward, but it immediately settled

back.

"Heave!" They pushed again; the engine whined and the truck moved forward again, Coca-Cola boxes creaking. The front wheels came very close to hitting the two planks ready before them; the rear double tires at first made a good purchase on the mass of brush, but now began spinning like a top, spraying a rain of mud and leaves backwards. Gahair felt pain in his stomach; he bit his underlip and drops of sweat broke forth on his face. The girl pushed, exerted tremendous energy. Beyond her he could see a fat head and a big shoulder caked with sweaty dirt. The sharp concentrated will of the one was thrown in relief by the half-hearted fumbblings of the other. Gahair wondered how such a bumbling fool could deserve such a woman.

"Heave!"

*She stood there, his cousin, tall, strong, dark, lovely, spinning the strings for the rugs with dexterity. She stood there, beside the sheep she was tending, the glowing orange disc of the setting sun beyond her, casting her long shadow in his direction. She never looked at him directly, but stole demure and yet amused sidelong glances once in a while. He looked awkward and discomfited in a way only a green young wadad could be; when he asked her, stammering, she*

*only said "I can't," and something in him snapped. And when he once again stammered and said, "Can you. . . Can you give me any reason?" she answered, "Gahair, you're like a brother to me." But that wasn't the reason and he knew the real reason soon enough. The very next week she eloped with another man, a rude, ignorant camelman. He'd never forgiven nor forgotten.*

They made one last desperate attempt to get the truck out, but it dug itself fast into the mud.

"It's useless," said the driver, killing the engine. It sat there, the truck, hopeless and helpless like an old camel hamstrung under a too heavy burden. No, worse than an old camel, Gahair thought. At least you could kill a camel and eat its meat. This infernal machine was the work of devils and infidels. It dumped these people in the middle of nowhere.

Gahair looked around at the passengers. There was despair on the faces of the women who still huddled together; the baby had stopped crying and was fast asleep, nipple in mouth.

Gahair's eyes automatically sought the girl; she had for the first time sat down, on a dry tuft of grass, and held her chin in her hand. He kept looking at her.

"What're we going to do now?" That was her husband,

who lay flat on his back, his broad face covered with sweat, his huge belly heaving. He was breathless and looked miserable.

"I know what we'll do," said the helper, laughing. "We'll cook a delicious dinner and then smack our lips."

Everybody laughed. The big man sat up, his eyes bloodshot, his hands clenched. The girl looked at him, embarrassed, but vaguely amused.

"Shut up, you!" the driver shouted at his helper. The helper kept on laughing, and then broke into his tune:

I once gave my. . .

The old man cleared his throat and called his son.

"Yes, father," the boy said, climbing up on the truck. The boy was thin, wiry, weatherbeaten, and never once complained of being either hungry or thirsty. He had told Gahair his father was a famous warrior and had two hundred camels. They had visited an elder brother who had been to school in Mogadishu because their father was ill.

"Why aren't you going to school?" Gahair had asked him.

"Me? I don't want to. Schoolboys are softies," he said and Gahair smiled. "I want to be a camelman like my father."

"Where's the driver?" the old man asked him. The driver heard and climbed up the truck.

"Young man, do you know where we are?"

"We're still in the Ogaden. Somewhere between Eel Deer and Galadi," said the driver. The old man now came to the rear of the truck and started to climb down slowly. The driver offered to help but he declined; he was so old that the skin on his face and neck was wrinkled, and his beard, now hennaed to golden yellow, hadn't a single black hair in it. It was clear, however, that he had been an extraordinarily powerful man, and even now the outline of the once strong muscles showed on his arms and chest.

"Between Eel Deer and Galadi," he repeated the words looking around. The sun was about to go down beyond the horizon. He shook his head and began scratching the ground with his cane.

"Young man, in my day, when people knew nothing of the infidel's machines, we would loot camels from near Galadi and cover the distance back in less than two days without eating or drinking. I don't know what has come over men now." He shook his head. He kept silent for a while, stroking his beard, apparently thinking.

"Young man," he said at last, "we haven't eaten for over two days and those women are very hungry,

especially that young woman with the child. Why not send two strong men to Galadi to bring back food and water. And in the meantime, the ground will get dry-- if God wills." The old man peered at the men around him, one by one. Nobody uttered a word, and the silence seemed to add to the thickness of the atmosphere.

"I think Galadi is too far," the middle-aged country man said.

"It isn't and you know it," retorted the old man. "What's come over men, anyway?"

"I think he's right, uncle," said the driver. "It's too far for pedestrians to go there and return. I have another idea, however." He looked at the girl and her husband. "If we can unload the truck. . . I mean if we leave half the Coca-cola here. . ." he paused and kept looking at the couple, first at the husband and then the wife.

"I think that's a good idea," Gahair said.

"By God, no!" the girl's husband boomed. "We've invested 5,000 shillings on that cargo!"

"We'll come back for it when we get to Galadi," said the driver.

"No, my Coca-Cola will stay where it is," he shouted, standing up, pouting.

"Hey, what will you eat then, big man?" the helper said.

"If you say one more word, by God, you'll see what happens!" He looked at the young helper with bloodshot eyes. The girl stood up and said, "We're going to leave the Coca-Cola." Her words were firm and final.

"But Safi--"

"We're going to leave it, Farah, and that's that," she said, walking briskly towards the truck. "Let's start unloading. We don't want to starve here." Her husband eyed her, mouth gaping. The young helper laughed; the old man shook his head.

"What's coming over men?" he said.

"Stop!" said the driver. "Do you hear that?" Gahair held in mid-air the box he was handing to the countryman. On the other side of the truck the driver stopped unloading the boxes and stood up straight. The young helper neatly piled the boxes on the ground, whistling.

"Stop, God take you!"

Everybody listened in complete silence. There it was indisputably clear. The deep, monotonous boom-boom coming from perhaps ten or fifteen miles away, straight ahead of them. The sound had a chilling pervasiveness, seeming to sink into the depths of the red, saturated Ogaden earth, reverberating back up to

the cloud-ridden sky, diffusing itself in the air like the oncoming dusk, casting a gradually increasing, engulfing presence around the group of men, women, and children.

For one whole minute, nobody said a word.

"Abyssinians!" It was the girl's husband. He jumped to his feet with extraordinary agility, looked to his left, then to his right, and then ran in the direction they had come from, all before any of the others uttered a single word.

The women now stood up and nervously looked about; the child started crying.

"What shall we do?" one of the women said.

"They'll kill my child," the country woman said, crying. Gahair jumped down from the truck and joined the driver and the other men who still listened. He noticed the girl looked after her husband, and he wondered what she felt now.

"Farah!" she shouted. Her shrill, metallic command had an immediate effect. He stopped and looked back. "Come back this minute!" He didn't say a word, but very slowly walked back. The girl sat down, put her head in her open hands, and broke into silent sobbing. The young helper laughed.

"What shall we do?" asked the driver.

"Do you think we can get it out of the mud?" the



countryman asked.

"Could that be a Somali civilian truck," Gahair said.

"Are you serious? They're not fewer than ten trucks and armored cars," said the driver.

In his mind's eye Gahair could see them, Kaki-clad, drab, hungry-looking and ill-tempered; he could see them, as he had in Jigjiga, where he had been studying the Quran ten years ago; he could see them cackling in their gibberish of a tongue, haggling over the price of some item in the market, churlishly dragging a poor Somali man they were falsely accusing of some wrongdoing; he could see them now, helmeted, bayonets at the ready, packed in their GMC trucks and half-tracks, the long column slowly creeping along, splattering the mud. He wished he could meet them headlong in different circumstances, as a fully equipped soldier in the midst of his attacking company. Wasn't that why he had joined the army last year after all? To fight those Abyssinians? Wasn't that why he put aside his book and pen, his Quran, to fight those infidels who took his land, to fight them, and maybe become a distinguished fighter, a hero? He hated to meet them like this, in such a hopeless situation. He looked at the little monkey face of the driver; he burned inside, wanted to sock him on the jaw. Why did he

expose these poor men and women to this danger, the little--

"Hey, listen!" the helper said.

"They've stopped," the driver said. The girl's husband joined them. Gahair couldn't see his face clearly in the dark, but he felt his quick breathing and nervous looking-about. He had a vague feeling of nausea.

"Do you hear anything?" the driver said after a while.

"I think they've stopped at the main cross-roads," said the countryman. "They sometimes lie in ambush."

"No, I think they've crossed in the direction of Warder," said the driver. "But I am not sure."

"We must go back," the girl's husband said.

"What do you mean, go back? Where?" Gahair turned and faced the big man.

"They're going to kill us, those Abyssinians. We must go back." The feeling of nausea in Gahair's stomach increased; he had an urge to spit to get rid of it.

"Look. We're not going back. We're going forward." He turned to the driver and said, "Start the engine."

"But we can't move on. It's too dangerous," the driver protested.

"Look, sir," said the girl's husband, touching Gahair on the shoulder. He spat out the English word

"sir" and gave it an emphatic edge. "We're going back, whether you like it or not. We're not risking our lives." Gahair was surprised. The two men, one tall, big and brooding, the other almost as tall, erect and well-built, faced each other in the semi-dark, foreheads almost touching, fists clenched American-style. By God, I could kill a coward and it would be good, Gahair thought, a stinking maggot of a coward. . . .

*The shadow approached, long and dark. He couldn't see the man it belonged to, the man who stealthily, partly hidden by the elephant grass, came nearer and nearer to the camel pen with the intent of rustling them; but he could see, from where he lay flat on his belly beside the fencing, loaded rifle in hand, could clearly see the long shadow cast by the almost full moon as it got longer and longer, in the clearing beside the bush. And the young student of religion slowly raised the gun he'd never fired before, the gun that had belonged to his father only ten days ago, before he was killed in the raid against the Guleed clan; he raised it, his elbows on the ground, and trained it on the approaching shadow, and he could hear the thump-thump, thump-thump of his own heart as it gradually picked up pace, quickened and got louder and louder in his ears, like a drum, and his hands were*

*unsteady, and he had a lump in his throat, but he trained the gun at the shadow and then gradually shifted the sights to where the shadow was coming from, where he thought he glimpsed the vague outline of a head and shoulder, and then he pressed the trigger, but it wouldn't go off and he saw he was trembling, his heart thump-thumping ever louder, and the shadow stopped and he pressed the trigger and something within him said "Thou Shalt Not Kill a Muslim. . ." and he remembered the fires of hell and then the shadow moved again and his father emerged out of it and chided him "Thou art a failure. . . Gahair, thou art a failure. . .," and he pressed the trigger, hard, and the deafeningly loud bang left him numb, and the crack echoed in the Ogaden wilderness. And then later, his uncle, who had been on the other side of the hamlet, eyed him strangely and said, "Your father would've had his man."*

The fist that darted out was fast, but not fast enough; it only grazed the fat man's ear, and then something stunned him, and the next thing he knew he was flat on his back and the big coward was on top of him. Somehow he rolled over and was throwing fists into the struggling, dark heavy mass below him when someone tore him off and his arms were held back, and the big man was also pulled in the other direction, and everybody

was talking and shouting.

"You're behaving like children," the old man said after a time. There was an element of sadness in his old voice. "Maybe all city people are children," he added, with a distinct note of disgust.

Nobody said anything for a while; it seemed as if the fight between the two men settled the other more serious problem by default, leaving it suspended in mid-air.

Then the old man spoke again. "Young man," he said, addressing the driver, "how far is the cross-roads from here?"

"About fifteen miles."

"I don't know what you mean by miles, but how long would it take a man to reach there and come back?"

"He'd be back early tomorrow morning."

"Young men," he said addressing no one in particular now, "If I were as strong as I once was, I would go without being asked to." His words were slow and measured. "But I am not. So you have to send one or two from among you to check the crossroads."

"I'll go," said the countryman.

"I'll go too," Gahair said.

The late afternoon sky was clear, without a single cloud, the blue deep and rich. And the truck, now not

covered by canvas, raced across hard and firm land, hurtling towards Hargeisa, and the strong breeze created by the speeding truck left a cool and pleasant sensation on Gahair's face. The events of yesterday seemed strangely distant, like a bad dream of childhood. The Ogaden behind them, they had crossed the border without running into the Abyssinians, who had passed on, half-tracks and all, in the direction of Wardeer, their main base. The passengers were refreshed at Galadi, where the old man and his son, the young woman with the baby, and the countryman who was looking for the camels had been left behind. The rest of the passengers sat in relative comfort now that there was more space.

In the front of the truck, the women passengers chatted amongst themselves. On the opposite side, the girl and her husband spoke in low tones, and the girl laughed softly at some quip her husband made. Gahair stole a furtive glance at them every once in a while, but now there was no welling up of feeling. Now he felt nothing. He looked elsewhere and began to forget.

He sat up and looked over the boot to have a good view of the scene ahead. They were passing through wooded country and the road, straight as a pin, parted the dark green of the vegetation.

He thought about Hargeisa, the town he considered his home, at the end of the road, and the good rest he would have tomorrow, the relatives and friends he would meet there. He thought of the clean streets, the streetlights, the cool water, the cars, the beautiful girls.

The road got narrower and narrower, the tall galol trees and the underbrush thicker and thicker. The driver slowed down. Gahair sat back in a more relaxed position, closed his eyes, pursued his dream. Then: a sudden jerk, a squeaking of tires, a creaking of wood, a clanging of bottles, a dead halt. He caught a wooden beam on the side of the truck, held on tightly so as not to fall, struggled to his feet, to see what the matter was. There, right across the narrowest spot of the road, lay a huge, knotty log and the front tires were less than two feet away from it. Almost at the same instant, the figure of a man, grey and ghostly in the shadow of the huge galol trees, darted out of the underbrush, stood in front of the truck, shouted "Halt!" training his automatic rifle at the driver. Another figure approached from the other side of the road and covered the passengers in the truck. Both had covered their heads and faces, the only visible parts their eyes and the bridges of their noses. No one uttered a single word or moved

a finger for an entire minute. Then the gunman in front spoke to the driver.

"Now," he said slightly signalling with his automatic, "get down, quick!" The driver did as he was told and stood beside the road.

"Hey," he shouted to the other, "get those people down." In a minute, everybody was on the ground.

"Go, all of you, to that clearing."

Gahair thought of what to do.

"Don't try anything ridiculous."

There was nothing he could do.

"Now, that's good. Listen very carefully. We don't want to harm you, but we will if we have to." There was something cold as steel in the clear, staccato Somali he gave his little lecture in, something cold and deadly. Could he have felt the same had the Abyssinians caught them? "All we want," the criminal coolly announced, "is your money. Every cent of it."

Half an hour later, as the truck and its cargo of goods and humans started the last leg of their journey, the passengers, too stunned to speak to one another, Gahair, in a dull, groping afterthought that seemed more like the hazy pre-dusk glow of evening than the golden pre-dawn awakening of morning, tried to understand what had happened to them, to him, to



define it, to place it somewhere in the experiences of his life. He couldn't.

CHAPTER V

THE QAT-EATERS

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,  
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;  
And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,  
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.

--Tennyson

Jama closed the thick ledger book after studying its contents for the second time that day and looked out the window of the store. His eyes scanned the wide expanse of grassy downs and settled on the hills beyond, their jagged peaks taunting the sky. They were shrouded in the deep, rich blue of the oceans. An eagle soared high above the downs, forming a small black speck against the hazy, cloudless sky of Hargeisa. Jama had always been fascinated by the sheer abruptness of these hills that defied the natural smoothness of the horizon. One of these days you must climb up those hills, he thought. He'd like to see what the town looked like from such a height.

The store was large and full. The soft glow of bulbs that weren't turned off even during the day failed to dispel the dark shadows cast by row after row, rack after rack, of provisions over the narrow aisles that crisscrossed the government agency warehouse. To his right, Jama could see sacks of rice, tons of it, lying one above the other, resting against

the grey wall, almost touching the ceiling. On the opposite side of the aisle, stacks of sticky, dark brown bags of dates were arranged neatly, narrowing into the distance until they were abruptly stopped by another aisle, beyond which appeared another wall of boxes, tea boxes. Toward the left, cartons of powdered milk made a tight square knot which quickly gave way to a mass of canvas cases containing sugar or flour. Over in the corner, an odd assortment of tinned food--fruit, fish, butter, cooking oil--shared two huge tables with fresh produce, and under the tables lay several plastic containers packed with charcoal. And beside them, near the door, stood a trolley heaped with sacks of sorghum, half-blocking the entrance.

Jama sat in his corner, wedged between the small desk and the huge filing cabinet, his eyes running over the rows and rows of provisions, looking into the aisles, his nostrils taking in a combination of musty and pungent odors.

He yawned, stretched his arms. Oh God, he thought, gadiro, the hangover of qat. If only he could stop chewing. Of course today he would chew; he and his cousin Osman would discuss the forthcoming wedding. That wedding! It made him feel bad to think about it. Sureer had waited for it so long. Well, he would have to discuss it over qat with Osman today. Besides

there was that other thing to attend to. So in one hour, he would be seated amid pillows. And then he would feel cozy and comfortable. But gat, that, that--what should he call it? If only he knew how to curse, how to use foul language, like Osman. Osman really knew how to curse. Stop! So, you're acting like Osman, he thought. Look at you. But that drug really deserved to be banned.

He looked at his watch. It was 12:45, fifteen minutes before he would get off for the day.

He opened the top drawer to put the thick ledger book in it, then stopped in the middle of the act, and instead opened the book again. He leafed through it until he came to the page he was looking for, and studied the figures for a while. Everything perfectly all right, he thought. And this afternoon he would settle the rest of the matter. His lips parted in an uneasy smile. Then the smile slowly disappeared and gave way to a small sigh. The young clerk looked out of the window, scanning the horizon once again. He closed the book, put it in the top drawer of the old desk, stepped outside quickly, locked the heavy front door with a loud creak. He walked brusquely, feeling somehow relieved as the bright sunshine greeted him, washing away the stuffy dinginess of the store as well as the hangover.

As he crossed the courtyard, Jama heard the tired gurgle of the old Series II Landrover. Osman was punctual, he thought. He had to be. A man on his way to the gat market couldn't afford to be late. And it was nice of the Public Works Department to allow Osman to keep the old Landrover for his own use after work in the afternoon. Otherwise how could they walk three miles to that gat market?

"Hello, old boy." Osman's loud, husky voice always startled him somewhat.

"Hello, Osman," Jama said, as he got into the Landrover. Osman drove the car, which left behind a trail of light brown dust.

"Who do we go to for the gat today?"

"I think maybe Mohamoud. Old Fadumo has been bothering me lately with her duns. The old hag," said Jama. Almost immediately he regretted saying "hag."

"Mohamoud? The bum has been making faces too. He won't give us gat on credit."

"I prefer him. Besides, I hope to pay him today-- I promised I'd pay him this afternoon."

"This afternoon? Where're you going to get the money from? Will you sneeze it up? Payday is ten days away." Osman looked at him with small eyes whose white was no longer white but had turned reddish brown with gat hangover, sleeplessness, cigarette smoke.

"Look out!" The old car screeched, skidded over the bumpy dirt road, and came to a halt with a protesting gurgle, swallowed up in a cloud of dust. The flock of goats and sheep went into flight, crossed over to the green to their left. Osman sighed.

"God kill you all!" he shouted after the flock and turned to Jama. "Did you see that?" he said, smiling with relief and baring a set of yellow fangs with two gaps. He remembered the small, even, gleaming teeth of the young Osman he had known a long time ago.

Jama also smiled, shook his head. Who said gat eaters were not reckless lunatics?

Osman shouted threats at the worried ten-year-old dhorey, the little girl tending the sheep, her small fuzzy knot of hair standing on top of an otherwise clean-shaven head.

"Hey, Dhorey," he yelled, "don't graze the flock near the road, God take you!"

The little girl first seemed to be afraid, but as they drove on, Jama looked back and saw her pick a small stone and throw it after them. Osman saw it in the mirror too. He said, "Do you see what she is doing? By Allah, I'll break her neck, the little fool!"

As he started to slow down, Jama said laughing, "You're out of your mind, Osman. Don't you see she's just a kid?"

"So what? You know the kids of today are impudent."

"We'll be late for the fresh gat."

"You're right," Osman agreed, picking up speed, driving on the corrugated road with the professional dexterity of an expert on bad terrain.

Five minutes later they approached the main road, the single-lane tarmac that led downtown, a few old Opel, Volga taxis, Leyland and Nissan trucks crawling along with loud rumbling, sending up a haze of exhaust.

Usually, it took them only a short time to get from the store to the gat market in the center of town. But they'd probably be a bit late for the fresh gat today.

"By the way," Osman said, "I've told the old girl to cook dinner for both of us today."

"Oh, have you? I'm sure I won't do justice to it. This gat--if only I could stop chewing it!"

"Why should you? Everybody uses it." Jama looked at him, studying his face, dry skin taut against a bony forehead and cheekbones, then quickly descending into hollow cheeks and eye-sockets. A bushy moustache guarded over blackened lips and an angular jaw with a week-old-half-grey growth abruptly gave way to a long, thin, scaly vulture neck, its Adam's Apple protruding.

"You look like you are forty-five years old, not



thirty." Osman looked back at him.

"Maybe, but you don't look much younger either."  
He grinned. Jama didn't say anything but silently disagreed. Of course not. He didn't look that old and he knew it. As a matter of fact, Osman seemed ten years older than he was, although they were born in the same year. How could he be like Osman while he didn't chew as much qat as those addicts did? Those people must have tough teeth, chewing leaves every day of their lives, while their shirts had soiled collars and their trousers were unchanged for ten days. By God, he wasn't one of them. Otherwise what was the use of his education? Nonsense. He wasn't. But he should break this habit one of these days. Completely. He would first gradually reduce it, and then stop altogether.

Osman swerved the Landrover to avoid a head-on collision with the approaching red-and-orange Volga cab and almost instantly began angling ahead of the old truck to the right. That wasn't easy with the creaking Landrover, but Osman managed.

"You drive like a qat seller," Jama said.

"Don't you remember I was nearly one?" Yes he did; long ago when they were both younger and Jama was a student at Ahmed Gurrey Secondary and Osman unable to go to school because his father, an old camelman,

wouldn't let him. That was long before Osman got his job. He had held a lot of little odd jobs. He was even a petty thief for a while. Then he became a gat-seller's helper.

Osman now drove more slowly because pedestrians crossed the windswept streets and a policeman with a greenish turban wrapped around a tall, pointed hat directed traffic with white-gloved hands from the intersection.

The policeman blew the whistle and walked in strides towards a truck. "Hey you, where are you looking, God blind you?" he yelled at the driver. "Can't you see it is not your turn?" The driver said something and shifted to reverse.

They turned right. Jama noticed the four-story police building with its ring of thick concrete outside wall and iron gates; beside it, a row of low tin-roofed, one-story groceries and draperies abruptly fell away in an almost continuous march along both sides of the narrow street.

He could see two policemen holding a man wearing a green, white-striped singlet, dirty and rent in several places, and a soiled pair of jeans, the legs of which hung in long, loose strips that flabbily danced around his ankles as they marched him towards the police station. Probably a petty thief, Jama thought.

He could hear the commotion coming from the qat market; men with wrapped bundles in their arms streamed back from there.

Two minutes later, Osman parked the Landrover and they both stepped out to join the mass of humanity gathered in the square. Jama always hesitated for one or two moments before giving himself up to this crowd, always with eager encouragement from his cousin.

The crowd! What a spectacle, Jama thought. The men weren't really one big mass, but formed tightly-knit groups, each forming a ring around a huge, rough, square wooden box with the owner standing closest to the box, guarding over the qat and the drawer containing the money, encouraging the customers to buy his fresh qat of today, not his neighbor's barihi of yesterday. Hundreds of these boxes lying just a few feet from one another composed the qat market. Teenage boys stood on boxes and called at their loudest to sing the praise of this qat or that.

"War hayaay! Come on world! Here is the freshest qat in the world!" one said. "War hayaay! Come on world!"

"Don't get fooled!" retorted another in a piercing yell. "Don't waste your money! Choose the best!"

"Only fifteen shillings. Only fifteen. Here!

You can have a bundle for fifteen only!" Jama was always both annoyed and saddened by these screaming youths, with their wild eyes and their uncombed hair. He looked at each one in turn, and then his eyes turned to Osman before him.

They edged through the sellers and buyers to find Mohamoud, who sold his gat on the other side of the square. Jama was pushed aside by a hefty gat seller who jostled through the crowd apparently in a hurry somewhere.

"Get out of the way, you!" he thundered as he pushed on. Jama shook his head and struggled on.

They found Mohamoud. He was serving a group of twenty who surrounded the box; Osman wormed himself into the group, Jama held back.

"Come on," said Osman. He already had a bundle in his hand. Jama came closer and looked over the shoulder of the short man before him.

"Hey Jama, you can't see anything from there. Come on in here," Osman said, almost shouting. "Hey you," he said pushing the man nearest him, "make way, make way." Jama wedged himself into the space. What a life! he thought. If I weren't a fool, I wouldn't be here.

Here was the gat, tied bundles of it, each bundle made up of tens of small, slender dark brown branches

tapering off into tender, delicate shoots clothed with fresh, dewy green leaves, soft to the touch, glossy to the eye, from which emanated that slightly grassy, yet strangely pungent and gratifying aroma--aroma that suggested clear springs, cool mountain air, drops of rain on a sunny afternoon. The bundles, scores of them, were spread out on broad banana leaves to keep them clean, wrapped up to shade them from the sun.

Jama's eyes drifted to the faces of the men absorbed in the magic commodity. A middle-aged man with greying temples and a clean-shaven face held up three bundles and examined them closely, spreading the rustling branches between his fingers. To his right two young men, not much older than twenty, accumulated a small heap of seven or eight bundles together. One of them wrapped up the bundles carefully in the banana leaf while the other got a wad of notes out of his pocket.

"How much?" he asked Mohamoud.

"Seven bundles, 140 shillings."

"But that's too high."

"No, it is not too high. That's the price everywhere today," answered Mohamoud, a portly man of about forty-five.

"Come on, we can't pay that much. Here's 120."

"Look here, why don't you go somewhere else?" The young man mumbled something to his friend and then reluctantly counted 20 shilling notes on the counter.

The middle-aged man put two bundles aside and returned the third, saying, "This is not fresh. Give me another one."

"All my gat is fresh."

"I don't want this. Give me some others, or I know where to buy better gat."

Mohamoud glared at him for a while, but pushed several bundles to him. The man chose two more and paid without further bargaining.

Over to the left, a short withered man with long unkempt hair sticking out in small curly spirals, and veins running down the temples and arms, grabbed a bundle. He caressed it, smelled it, examined it. He studied it with small, deep-set eyes around which played a strange smile--the kind of smile that expressed a sense of deep wonder, reverence, yearning. The man put the bundle aside and picked another, and then another. Jama noticed that Mohamoud was following the wiry man's actions.

"Hey you. What do you want, gat or something else?" Mohamoud pointed a finger at the little man.

"What? You son of a whore."

"Wallaahi, I'll break your neck!" Mohamoud shook

his clenched fist at him. "Don't touch my gat with your dirty fingers again. I know your type. You don't want to buy anything, you're just soiling my gat."

"Come and break my neck, you--" retorted the little man, swinging a club and lunging forward at Mohamoud. Two men immediately grabbed him. Jama and another customer together seized Mohamoud.

"Calm down, Mohamoud," said Jama.

"Get him out of there. By Allah, I don't want to see him!"

"You just wait," the little man hissed as he was led away into the crowd. "I am not who I am supposed to be if I don't cut your throat."

Jama and Osman examined some bundles and chose six, wrapping the banana leaves around them. Jama turned to the gat owner, who had now calmed down, and said, "As I said yesterday, I'll pay you this afternoon. Please come down to my house after 6." Mohamoud collected cash from the other buyers, who roughly competed to be served first, and casually put the money away in the drawer. Jama caught a glimpse of the mass of five-, ten-, twenty-, and hundred-shilling notes lying in a confused manner in the drawer. Here and there also the change was scattered, hundreds of sparkling silver coins.

Mohamoud kept silent for a while and then said,

"Young man, I wouldn't trust anyone else all this time the way I have trusted you. Don't disappoint me."

"I won't," Jama said. He had a feeling of cold emptiness inside. This is degrading, he thought, and silently vowed he would stop chewing gat one day.

Jama and Osman once again fought their way through the milling crowd of men who, in their eagerness, resembled a herd of thirsty camels rushing to their accustomed water hole. He heard the peddling boys announce: "Soo dhoyey! Soo dhoyey!"

"The newest gat has arrived," said Osman craning his long neck in the direction of the humming Landrovers. Jama stood on tiptoe and saw four Series 3 Landrovers come to a skidding halt at the edge of the square. Almost half the crowd either turned their eyes expectantly or ran towards the Landrovers. Six or seven men caked with brown dust alighted from each car and unloaded heavy sacks, rushing each sack to a different box--all in a matter of seconds. What efficiency, Jama thought.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Osman.

"Woman, is the dinner ready? Let's have it. Quick," Osman said when he and Jama stepped inside.

"It will be ready in a few minutes, Osman," replied his wife, Ardo, meekly. "Please sit down,



Brother Jama." She pointed to one of the two chairs that lay in the small but clean room that served for a living, dining, and guest room. Osman slammed the door. Jama looked at him and saw he was upset about the delay. Apparently he would have liked to say one or two unpleasant things to the girl, whom he had married in the country two years before, but he wouldn't dare to mistreat her while Jama was a guest in the house. He slouched on the other chair, his mouth pouting in a huff, his normally dry, taut forehead reluctantly creasing into a frown, his narrowed eyes glued to the six bundles of qat which Jama had placed at the corner of the table. Jama had the urge to smile in amusement, to shake his head in despair, and to ask him why he was making a fool of himself--all at once.

About ten minutes later, Ardo emerged from the small kitchen carrying a bowl of ground sorghum in one hand and a jug of milk in the other. She laid them carefully on the table and said, "I am sorry Brother Jama. I had planned to prepare a dish of broiled mutton and rice, but it was too expensive." She smiled apologetically.

"It's fine, Ardo. Don't worry about it. I am sure the food you cook is always superb."

"What's superb about ground sorghum?" said Osman, still sulking. Jama again had an urge to tell him to

shut up and say "Why didn't you give her more money if you expected something better than sorghum?" He stared at him for a while. At last he turned to Ardo, who apprehensively eyed her husband. Jama said reassuringly, "Don't mind him Ardo. I mean it when I say your dish is excellent."

Ardo went back to the kitchen and came back with a glass of rich brown ghee. She set it beside Jama and retreated again. Jama smothered the sorghum with the ghee and, after saying, "Bismillahi, in the Name of God," started to eat with the wooden spoon on his side of the bowl. Osman, who now looked calmer, presently joined in saying grace and began eating with the other spoon. The sorghum, soft and pasty, sprinkled with cumin and pepper, would be a feast to Jama were it not for his bad appetite. He ate a few more mouthfuls in deference to Ardo, drank a glass of camel milk. After wiping his mouth with the small, clean, brown towel on the table, he said, "Thanks be to God," and pushed away the dish towards Osman.

"What do you mean, stopping eating?" said Osman, pushing back the dish.

"I can't eat anymore, thanks."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. But it was a good dish," said Jama. Osman,

who apparently didn't have any more appetite than Jama did, also wiped his mouth and called Ardo to remove the bowl. Ardo looked at the bowl with slightly widened eyes but took away the food without saying anything. Osman looked at his old West End watch.

"Two o'clock. Let's go," he said, rising. "It may be late for chewing if we wait any longer." He grabbed the gat and started for the door; with his loose-jointed, gawky gait, his long dangling arms, his oil-stained baggy kakhi trousers and dull grey shirt, and his scaly neck, Osman presented a sight to be both pitied and laughed at.

He rose too but didn't follow Osman immediately. Ardo came back from the kitchen and watched her husband. She wanted to say something to him but from the harassed look on her once pretty face, Jama could see she was afraid to talk lest her husband explode. Osman halted at the door and looked back.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Osman," said Ardo hesitantly, "Bulaleh the shopkeeper says he won't give me anything on credit. He says we must clear the old bill."

"Well, woman, what do you want me to do? Put myself up for sale?" Ardo looked down. Jama felt anger slowly rise up in him.

"Listen," he said, "can't you for once say something respectable?"

"Talk to her and not to me," Osman retorted. "She knows payday is ten days away, and yet she is telling me the same old story of credits and bills." He began to pout. "As if I could dig up money from the ground."

Jama shook his head and turned to Ardo and said, "Look, sister, I'll cover the bill. Tomorrow, God willing." He walked towards the door but again turned to Ardo and said, "Ardo, it was a good dish. Only I didn't have enough appetite for it. Thank you and peace be with you."

"Are you coming or not? We don't have all day." This was Osman who was already in the Landrover. Jama stepped out and joined him. He said, "You don't deserve a woman like her, Osman, and you know that."

"By Allah, I don't understand you, Jama. She knows as well as you do that I don't have any money at this time of the month."

"Maybe you'd have some if you didn't spend half your salary on gat and other women."

"By Allah, I have never seen anybody like you. Why do you speak like you are a saint? You chew as much gat as I do and go after whores too."

"Well," Jama said, defending himself, "first of

all, I don't chew gat every day as you do and secondly, I don't have a family to worry about."

"By Allah, you're strange. What do you mean, not married? Your fiancée has been waiting for the promised wedding for two years now, Jama," Osman said sarcastically.

"So, family or no family, it doesn't make much difference. We both spend money on gat and we both have women waiting for us somewhere." Jama didn't say anything. Osman had touched the sore spot again.

Wedding. Two years. If only his father hadn't lost all his money. And what was the use of his education if he couldn't marry in a respectable way anyway? Of course Osman was talking nonsense, although to tell the truth he spent his money on gat and occasionally on women. Maybe one third of his salary, maybe a bit more. Maybe close to one half but not quite. At least he was going to have that other money this afternoon and then things would look brighter. Nobody would know about it. This was only the second time he had done this and nobody had found out anything the first time. Besides, was that really anybody's business so long as the figures in the book were straight? But, that wedding, he had waited so--

"Did you say we're going to sit at your house?"

This was Osman, who now sped up as he got the Landrover

out of the narrow alleyways of Qudha Dheer into broader Guul Street.

"Yes," said Jama.

Osman looked at him with a broad smile and said, "It would be a fine day to visit those girls, you know."

"Listen, Osman. I don't want to go to those places anymore. I don't want you to talk about them anymore. Please."

"All right. I won't, but are you sure?" Osman still smiled. Jama looked at him but didn't say anything. He was feeling impatient but he didn't quite know whether he was upset over Osman's biting little jokes or over himself. He said calmly, "Let's go to my house. I have an appointment there." Osman looked at him with inquiring eyes.

Jama thought about "those girls." If only Osman would stop tempting him to visit them! He felt a mixture of feelings whenever he went there and sat with them to chew qat--a mixture of desire, disgust, pity, anger. The last time he was there he secretly vowed he'd never go back there again. He hoped to keep his pledge this time. He must. Otherwise, how could he face that girl who embarrassed him so?

"By the way," he had said, "why are you here-- I mean, you know, why aren't you a good girl?"

"What do you mean?" she said casually.

"Well--"

"You mean why am I a prostitute?" she said, looking up with slightly amused eyes as she snuggled against him and fed him with small leaves.

"I guess--I guess so," he stammered. She giggled and said, "You men are strange." She resumed chewing and feeding him. She was about twenty and her soft features and large eyes gave her an aura of innocence.

"You know you're a good girl," he said.

She looked up at him again and said, "You know, Jama, you're boring." Then she giggled, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Osman and the other girl also laughed. Jama felt cold and miserable. From then on, he decided not to go there again.

Why didn't he stop associating with Osman, anyway? He was educated, had a better future after all. Osman was his cousin all right. But that was another matter. He was different and he should act differently.

The two cousins were seated in Jama's house on a soft mattress, pillows neatly placed on each other, two at each end, so the two men reclined comfortably. On the floor in front of them, near the edge of the mattress, lay a thermos of hot black tea, a large jug

of cool water, two glasses. Near them stood a tape recorder playing "The Camel and the Water Well." The bundles of qat, three for each man, were now spread out on the banana leaves, a lush, moist, green mass.

Osman looked carefully about, checking the items lying around one by one--the jug of water and glasses, the thermos, the tape recorder, the two packets of cigarettes. Finally his eyes settled on the qat, and he gave a sigh--a deep sigh accompanied by a broad smile. His eyes acquired a strange, almost mystic, luster, as they looked on at the qat. Jama watched him; he, too, sighed, smiled, shook his head.

Osman carefully cut the strings tying the bundles, pulled out a long, slender branch, held it up.

"This is the queen," he said, smoothing it tenderly, "and I'll start the prayers with it." He held up his hands, branch in hand, and started:

O Allah,  
We haven't robbed anybody for it,  
We haven't bought it with bad money,  
We haven't bought it with stolen money,  
It is all our clean money, O Allah.

Osman snapped off the delicate slightly swaying shoot with his fingers, and put it in his mouth, slowly starting with the tip, gradually taking in more of it, the crunch, crunch, crunch, audible to Jama as the first bite of the magic herb burst between Osman's



teeth and released its juice--juice that was mildly bitter and alkaline, yet laced with another taste, elusive, impossible to recognize, but deeply satisfying. Osman swallowed the juice, chewed, swallowed, chewed, sucked in the last bit of juice, swallowed. He cleared his throat; it was more like a grunt.

Jama joined in and the two cousins started chewing in earnest, as leaf after delicate leaf, shoot after tender shoot, found its way to their mouths. The juice gone, what remained was the cud, a mashed mess of green matter stuffed and stored in one cheek; the cheek gradually grew into a bulge.

Osman poured out some tea, sipped, lighted a cigarette. He drew at it, blew out smoke, and for the first time since starting chewing said, "You know gat is the food of saints." There was a light green veneer on the normal yellow of his gapped teeth. "It was discovered by Prophet Yahia in a deep well, you know." Jama smiled. Osman took another drag. "You don't believe me. But ask religious men. They love gat, you know."

"You're right, but that doesn't make it more respectable." He knew Osman would get garrulous now. And he himself was already in the proper mood. As he bit, munched, and listened to the all too close crunch between his own teeth, as he watched the constant

rhythmic, upward-downward dance of Osman's jaws, studied the contour of the bulge of his cheek, followed the funnel-like puff of smoke he exhaled, he experienced a feeling of deep contentment, total peace.

Osman drew at the cigarette; Jama poured tea into his cup, sipped; the tape recorder played:

My lady, you're like a cool breeze,  
Blowing over grass after a rain,  
When the sun shines through,  
The clouds part before its face.

The lively tunes of the guitar combined with the deep boom of the drum, punctuated by the soprano voice of Mohamed Yusuf as he recited the verse of the song.

Osman followed the cadence by tapping a match box with the tip of his fingers, whistling. Jama joined in by softly clapping and repeating the words after Mohamed Yusuf.

Breeze, grass, rain! The sun casting light on the tiny, shimmering drops. Oh, how beautiful, how absolutely beautiful! And there she was. Sureer, small, delicate, almost fragile, needing his love and protection. She smiled, she smiled that compelling, enigmatic smile that now seemed to rebuke him too; it seemed that she almost said, we have been waiting too long. But wait, Sureer, I'll yet make it, he thought. Of course he would. As a matter of fact, he was now almost ready with the date of the wedding. And then they would be

married happily, live a respectable life, have children-- children with such names as Faisal, Gowdhan, Farhia. And then they would bring them up like the children of a respectable family. So, don't worry Sureer. Don't-- He was vaguely aware of something Osman was saying to him.

"What?"

"I said," repeated Osman, "if I had five thousand shillings, you know what I would do?"

"What?" Jama asked again, but now silently said to himself, "Of course I know. You'd chew and chew till you lost every tooth in your head."

"Well, I'd become a gat-seller and teach those fools to respect me." He picked a long, beautiful branch, smoothed it, his fingers making a soft rustle against the leaves; he broke the tender part of it along with its leaves, folded it, and slowly put it in his mouth. Then he lit another cigarette and resumed his talk. "You'll see, Jama. One day, I'll make that money. Then those bastards will see if they can monopolize the gat market. I'll buy my own Landrover that will bring sacks of it from Jigjiga. And then, by Allah, you'll see, you'll see. The fools." Osman had played this tune before and every time Jama had the urge to say, "Dream on, old boy."

Osman beamed. No harsh ruggedness showed on his

face. The faded, dry, dark look disappeared and something else replaced it. He acquired a glowing, brown complexion, the creases seemed to get smoother, more even, his eyes became more gentle. That reminded him of those days long ago, when his cousin had round, young, soft features. When their two fathers argued about whether or not Osman should be sent to school. That was when his father, Jama's father, old Haji Farah, was still well off, long before his business ran aground with that Arab dhow. Haji Farah then frequently travelled to Aden to bring Japanese poplin shirts, Indian shawls and turbans, and Javanese loin cloths to sell them in his shop. And his cousin, Geele, Osman's father, used to bring some camels to sell at Hargeisa and also try to persuade Osman to go back to the camels he used to tend. Haji Farah would argue with Geele and say, "Do you want your son to grow up ignorant? He'll become a criminal or a qat-seller."

"That's better than an infidel. I know that's what they teach them at the place you call school," the old camel herder would say with obvious relish. "Look at your son. He wears the white man's clothes and I am sure he doesn't read the Quran." And then Jama's father would stroke his beard, as he sat behind the counter in his shop, and look at his cousin.

Young Jama and Osman used to listen to this argument and Jama hated the old camelman almost as much as his own son did. And Haji Farah, after failing to convince his cousin, continued to stroke his beard silently, with a look on his face that Jama always interpreted as saying, "Why should I waste my breath on you? You are as stupid as your camels." And then young Osman used to declare, "By Allah, I won't go back to those stinking camels. I want to go to school."

Osman hadn't been to school, and he hadn't done anything worth mentioning. But he had married. That's one good thing about him. He had even beaten him, Jama, on that score. Perhaps.

But you just wait. He would make it yet. He would go to university, study engineering--become an acclaimed engineer. Then he would build his own house, buy a car, even rebuild his father's business. After all, he was an only son, and his father had brought him up like a rich merchant's son and it was incumbent upon him now to help him. Maybe even help Osman too. Why not? Of course he would also have a happy family.

But what would he do now? His fiancée's father was upset. He turned to Osman, who poked the glowing charcoal in the brazier with a small twig, so that small tongues of flame leapt out of it. Osman loved warmth in the room when he was chewing. It set the

mood, he said. Small drops of sweat stood on his face.

"Osman," said Jama, "I'd like to hold the wedding soon. My father-in-law is upset, you know. I don't have the money to buy furniture and jewelry." Jama had a vague notion of things coming together, meeting--his quick heartbeat, his munching, Osman's, the two straight puffs of cigarette smoke spouting out of his cousin's nostrils, the gat in front of them, the music, the room. He felt all these things come together in a big confluence, raise him to the pinnacle of happiness, and assure him that his father-in-law was wrong, that everything was going to be right.

"You're kidding yourself," Osman broke the spell. "I didn't have a penny when I married. You're dreaming of expensive furniture and jewelry that you can't possibly buy--unless of course you rob somebody." Jama felt something in him give way and looked at Osman.

There was a rap on the door. Jama quickly stood up and walked towards the outside door without speaking to Osman. There he was, the young shopkeeper he had the appointment with.

"Good afternoon, Jama."

"Good afternoon. Come in please." Jama stepped aside to let him in. He didn't close the door, but put his head out and scanned the street. There was

no one there. He looked carefully around. A window almost directly opposite was half-open, and there was a glimpse of someone's head. But the head immediately disappeared as the window was closed. He looked at the shopkeeper.

"What's the matter?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Oh, nothing." Jama led him into the other room and motioned him to sit down on the chair. Jama squatted in front of him and the two men attended to their business in low tones.

Ten minutes later, Jama joined Osman.

"Who was that?" Osman's question had a mildly incisive tone to it.

"Oh, it was just a friend. He was lending me some money. Here--" Jama pulled a wad of notes out of his pocket, counted 150 shillings, pushed it to Osman, and said without looking up, "give it to your wife. To clear the shopkeeper's bill." Osman did not take the money but stopped chewing and continued looking at him. Jama felt uncomfortable. He looked up.

"Why don't you take the money?" There was a searching, slightly suspicious look on Osman's face. But presently he started chewing again.

"I guess you're right. Indeed why shouldn't I?"

he said and put the money in his shirt pocket. Then silence followed, except for the music.

Jama felt cold, as if he'd touched something reptilian. So that was it. Even Osman didn't believe what he told him. Well, why should he? Will you sneeze it up? That's what it is like to be rotten, he thought, rotten both inside and outside. That's what gat-eating makes you--a rotten, miserable criminal. A nothing, a cipher. And there'd be no wedding, no school; why should he kid himself? No school and no wedding. Absolutely none. . .

The tape recorder played:

My lady, you're like a cool breeze,  
Blowing over grass after a rain.

Jama reached for Osman's packet of cigarettes, pulled out one, lighted it, and took the first draught of smoke he'd ever had in his life.



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