

Samatar Sooyaan

Translated by Lidwien Kapteijns

Once he had put his glasses securely in front of his eyes opened wide in surprise, Farah quietly asked his wife Kaltun, "How do you spell the word 'heart'? Is it with a double consonant and two *r*'s or with a long vowel and double *a*?" Distorting her mouth in a sneer, pulling up one side of her light cotton caftan with one hand and throwing the other, fingers pointed, at her husband, she answered, "Listen, *that* you must ask our child. What do I know about this foreign language? I hate it!"

"Anyway," she added, "what does that word 'heart' refer to in Somali? Does it have to do with the lungs or, perhaps, the stomach?"

Amazing! What do I do now?, Farah said to himself regretfully, while stealing glances at the clock on the wall. He had to quickly fill out some healthcare forms before he could go to the hospital. Two weeks earlier he had been advised to choose between two equally difficult options: either to return to the lovely climate of Somalia to regain his full health there or to stay in England and undergo dangerous bypass surgery for his heart. He was at a loss about what to do. Another burning issue weighing on his mind was that the Social Welfare Agency had informed him that it would cut off his welfare benefits if he did not learn English. More seriously even than that, and a problem looming even larger than the Golis mountain range, was that he would not be able to get British citizenship if he did not learn English properly.

Frozen in place, aimlessly turning the pages of the forms he had to fill out, he came across a word that almost made his heart stand still. It filled his already troubled mind with fear and disgust: the word

“sex.” “Kaltuun, listen. Only God knows! What do they mean by the word ‘sex?’” he asked, pressing his palm to his temple. “Does it not refer to when a man and a woman have sex? These Europeans are crazy! Don’t they have any shame?” Now Kaltuun appeared to be a bit better informed than her husband and to have gotten used to life in Europe a bit more. “Does the word ‘sex’ not refer to men and women being equal?” she answered. “It refers to ‘men and women’ in order to avoid discriminating between them.” Farah looked at her incredulously and fell silent. What an amazing country! What a pain, this language! I really am in deep trouble, he thought. This world is full of surprises. Men and women? Impossible! Don’t they say “men and women” instead of “sex”? What a nuisance, this language.

I hate these white folks, he continued with his train of thought, for they are soft on the butchers who destroyed Somalia, and refer to them with beautiful words, full of respect. Look, they call them “warlords”! Do you know that “lord” means king or wise elder? Wouldn’t you say that they are the ones inciting these butchers against us? What a language! It completely bewilders me today. What a nuisance, this language. I must wait until Rahmo comes home, Farah said to himself, not wanting to show his wife either his sadness or his problems. He was, after all, a full-blooded man; he must conceal his defeat.

I cannot even communicate as I would like with either the doctor or the other people of this country, he said scornfully to himself. I cannot say what I have to say in this language. And even if I learned the language well, I will still be a foreigner. What a pain, this foreign language! Humbled, he looked up at Kaltuun.

After a little while, Rahmo rushed in, together with her boyfriend Warlord. As Rahmo introduced this Mr. Warlord, who was new to the family, to her father and mother, the phone rang. Farah, whose blood pressure shot up when he saw Warlord with his arm around Rahmo’s waist, ran to the phone, to conceal how upset he was and not to have to watch the actions and behavior of his one and only daughter and child.

The way Warlord and Rahmo behaved reminded Farah of a long article he had read the night before in a newspaper about “The Obliteration of the Nation and the Family.” Struggling with his English and cursing the language under his breath, Farah tried to explain to the man who was to repair the pipes in the house, “My water is not good.” “Father, don’t say ‘water,’” Rahmo corrected him. “In English, if you want them to understand you, you do not say ‘water’ but ‘wad-

her.' Otherwise the whites will think that you are a country bumpkin. Do you get me?" For heaven's sake, what can be done with this old man? He will never become civilized. Mark my words. "Listen, Dad, the other day I heard you tell some men that you had spoken with 'Minnesota,'" Rahmo added angrily. "Did I not tell you that you don't say 'Minnesota' but pronounce it as 'Minnesoda'? Do you get me? Don't embarrass me, old man," Rahmo said, looking at her boyfriend. "When you speak English, you should twist your mouth, tongue, and lips. Please, Dad." What a pain, learning a foreign language.

Shaking all over, his pulse racing and his blood boiling, Farah, without thinking, put down the receiver. He swallowed back his saliva in anger. Overwhelmed by different emotions, he veered from surprise at the fact that his daughter Rahmo had fallen into the hands of Warlord, to complete speechlessness and utter fear of the man. He sat down again.

"Did you complete the hospital forms?," Rahmo asked her father. "No, there are many words I don't understand," Farah answered, looking at Rahmo imploringly, like an orphan. Meanwhile he threw timid and fearful glances at Warlord, now showing him an artificial smile, then glaring at him angrily. "To begin with, Rahmo my daughter, do you say I sleep *on* the bed or *over* the bed? What is correct?" What a pain, this language! "The Social Welfare Agency has informed me that I should write a letter explaining my illness." Rahmo burst out laughing and Warlord joined her without fully understanding what was said except the words "bed" and "sleep." He inferred something quite different, encouraged by the peal of laughter that came out of Rahmo's mouth. "Dad, get your book. I will spell it for you," Rahmo said, feeling a bit bad about the anxious look on her parents' faces.

Farah was quiet. Then he reached for the book he had been given at school to learn this foreign language on which his life and freedom depended. Everything from access to welfare to obtaining a British travel document or passport depended on it. The problems Farah and Kaltuun had with this foreign language were all the more serious because, not having passports, they could not even leave the country. They therefore had no other choice but to learn the language.

"First, write 'sleep,'" Rahmo said. As he began to write the word, he asked her, "Do I use the *b* that prays to God and lifts its head to the sky or is it the *p* that points down and turns its head to the ground? Which of the two miserable letters is it?" Rahmo burst out laughing and said,

"It is *p* for pen. You don't even know this, Dad? It is not *b* for book." What a nuisance, this foreign language.

"Daughter, the letter *S* is crying and complaining," Farah exclaimed, full of anxiety.¹ "It speaks of misery and ill-treatment; that is why I cannot write the way I want to." Assisted by his daughter, he worked on his correspondence for a while, avoiding the letter *S*, which he felt had been mistreated and needed rehabilitation. Then he cautiously asked about a word that also appeared to trouble him. "Daughter, why do they say 'afraid' all the time? I am told that it refers to fear. All the time I hear, 'I am afraid I cannot help you.'" What a nuisance, this language. "The other night I told a nurse in the hospital, 'Fear God, not me!' I am not sure if she understood me. What a nuisance.

"Also, I want to tell the Social Welfare Agency to do two things for me: first, to completely eliminate the word 'warlord' from the English language. It is this word that has caused my heart problem and has prevented me from learning the English language, nuisance that it is! Second, what was it again? What was that word I am looking for again? What a pain, this foreign language!"

Note

1. The letter *S* stands for Somalia, which is still at war as this story goes to press.