

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Refugees*

Haweya and I left Mogadishu in mid-November 1990, crammed onto wooden benches with about thirty others in the back of a pickup. We were accompanied by Qubqac, Ibado's nephew and our second cousin once removed, who had some family over the border in Kenya. It was going to be a very long detour. The road to Kismayo on the coast of Somalia was already in the hands of the Hawiye rebels; it was far too dangerous to traverse. The only way for us Darod to make it safely out to Kenya was the long road up north to Baidoa, in the hills, and then west, across the desert. Even on this road, there might be bandits or stray members of the rebel armies, looking for adventure and crazy with *qat*.

A few hours' drive out of town, we got to Afgoye, one of the main market towns of southern Somalia. The landscape became suddenly green. Along the river were fields of rice and orchards: papayas and guavas and plantations of bananas and mangos. The street stalls overflowed with food, and the meat was wonderful.

The people in Afgoye looked different, more like Kenyans. These were the descendants of slaves and peasants, the outcast Sab. They lived in the arable land that feeds the rest of Somalia, and yet these people were supposed to be inferior to us. They stepped off the pavement to let us by. One highborn Darod man from our pickup actually pushed aside an old Sab woman who didn't move out of his way fast enough. It made me glad I was leaving. The open bigotry was one of the things I hated about Somalia. I had thought that belonging to a higher clan signified a higher morality. I didn't see it as a justification for mistreating people on the basis of their physical characteristics and the quality of their blood. Yet whenever I protested about the blatant prejudice against people of the Sab clans I was called a communist.

When I thought about it, the attitude of the Sab themselves also exasperated me. In places like Afgoye and Baidoa they were in the majority: Why did they obey like this? What were they waiting for? Did they fear the airplanes of the higher clans, and the bombs? Or was it that they were dependent on the northern Somalis for money? Could they have truly internalized this idea of their own inferiority, this daily humiliation? Why didn't they rise up?

We spent the first night in Baidoa, a hot, dusty market town about 150 miles northwest of Mogadishu and about two hundred miles from the Kenyan border, where we arrived just after nightfall. Then we got on another ramshackle bus to drive to Luuq, an old trading post on the Juba River. As we left Baidoa, the countryside emptied out: there was only sand, scrub brush, thorn trees, and one or two baobabs. This was the kind of land in which my grandmother had grown up. Occasionally we'd pass a young boy herding camels, who would squint at us in the sun, or a woman with a cloth tied around one shoulder and a baby tied to her back, walking into the distance with a stack of firewood tied to her belly.

In Luuq, the people were thin. Refugees were sleeping in the streets, and the houses were pockmarked with bullet holes. The hotel's tiny rooms were as hot as ovens,

so everyone slept outside, the women all on mats laid out in the inner courtyard, the men in the outer yard. There was no running water or electricity. Everyone washed out of a jug and mocked Haweya and me for using the foreigner's instrument, a toothbrush, instead of rubbing an acacia twig against our teeth. Breakfast was goat liver with garlic and onion; I couldn't face it so early, but the others tried to induce me to eat it before we entered the hungry places. There would be less food farther down the road.

The pickup droned through the sand in the fierce sun, probably following some kind of path that we couldn't see. We had no shade; we simply sat on wooden benches.

We spent the next night in Bulo Haawo, a small village on the Somali side of the Kenyan border, with a few thatch-and-stick huts and a shop that had a cup board with some ice in it. But just a few hundred yards past that shanty village we crossed the border, and there we found the Kenyan town of Mandera, with buildings made of concrete, a paved road, and electricity. Electricity had become a rarity in Mogadishu; we were startled to see it here. We went through an official checkpoint, where people were openly bribing the uniformed officials. (Since Qubqac had a Kenyan ID, and Haweya and I spoke perfect Swahili, we could get into the country without having to pay any bribes.)

Once in Mandera, Qubqac took us to the home of his stepmother and stepsisters, to pay our respects; they had electricity and running water. Mandera had shops and a school, even a district council office and a police station. In every way this little town in Kenya, a country Somalis considered inferior, functioned far better than almost anything in Somalia, just a few miles behind us.

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We spent two nights in Mandera before Qubqac agreed to get back on the road. We took a country bus to Garissa, a large town 350 miles farther south, which had asphalt roads, hotels, a bus station, traffic lights, a mosque. There, we bought bus tickets to Nairobi. We were almost home.

As we finally drove into Nairobi, about a week after our departure from Mogadishu, and made our way through the smells and colors of Eastleigh, everything looked exactly as we had left it. Even the pungent odor of *sukumawiki* was welcome: it meant home to me now: I was looking forward to seeing my mother again, but as we neared our neighborhood, I found I was also dreading the fights and emotional scenes that we would inevitably endure.

A few days after we arrived in Nairobi, at the end of November, open warfare broke out around Mogadishu. Siad Barré's army still held the center of town, but the outskirts were completely encircled by the Hawiye rebel forces. Gunmen rode around in pickups, high on *qat*, shooting at whatever they felt like and burning down farms and orchards.

To split the opposition against him, Siad Barré had been playing on the clan hostility that is always latent in Somalia. His forces staged attacks on the Darod as if the attackers were Hawiye: they left their scenes of murder daubed with slogans like "Cleanse the Darod from Hawiye land," and "USC," the initials of one of the Hawiye militias. They did the same to the Hawiye, with slogans like "The Hawiye are inferior and deserve to be wiped out."

So, as Siad Barré went down, he took the country with him: the fight to oust him became a full-fledged civil war. The Hawiye were no longer just demanding Siad Barré's

head: they wanted ethnic cleansing. The Darod were caught by surprise. They had expected that the Hawiye would seek revenge from Siad Barré's subclan, but not that they would attack all of the different clans of the Darod. Mogadishu fell into chaos, with looting, wanton killing, and destruction of property. Fighters suddenly swept into neighborhoods and burned houses; children were left behind as their parents fled. Any Darod who could escape drove, walked, or crawled as far as *Mgoye*, Baidoa, to Kismayo on the coast, and to towns and villages all the way to the borders of Kenya and Ethiopia.

Some of the Darod fought back, and in these battles both the Darod and the Hawiye died in large numbers. Siad Barré's army had shrunk to the soldiers who guarded his presidential palace. On January 27, 1991, in the midst of this mayhem, Ma, Haweya, and I learned from the BBC Somali Service that Barré had been flown out to safety-to Nairobi.

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Mahad was accompanied by our cousin Warsame, the son of Ma's twin sister, and by two of Warsame's half-brothers. We now had six men, all of them more or less family members, sleeping on mattresses in the living room. Next to arrive was Osman's older brother, Mahamuud. Again, it was a great honor to offer him hospitality, but Ma's face crumbled in terror when Mahamuud told us that Mogadishu had all but fallen when he left the city. The Hawiye had Siad Barré's palace under siege, and there was rape and looting everywhere. Hawiye gunmen dragged Darod women and children into the street and murdered them, he said; they even burned down houses with people still inside. Water was scarce, and people were already so weak from the lack of food that they could not fight or flee. Later we would learn that our Aunt Khadija had made it out to Kismayo, where she fell ill. Eventually we received word that she had died there.

Ibabo Dhadey Magan, whose mother was Hawiye, gathered a number of kinsmen into her compound to keep them safe. But the Darod were beginning to move out of the city, in vehicles or on foot, fleeing the disaster. They were making their way down to the coast along with people running from the burning farmland south of *Mgoye*. There were now hundreds of thousands of people on the move. The massive exodus from Somalia to Kenya, Ethiopia, and beyond had begun.

Mahamuud told us he had left his wife and children in Kismayo with family members; he had made the journey to the Kenyan port of Mombasa in a boat crammed with other refugees, in order to find a safe place for his family to stay in Nairobi. Now he needed to return to the border and bring them to Nairobi. He calculated that they had enough gas to make it roughly to the Kenyan border, to a place that refugees were gathering, about a hundred miles into the desert. Everyone called it Dhobley; the Muddy Place.

Every day for a whole week, Mahamuud pleaded with Mahad, who had a proper Kenyan ID and spoke Swahili and English, to go with him to the border to fetch his family. The border was chaos, and the Kenyan government was trying to stop more refugees from crossing into Kenya; Mahamuud would need help.

But Mahad procrastinated. Every day he waved Mahamuud aside: tomorrow they would begin the trip to the border. We could all feel Mahamuud's anxiety. Finally; one night, at dinner, he announced that he would leave, alone, the next day. I couldn't stand it anymore and said, "I also speak Swahili and English, and Haweya and I have just traveled from the border, so I know what to do. I'll go with you."

My mother said no, a young girl should not be allowed to go to a war zone. But I told her I would stay on the Kenyan side: How bad could it be? The conversation lasted for several days. Everyone took sides. Mahad kept promising to leave, then he would head out the door saying he was going to the mosque and stay out until nightfall. It was clear that Mahamuud would have to go with me or go alone.

Finally, at the end of January, we left. I had been home two months. After a night or two on the road, we arrived at the Kenyan border town of Liboye. Mahamuud was so nervous he could barely speak. He had a leather pouch under his shirt, full of U.S. dollars to use as bribes, but it would be up to me to negotiate with the police at the border post. I had never tried to bribe anyone before; I didn't even know what a dollar might be worth so far away from the capital.

At the border, soldiers in green uniforms were everywhere, with machine guns and ammunition belts slung across their shoulders. We found an army officer who said he was the commander. I took a deep breath and told him, in Swahili, "This man is looking for his family. They just went on holiday to Somalia and they've been trapped there. All we need to do is cross the border and get them."

The officer looked me over and asked, "How many people will you bring in?" I answered, "One woman with four tiny children. Just one woman, really, because the kids are so small they hardly count."

He looked at me quizzically, and I reckoned that now was the proper time to give him money. I turned to Mahamuud and said, "Do you have something like five hundred shillings?" I was guessing wildly. It was about a week's rent on our flat in Nairobi. Mahamuud pushed a banknote into my hand and I handed it to the officer. He looked down and told me "Two more." We gave it to him and he said, "So, go."

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It was very dusty; and there were absolutely no trees, no shade at all. The United Nations refugee agency had set up camp on the Kenyan side of the border, at the bottom of the hill. Dozens of bright blue plastic tarps clustered near a large, well-made tarpaulin tent where people were lining up in the sun to register. We passed a health center—really just a place where you could report the dead—around which were thousands and thousands of tents.

The farther we walked, the shabbier the tents became. At first, most of them were blue tarpaulins strung onto branches and twigs, with whole families sheltering under them. A little farther on, the tarpaulins ran out and thin branches and twigs were just shoved into the soil, with cloths arranged over them, women's shawls or a shirt, so the children could sit in the shade. The tents were clumped around little waterholes in the sand, some of them no more than muddy puddles. The smell of recent rain was still in the air, but the puddles were already evaporating in the heat.

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I felt totally helpless. I had come to help one man find his family; and there was a sea of desperate people around me. Among them I stood out as the only one who seemed rested and well-fed. I looked like almost the last hope of every woman, every family, under every tree. Many people came up to me begging, "Will you talk to the border guards, can you take me there? I have family." And I had to say "No. No I can't, there is nothing I can do." I was there with Mahamuud, and he had only one aim, which was to find his family.

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Mahamuud's wife caught sight of him from far off and began running to greet him. When she threw herself at him she began to sob.

It was the first time I had ever seen a Somali couple display affection to each other like that. They were clinging to each other and stroking each other's faces, both of them crying and not letting go. The children came running and clung to the two of them—there was a moment of pure joy and tears which was very private, and Mahamed and I turned away out of respect.

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That night we slept on mats and thin cloths spread on the white sand, all near each other. Si'eedo cooked a kind of watery sorghum porridge with dirty water. There was no nutrition in it, not even any salt. Then, we fell asleep where we'd eaten, wrapped in shawls. It was comfortable in a strange way; the sand was soft, and the wind smelled like Mogadishu. But everyone had scabies and lice and warned me I would catch them, too. The children had lice visibly trailing along their necks, and there I was with my sporty little duffel bag, with a toothbrush and toothpaste and a change of underwear and clean clothes. It was surreal.

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We had to get back to the Kenyan border as quickly as we could before our army officer, Mr. Mwaura, forgot about us. We looked around. We had told him that we would return with one woman and four little children, but now, in addition, we had Mahamuud's brother and his family, his sister and her two children, and my two little boy cousins. On top of that, both the wives had young women relatives along with them. So now we were accompanied by one man, five women, and twelve children. Instead of being a party of seven, we were now a huddle of twenty human beings.

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We waited for days in the shadeless zone full of tarpaulins and desperate people. Mahamuud developed a fever. When it rained we gathered water from a pothole that was coated green with algae. We crushed maize flour into the water and I gave some of it to the baby.

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One morning when I went to get water with all the throngs of other women I heard that a woman had been attacked in the night. She had arrived alone, and she was from a small subclan; she had no men to protect her. Kenyan soldiers had taken her out of her hut in the night and raped her.

I went to see her in the tiny rag hut she had made for herself. She was one big wound. Her face was swollen and covered in dried blood, her clothes were torn, there were marks all over her legs. She was shaking uncontrollably. I touched her hand and asked if I could help her but she didn't talk. All she could say was *Ya'Allah, Ya'Allah*, "Allah have mercy on me."

I went to get her more water, and all the people nearby told me, "You shouldn't be seen with that woman. She is impure. People will say you're the same." All I could see was a human being who had been abused, who was on the verge of death, but to them, she was an outcast.

I knew she would die soon. I walked all the way to the UNHCR tent and found a Sri Lankan woman and told her, in English, that there was a woman alone who had been

raped. I explained that Somalis would leave this woman to die. She came to the tent with some guards and took her away. I told Mahamed and the others about it and they said, "Of course it is not the woman's fault, but you know, there are so many problems. You can't save everyone here." I did know that, but we could have taken care of each other. Two days later, again there was a story of another woman who had been raped. It began happening at the time: Kenyan soldiers came at night to rape Somali women who were alone without protectors. And then all these women would be shunned and left to die.

This is what my grandmother had meant when she warned me: if you are a Somali woman alone, you are like a piece of sheep fat in the sun. Ants and insects crawl all over you, and you cannot move or hide; you will be eaten and melted until nothing is left but a thin smear of grease. And she also warned us that if this happened, it would be our fault. It was horrible. Everyone in that camp called themselves Muslims and yet nobody helped these women in the name of Allah. Everyone was praying-even the woman in that hut had been praying-but no one showed compassion.

Mahamuud's fever had already begun to abate when Mahad arrived in this no-man's-land, straight from Nairobi. He had Kenyan shillings with him; he had raised money from the Osman Mahamud to come and rescue as many people as he could.

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It was now Mahad and me, Mahamuud and his family; Mahamed's family, Aflao and Ainanshie's family; Marian and her child and baby, and my two little cousins: fifteen adults and sixteen children.

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First we had to find Mwaura and renegotiate. I walked with Mahamuud along the path into Liboye. Every time soldiers stopped and questioned us, I spoke to them in Swahili. We finally tracked Mwaura down in the empty lot where hundreds of refugees were massing and trying to negotiate with Kenyan men with pickups and buses. Mwaura looked at me and said, "Ah, the girl who speaks Swahili." He was friendlier now: I bribed him several thousand extra shillings to let us all get through. It had become an easy transaction, adult to adult, eye to eye. He was not a bad man, and I later realized that I had vastly overpaid him. Mahad made the same trip after us for far less money.

But then it took several days for Mahamuud to negotiate our transportation from the border. Again and again he trudged back to the Somali side of the border, where we waited for him, and told us "Maybe tomorrow." There were simply too many of us, and the prices were too high. All the Somalis who still had money; as we did, were also bribing the police and offering huge sums to anyone who would drive them closer to Nairobi. Finally Mahamuud told us he had made a deal. He had found a bus driver who would take us-but he had agreed to pay him almost all our remaining money.

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We walked into my mother's house at 10:30 in the morning at the end of February 1992. I had been gone for three weeks. She had been so desperate about us-she, too, looked thin and haggard. She was stunned to see me walk in, filthy and crawling with lice, with a huge crowd of starving people.

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