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**Item:** English translation transcript of oral history interview with Ahmed Mohamed Mohmoud, July 13, 2014.

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**Narrator**

**Ahmed Ismail Yusuf**  
**Interviewer**

**July 13, 2014**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

**English translation of the original Somali recording<sup>1</sup>**

Ahmed M. Mohmoud       **-AM**  
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf       **-AY**

**AY:** This Ahmed Ismail Yusuf. I am recording for the Minnesota Historically Society Somali Oral History Project. Here with me is Ahmed Mahmoud or—embarrassing—Ahmed Mohamed Mohmoud, a friend of mine who is a poet, among other things. But what we are going to do is just to actually record the interview in Somali. Ahmed, welcome to the interview.

**AM:** Thank you.

**AY:** Okay, tell me about you. Or briefly go over for me the day that your father was born.  
[chuckles]

**AM:** My father was born... In those days people in Somalia did not record historic calendar dates as it is practiced in the West now.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** However, he was born during the Darvish liberation struggles which were approximately from 1917 to 1919.

**AY:** So his birth time actually coincided with that historic time?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** But it was a well-known era.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Where was he born?

**AM:** He was born in...

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<sup>1</sup> Somali transcript is also available.

**AY:** Rural area.

**AM:** Rural area.

**AY:** Where was the nearest settlement village in those rural areas?

**AM:** I think the nearest settlement in the area was the Buuhoodle district.

**AY:** Do you know the name of the rural area where he was born?

**AM:** I think it was called Horufadhi. It was in that zone. Anyway, it was a rural area.

**AY:** It was?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Have you yourself been to those rural areas?

**AM:** Yes, I had seen and traveled through those areas.

**AY:** Really? Wow.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** When was your mom born?

**AM:** My mom was about five years younger than my dad. Therefore, she probably was born around 1925. At least she was five years or perhaps as many as seven years younger than him. She was born around 1925.

**AY:** Where was she born?

**AM:** She was born in the outskirts of the Hargeisa [Hargeysa].

**AY:** Rural Hargeisa region.

**AM:** The rural areas near the Hargeisa region.

**AY:** Oh, I had seen your dad myself before he passed away. Actually, and quite frankly, I blame both of us for the failure of not recording and preserving the wealth of history and life experiences that he had. I had heard that as a young person, he had sustained an injury during the war between the Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan [Sayid Maxamed Cabdalle Xasan] liberation army and the colonial powers and their allied Somali clans. I also had heard that he was injured in the conflict when he was a fetus. Is that correct?

**AM:** He did sustain an injury during that war. He was an infant and his mother was carrying him on her hip when he sustained the injury.

**AY:** Oh, his mother was carrying him on her hip.

**AM:** Then the bullet that killed his mom had struck him on the side and injured his kidney. He lost a kidney as a result of that injury, and for almost one hundred years he only had one kidney.

**AY:** When he died was he one hundred years old?

**AM:** Yes, almost, approximately. He was not quite one hundred years old, but he was just a few years shy of that.

**AY:** When was it that he passed away?

**AM:** In 2011.

**AY:** Did he die here?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** In his long life history at one point he joined the British colonial army. What was the name of that army unit in which he was a member?

**AM:** The colonial army in those territories had many different names and units. Some of the Somalis called them “Somali Scout” or “Camel Corps.” They had many names by which the locals knew them. However, his unit was deployed overseas during World War II.

**AY:** So he was taken to places to engage in the conflict?

**AM:** From what he told me, he was recruited in the Horufadhi rural area where he was born. Then after that he was transferred to Mandera, where he started his initial military trainings.

**AY:** Is that in Kenya?

**AM:** No, the Mandera is in the north.

**AY:** In Somalia, near the Barbara coast?

**AM:** Yes, it was located in the north.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** They had him walk from Mandera training camp, and while they were on this long trek to a place called Arusha, they were receiving trainings and they completed the trainings during the trek.

**AY:** Was Arusha in Tanzania?

**AM:** In Tanzania, yes. That long trek to Arusha lasted for several months. When they got there, they were transported on vessels. I think at some point, they were returned to the coastal city of Mombasa and went through the big harbor there. Then they were shipped to Burma, India, and all those foreign places. Eventually when World War II ended they were in Burma.

**AY:** That's fascinating.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Do you have...

**AM:** Nowadays, I think that country is called Myanmar.

**AY:** Myanmar, yes, yes.

**AM:** That name had been changed.

**AY:** Do you still have any documentations or photographs showing his legacy and life experiences that he had left behind?

**AM:** I was actually quite young when those things were happening in Somalia.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** However, all his personal effects and documents were left in Hargeisa. I don't think now that those items are available anymore.

**AY:** When did Mom pass away as well?

**AM:** Mom, may God have mercy on her, passed away in 1984. She had died in a vehicle accident that took place in the town of Sheikh [Sheekh].

**AY:** Now we are going to come back to you. When where you born?

**AM:** I was born in 1969, and I was born in Hargeisa.

**AY:** You were born in Hargeisa?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** So were you reared in Hargeisa?

**AM:** I was the youngest of all my siblings. All of my other siblings were there. However, I was

still a child when my family moved to Buuhoodle district. Then we left there for the south and Mogadishu. In the south, we were there for a while, then we came back. Basically, we were everywhere from the Juba [Jubba] and Shabelle [Shabeelle] regions of the south to the entire north. I was raised in all kinds of different places, including Mogadishu.

**AY:** [chuckles] If you look back at your childhood life, how would you characterize it? Was it a difficult life where you had experienced some hardship or was it a comfortable upbringing that you look back on nowadays with some nostalgia?

**AM:** To be honest, that depends on what you would consider comfort. For me at the time, I thought my life was a difficult one.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** However, when I look back, I come to the realization that it was a very comfortable, joyful life. Particularly, the guys enjoyed lots of freedoms and adventures. We could play with balls wherever we wanted. For example, I could go out with friends and stay out with no restrictions or curfews. I could go to the rivers and we could go to the ocean for swimming and adventures. We could play soccer in outdoor stadiums. We enjoyed the most childhood freedoms and adventures that any child could hope for.

**AY:** Why did you think at the time that your life might have been difficult? Were you lacking or missing out on something?

**AM:** As a child, I did not really know what real life problems could be like. However, as I grew a bit older, it was obvious to me that life in general was challenging in the entire country. There were recurring droughts and conflicts. There was also widespread poverty and destitution. Everybody more or less was suffering. The only people that had income and resources were the people who left for the Gulf States to work there as laborers.

**AY:** Yes, and the government officials.

**AM:** Yes, and the high-ranking officials in the government.

**AY:** And you were not either?

**AM:** So as a young man not on either of those two segments of society, you feel a certain desire for a better life. In my household, no one was abroad for us.

**AY:** The entire household.

**AM:** The entire household. So we were not one of the households that were receiving remittances and new clothes from abroad.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** When you are a young guy coming to age, you know, you develop a feeling and a desire to go abroad.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** To partake and to do your part in the efforts to support the household.

**AY:** You have a desire to do that.

**AM:** [chuckles] You have a desire and willingness to do that.

**AY:** I understand.

**AM:** So as a youth, I had all those kinds of feelings. However, for the most part prior to the conflicts, life was carefree and very good.

**AY:** Where did you finish high school?

**AM:** I finished high school in Las Anod [Laascaanood] High School. In those days, the school was called Ismail Mire High School. Nowadays, it is called Muse Yusuf High School.

**AY:** Who is Muse Yusuf? I think that's an internal Somali story. I don't think outsiders can get that.

**AM:** Muse Yusuf was one the men who organized efforts to rebuild the school.

**AY:** He was one of the men.

**AM:** He was one of them.

**AY:** Was Ismail Mire, however, a well-known poet?

**AM:** He was one of senior commanders of the Darwish Liberation Army.

**AY:** He was a senior member of Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan's liberation army. And his devotional poems are still around.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** When you graduated from high school, what did you do next?

**AM:** When I graduated from secondary school, there was something called national service. The national service would last for two years. Everyone who graduated from high school was mandated to perform two years of mandatory national service.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** For example, female high school graduates would work as volunteer teachers at schools. The guys would be sent away for military trainings. At the time there was still ongoing conflict between the nation and Ethiopia. I am talking about in 1985, when I finished high school.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Then '86 to '87, for those two years, I was performing my two-year national service.

**AY:** Where were you assigned to work for your national service?

**AM:** I received trainings in a place called Dalyare. It is a place near Las Anod. Then we were assigned to different front lines. I was assigned to the Buuhoodle district.

**AY:** So you were not that far away from your own community?

**AM:** No, I was not.

**AY:** When that episode of your life ended, then what?

**AM:** When the national service ended, then I returned to Mogadishu to take a national examination that all high school graduate students would take to enter the National University.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I was accepted by a Teachers' Training College.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Teachers' Training College.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** When I finished that college, I further went on to attend the School of Public Health. By the time I finished my education, the catastrophe happened. Throughout the time that I was attending those institutions, I held jobs to support myself.

**AY:** When you say the catastrophe, what do you mean?

**AM:** I mean the war in Mogadishu that broke out in 1991.

**AY:** So when you were in school and the conflict and mayhem were taking place, how much awareness did you have about the level of conflict and dire situation of the country?

**AM:** We had heard about the conflict and destruction that were taking place in the north. Luckily, we were not there at the time. At the time, we were in Mogadishu, but the people who



were engaged in the conflicts were people from the same families and communities. There was a tremendous amount of suffering on each side of the conflict, you know. So I was keenly aware of the conflict and its ramifications for the countryside when we were in Mogadishu. However, the conflict only impacted us directly when the war broke out in Mogadishu.

**AY:** How did the conflict manifest itself in your area? Was there a direct armed attack against the city you were in by the rebels?

**AM:** No. One afternoon, I was just taking a nap when things began to happen. Prior to that there was some general insecurity and people of the city were spellbound, but nothing serious had happened up until that point.

**AY:** Just taking a nap.

**AM:** And then it was just a normal afternoon, nothing really out of the ordinary was taking place. Then all of sudden the war exploded like a volcano that afternoon. There were some reports prior to that, indicating some things were happening in Balad [Balcad] and Jowhar [Jowhaar], north of the city.

**AY:** At the time when the conflict exploded in your city, was it 1990 or in 1989?

**AM:** It was late December of 1990. Yes, I think it was around December thirtieth.

**AY:** You were taking a nap.

**AM:** I was not aware of unusual occurrences, and I was just taking a nap when I was awakened by the commotion of gunfire. We could hear the commotion and the gunfire from a distance almost on the horizon. Then we saw fleeing people. Those people were mostly women and children, and they were carrying their meager belongings on their backs and heads.

**AY:** Which district of the city were you residing in at that time?

**AM:** I was in Howlwadaag district.

**AY:** How long did it take for you to become part of fleeing people? When you woke up from the nap, what happened? Did you gather all your belongings in the home?

**AM:** We did not flee right away. We stayed in our home for several more days following that afternoon. Then we went to Medina [Mediina] district for safety. We stayed there for several more days. Then we fled the city entirely. We fled to a city called Mareeray. We were familiar with this city because we lived there in the past. We lived there for about a month. During our time there, we stayed in a barn from an old converted sugar plant.

**AY:** In Jowhar.

**AM:** No, the sugar plant in Mareeray. It was in the lower Shabelle region near the town of Jilib.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** After staying there, we left there for Kismayo [Kismaayo]. In Kismayo, as a trained public health professional, I put my skills to work and I began working at the emergency room of the only hospital in the city. I was assisting the doctors there all the time, day and night.

**AY:** Could you please repeat that word? Was the word you just said an Italian word?

**AM:** Oh, it means emergency room.

**AY:** Oh, okay.

**AM:** It roughly translates to first aid.

**AY:** First aid.

**AM:** Yes, I was just doing emergency room work, but also I was doing work at the entire hospital. We were there for approximately nine months. Then the war and the conflict had reached Kismayo, too. We fled again toward the Kenyan border. We arrived at a town near the border called Dhobley [Dhoobley]. The city had another unofficial name. It was called Liboi, Somali. However, its official name was Dhobley.

**AY:** That word is new to me. During the conflict, before you reached the border itself, what was the most harrowing ordeal that you had encountered?

**AM:** As far as I was concerned, even when I was in Mogadishu, I had never been to the front line of the war where the actual armed fighting was going on. I have got to be honest and truthful. I mean, we had reached Kismayo, and for me the most touching and painful experiences were seeing the injured people that were brought to the hospital. Their injuries and sufferings were horrific. We used treat everyone the same. When I say “we” I mean the medical professionals. The doctors, nurses, and all of us would treat the warring factions the same way. Even the prisoners of the war. When they needed medical attentions, they would get the same treatments as anyone else.

One of astonishing things I had seen during my tenure as a medical person was one night I was on duty at the hospital emergency department, and then large numbers of casualties were brought into the emergency room area. Of those casualties there were two injured men who were also prisoners. And then we started treating the men promptly, and then two other gunmen came in and tried to take those two patients out of the hospital. I refused to let the two gunmen take the injured men out. I told them that I could not allow them to take the two men.

**AY:** I got it. Did you know the gunmen, though?

**AM:** No.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** In any event, the gunmen were from clans that were in charge of the area that I was in. They were. Then they began to threaten me by pointing their guns on me.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I said they'd only take the men out over my dead body. At the time, I was still quite a young man. And I too had lots of raging testosterone.

**AY:** Okay, were you scared when you were standing on principles of saving the lives of your patients, even risking your own life?

**AM:** Of course. But the two men, as fellow Somalis besides being my patients, I could not have allowed them to be taken out to face certain death.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** They were taken as prisoners. In order to mislead the gunmen, I told them that they were not the men who took those prisoners. I told them that I was left to the prisoners by the real men who captured them in the battlefield.

**AY:** Those two wounded prisoners that the gunmen wanted to take, what clan did they belong to?

**AM:** The two men were from the Hawiye clan.

**AY:** The ones that they were going after him, what clan did they belong to?

**AM:** They were from the Darod [Daarood] clan.

**AY:** What sub-clan of Darod brought those two men to you in the first place?

**AM:** I don't know. There were amalgamations of sub-clans there at the time.

**AY:** [chuckles] You just made up the story that you were safekeeping the men for someone else.

**AM:** Yes. I did not even know who brought the men to the hospital. I was just made it up to make them leave us alone.

**AY:** Did the gunmen know that you yourself belonged to the Darod clan?

**AM:** They probably suspected that I belonged to that clan. Then one of them slapped me, and then after that there was an uproar and confrontation between the men and my clan. Eventually, the tension was lowered, and the men were asked to leave and they left without further incidents.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** For me that was one of the biggest threats that I personally faced. To be honest, when I look back now, I think my life was seriously endangered at the time during this incident. It was an attempt to kidnap those men and probably to kill them. By the grace of God, they were saved. They were Somali men of Muslim faith whose lives were saved. By the grace of God, they survived.

**AY:** Were these high-ranking officers or were they just civilian men?

**AM:** No, these were not high-ranking officials. You could tell if someone was a high-ranking officer or not. Those men, the way they dressed and the way they were talking, they were just normal Somali peasants.

**AY:** Do you recall their names? Would you be able to recognize them if you were to see them today?

**AM:** No, no, I don't recall their names.

**AY:** Did they recover from their wounds? You don't know where they ended up, do you?

**AM:** I do not know where they ended up. Shortly after they were discharged from the hospital, they were taken into custody. There, they were handed over to the Al-Etihaad Al-Islam at the time when Mohamed Farrah Aidid's militia was about to overrun the city. Prisoners were released or were handed to the Islamists forces. Al-Etihaad Al-Islam was there as well. The Islamists had a militia and military base in Kismayo. Their forces were using an old Soviet-built military garrison as a base in the outskirts of town. It was called Camp Forty-Three. That was their base. A man from the north by the name of Ibrahim Afghani was killed just the other day in the town of Baraawa [Brava]. I don't know if you have heard of his demise or not.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** He was the individual who was mainly responsible for establishing the base for the Islamists. In any event, the men were handed over to the Al-Etihaad Islamist forces. Eventually, they were released, though. They were left behind in the city when forces in charge of the city fled.

**AY:** So they were left behind. What was your next journey like for you? Was it the one that took you to the border and your arrival at the Liboi border crossings?

**AM:** Before arriving at the Liboi border crossings, we had embarked on a long trek known as Habaarwaalid [cursed by parents].

**AY:** Habaarwaalid.

**AM:** The name, which roughly translates "parents' curse," stems from a nickname that was given to the unforgiving, long route that masses of people took as they fled from Kismayo to the

Kenyan border. The route runs through very thick forest terrain and it is two hundred kilometers long. The terrain was similar to the Amazon rain forest. There was only one narrow paved route that ran from Kismayo to the Kenya. This route was originally used by khat [*qaad*, stimulant drug] smugglers and other unsavory characters. Mainly the commercial and well-traveled routes run through the city of Beled Hawo [Beledxaawo] to the north. But this route was a less traveled route. I think I had heard that the path was originally built by an individual named “Jama Blue” [Jama Buluug].

**AY:** What was he called?

**AM:** Jama Blue was his name.

**AY:** Jama Blue.

**AM:** Is that what I had heard, that he built the route? It is possible that it was built before him. This road called Habaarwaalid is a very narrow route. Vehicles began to stream out of Kismayo. It was surreal. There was a mass exodus and all kinds of vehicles and people that took that route seeking for safety sanctuary. This was an unpaved dirt road, and to make matters worse it was during the rainy season and vehicles were getting stuck in the mud. The two hundred kilometer journey that on a normal dry surface would take not more than a few hours was taking a few days to complete. The people traveling in vehicles, it would take them an average of three days to get to the border. When the vehicles began to approach the border crossings—and I doubt if you ever traveled that area—there were long traffic jams that were forty miles long. It was similar to the traffic jams you would see on the highway here when there is a bad accident or a big event. One of the harrowing ordeals that we faced during this trek on this narrow route called Habaarwaalid was the haphazardness and totally disorganized fashion of the three- to four-day journey.

**AY:** And was that during the rainy season?

**AM:** Yes. There was heavy rain, and the terrain was muddy and saturated.

**AY:** What month was it when you were embarking on this trek?

**AM:** I think the month was...

**AY:** Or what season was it?

**AM:** It was the spring season. I don't know what month it was, though.

**AY:** So it was springtime?

**AM:** I would not know the exact month.

**AY:** The only thing I know is that it was the springtime.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** It was just right after the holy month of Ramadan. And since the route was narrow and the trees were thick and brushes were dotted along the route, the passengers on the open air vehicles were exposed to the trees and branches. At times the passengers would be brought down by the thick bushes as the vehicles travel through the dense brushes.

**AY:** The trees.

**AM:** Even if the thick bushes didn't bring them down, the passengers would be scraped or scratched by thick growth of shrubs and the branches along the route. Those were some of the ordeals that we faced.

**AY:** So when you were fleeing and the mass exodus was happening through this route, was that triggered by the impending invasion of the city by the militia loyal to warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** The people who were fleeing the city for safety through this narrow route called Habaarwaalid, did they belong to one clan or were they from various clans and sub-clans?

**AM:** I would say that the vast majority of the fleeing people from the city belonged to one clan. They are mostly displaced people from Mogadishu. They fled to Kismayo at the outset of the conflict for safety, and they were displaced again from Kismayo and now they were fleeing toward the border. Anyways, there are other peoples from other clans who were fleeing with them as well.

**AY:** They were others as well?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** The fleeing people, who were chased by the marauding militia, were they being chased because of their specific clan identity and were they mostly from the Darod clan?

**AM:** Yes, they were.

**AY:** While they were fleeing and on this long difficulty journey toward the border, were there atrocities committed against the fleeing people? For example, were people killed or were there mothers who went into labor during the journey?

**AM:** Of course, those sorts of things were happening during the journey. I just want to go back to something that I missed. While we were still in Kismayo, the fleeing people mostly were mixtures of Darod and Isaaq sub-clans—the two clans were fleeing together from Aidid's militia.

**AY:** I mean your own family. I got it.

**AM:** We were.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** When we came to Kismayo from Mogadishu, the family we stayed with belonged to the Hawiye, Baadi-cadde sub-clan. The people whom we were fleeing from and that displaced us were the Hawiye clan as well.

**AY:** [chuckles] That is strange.

**AM:** We were related to that family. They welcomed us into their home.

**AY:** As far as the conflict's narratives were concerned, the people from the Isaaq clan should not be fleeing with you, and someone who was from the Hawiye clan should not have been welcoming you into his home.

**AM:** [chuckles] Yes, the family that we stayed with that welcomed us were family that we were related to that belonged to the Hawiye clan.

**AY:** So the family had lived in the city all along?

**AM:** The family had been residing there for a long time. This was their hometown.

**AY:** So although there was mass displacement of people and the clans were separating from each other and Darod clan fled to their city, this family still managed to stay put and remain there.

**AM:** Yes. The city of Kismayo was a very diverse city, and the clanism and clan identity were less strong there than other areas of the country. There were people from various clans who lived there together harmoniously for a long time.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** In the city there were mass clan separations. It was possible that there was a small number of people, and I actually knew some young men that were from the Hawiye that I had been friends with who went back to Mogadishu. Those were friends that we left Mogadishu together. But there were people like us who were outsiders. They were not locals.

**AY:** When you say those youth went back to Mogadishu, did they go back to there to take part in the fights and to support their clan's militia?

**AM:** No, no. They were just young men who left with their families.

**AY:** Oh, okay.

**AM:** With us was an Abgaal clansman who was married to my cousin.

**AY:** And he was one of the fleeing people.

**AM:** Yes, he was fleeing with us. I am mentioning all of those things to make a point about how confusing the whole situation was in term of the interplay of inter-clan conflicts.

**AY:** It was phenomenal.

**AM:** Mohamud, may God has mercy on soul, was with us as well. He recently passed away in Hargeisa.

**AY:** Did he die of natural causes?

**AM:** Yes, he died of natural causes. His brother and his entire family now live in Hargeisa. Mohamud, from the Abgaal clan, was with us as well as my cousins. My sisters-in-law and other Isaaq clansmen, eight of them to be exact, were with us as well. The fleeing families consist of mixtures of various clans.

**AY:** Amalgamation of sort.

**AM:** Yes. Then the good thing was that family that welcomed us into their home quite gracefully. However, the inter-clan conflict was heating up day by day.

**AY:** Right.

**AM:** We too became the guardians and the protectors of the family with which we were staying that welcomed us into their home.

**AY:** Yes, because of the interplay of inter-clan conflicts, whether they did something wrong or not, their minority status could make them a target of the rival dominant clans.

**AM:** It was possible that uncivilized people may harm them simply because of their clan lineages.

**AY:** Simply because of their lineages.

**AM:** Those were the people that welcomed us into the city after we fled our home.

**AY:** This is a very fascinating story.

**AM:** One of the crazy things about the Somali clan lineages was that the people don't necessarily know how their lineages are akin to each other.

**AY:** Yes.



**AM:** Those remarks were not my remarks but remarks that a wise man had uttered before. The man who coined the phrase was from Buuhoodle. During the military government, he was a high-ranking government official. One day, because of renewed conflict in the north, his clansmen were planning a meeting at his house to talk about clan matters. And at the house where they were planning to convene the meeting, there was a little boy who was the homeowner's nephew. The clansmen told the owner that they would like to convene the meeting and because boy is paternal to the rival Isaaq clan, they did not want the boy to be privy to the clan secrets, and they asked the homeowner to ask the boy to leave the house during the meeting.

**AY:** And they refer to his own nephew, his own sister's son.

**AM:** Yes. He has been raising and schooling him. He probably had more love for his nephew than the clansmen.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** He said he was not going to send his nephew out. And the clansmen said he was going to know the clan secrets.

**AY:** Just send him out.

**AM:** Yes. "We were respected men and we came to your house to host the meeting." That was when he made the remarks that the Somalis don't know how the lineage and the kinship relationship were supposed to work. He said this house belonged to the young man.

**AY:** Remarkable.

**AM:** Then I was reminded by those remarks that Somalis don't know how their lineages and their kinships were supposed to work.

**AY:** So after that long journey, eventually you made it to Kenya.

**AM:** Yes, we arrived at the border-crossing town called Dhobley. We had lived there for a long time with our families. At the border, we established a makeshift hospital because when we fled from Kismayo, the wounded and sick people that we were responsible for at the Kismayo hospital were brought along.

**AY:** So some of the patients at the hospital were brought along?

**AM:** Yes, all of our patients were transported out of the hospital when we were fleeing. Families picked up their own members who were being treated at the hospital when they started to flee from the city.

**AY:** Really?

**AM:** Yes. Not one patient was left behind.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We used trees to create shade and shelter to shield the patients from sun and wind. We continued to treat the patients in that makeshift hospital.

**AY:** Shade from the trees was used?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Tree shade.

**AM:** The area had many large acacia trees. One of the good things about Dhobley village was it had four rigs.

**AY:** When you say rigs, do you mean water wells?

**AM:** Motorized water wells that provided water to the residents.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** We settled there. We were on the Somali side of the border. And before people began to flee, it was a small village. Upon the arrival of all those fleeing people, the village's population had swelled.

**AY:** After people fled to it?

**AM:** Most of Kismayo's population had fled to the border village.

**AY:** They fled to the village.

**AM:** Then I was there at the makeshift hospital helping the patients. One of my specialties was to perform blood transfusions. There were many people at the clinics who were anemic.

**AY:** How would you do that? Did you have the equipment needed to perform blood transfusions at the clinics?

**AM:** Yes, we had the equipment. The procedure itself did not need complicated equipment. It was quite easy. We would not screen the blood for bloodborne illnesses because of dire needs. Patients may not survive long enough to wait for the test results to come back.

**AY:** The patients that were admitted at the makeshift hospital, what sorts of injuries and wounds were they suffering from?

**AM:** Well, almost all of them were suffering from gunshot or shrapnel wounds. There were

people who had physical and mental ailments. Maternal illnesses were common health problems. However, those common health problems were overshadowed by the gunshot and shrapnel wounds.

**AY:** Gunshot wounds.

**AM:** Those were open wounds that needed dressing, stitching, and IV fluid treatments. It was a big job.

**AY:** It was?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** How long had you been there?

**AM:** At some point my friend crossed the border into Kenya proper. There we were at a refugee camp briefly at Liboi crossing. The camp we were in was about thirty kilometers inside Kenya. The border crossing is not at Liboi.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The Kenyan town is not exactly at the border. It is a bit further away from the crossing. I think the town is approximately seventeen miles away from the crossing.

**AY:** So the town was a bit away from the crossing?

**AM:** It was about seventeen or sixteen miles away. That's where the family went—the refugee camps where some nonprofit agencies were operating to assist the newly arrived refugees. I did not go with the rest of the family. I stayed behind at the Somali side of the border. I remained there for about an additional three more months to help out the patients.

**AY:** So you stayed behind just to help out?

**AM:** Yes. Then a friend of mine who was also my classmate back at the public health school in Mogadishu sent a message to me saying that he had found a job for me at the camps. He was saying that a public health position was open at the camp where he was. There was great need for public health personnel at the newly formed camps.

**AY:** Were those camps the ones on the Kenyan side of the border?

**AM:** Yes. I was reluctant to go there. I stayed there for a lot more time after I received the job offer from him. Eventually, I had to cross the border into the Kenya. My friend introduced me to an American gentleman from Fargo who has become a friend of mine since.

**AY:** Is he here now?

**AM:** He is in Fargo now.

**AY:** Okay. Was the gentleman working there at the time?

**AM:** Yes, he was assigned to the camps to address public health needs of the camps. His specialty was public health projects. He was tasked to deal with issues related to settlements, sanitations, housing, water facilities, and any other activities related to the public health needs of the population.

**AY:** Who was he working for at that time?

**AM:** He was working for a nonprofit agency called CARE [Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere].

**AY:** Oh, he was working for CARE?

**AM:** Then, the man's name is Herb Ludwig, Jr.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Then I was introduced to Herb upon arrival on the other sides of border, which is where his office was located.

**AY:** Forgive me. Let me interrupt you for a minute. For the refugees on both side of the border, are they being supplied foods and other necessities by the nonprofit agencies?

**AM:** Yes, mostly by the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees]. There were other people there as well who were working for smaller agencies like MRF, CARE, and the Red Cross. I am taking about when the camps were new and were being established. I don't know who else was there later on.

**AY:** At the time.

**AM:** At the time, there was a small clinic made of small tents. I joined the clinic and I was given my own private small tent office.

**AY:** At the camp.

**AM:** At the camp. It was the first office that was my own, albeit a tent office. At other camps, I did not have my own private office. The people from the public health and the people from other health departments, we were all mixed together.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Then that was where my work started. I was the only public health professional that had been working with the gentleman. The public health administration encompassed a large swath

of public works projects. It dealt with issues ranging from establishing refugee settlements to digging water wells to sanitation facilities. We also dealt with ways in which we could prevent the outbreak of communicable diseases at the camps. Given the squalid conditions of camps, that task was a big one. The main causes of deaths at the camps were not caused by the conflicts. It was the diseases caused by poor sanitation and hygiene. Squalid conditions and poor sanitation were twin killers. When people were displaced from their homes, and they don't have toilet facilities, they don't have running water, they don't have shelters, the conditions set the stage for communicable diseases to spread like a wildfire. Some of the common diseases that played havoc with population were mostly abdominal waterborne diseases, including diarrhea, dysentery, and typhoid fever.

**AY:** In English it is called typhoid fever. What about the one called *dacuun* [cholera] in Somali?

**AM:** Oh, *dacuun* is called cholera in English, but I haven't observed or heard of any cholera outbreaks.

**AY:** Oh, it is called cholera.

**AM:** There was hepatitis A, which was one of the communicable diseases that was prevalent in the camps. The Somalis called that disease both jaundice and *indha-caseeye*—rough translation is “yellowish eyes.”

**AY:** So it is called both names?

**AM:** Yes. Those were the diseases that inflicted heavy losses in the population.

**AY:** They spread fast.

**AM:** They spread fast and they spread because of lack of toilets and clean drinking water. Some of the diseases were spread by flies and mosquitoes. We developed a project designed to address sanitation problems as well as the whole refugee camps settlement planning. One of the projects we worked on developing was installing water wells where the refugees could go to get clean drinking water. Before the wells were dug, the refugees would get their water from ponds and creeks near the settlement, and water from those ponds and creeks was not suitable for drinking. So immediately we began a project to get clean running water to refugees.

**AY:** Wells.

**AM:** There were some wells before. However, the number of wells was increased significantly later because they were not sufficient to address the need of the refugee population.

**AY:** Oh, okay.

**AM:** We were able to extend water on each family's neighborhood. What we did was we installed one pipe carrying running water to every few blocks or so. We also established little roads that ran through the camp settlements. But the main goal for us was to establish one toilet

facility for each household in the camp's settlement. You know how people always emulate each other. We said to the families that if a family wanted to install a toilet in their residence, we were going to help them with some of construction materials needed to install the toilet. We told them if you are going to dig the hole for a toilet, we were going to give the tools needed to dig the hole as well as cement and the other items needed to finish the toilet facility. We told them we were going to support any family that wanted to establish a latrine for themselves. We also made it clear that for the families to take advantage of the offer, the families themselves must initiate the process by digging the hole. Most of the people were educated people who fled from urban centers like Mogadishu and Kismayo. So no one wanted to go to the bush for relief. People began to build their own toilets and it was quite easy for us to convince them. And then some of diseases that were prevalent before began to subside.

Those kinds of projects did not exist in the Dhobley camp on the other side of the border. In Dhobley, lots of people perished there because of communicable diseases caused by the lack of proper sanitation and poor living conditions. They died of those communicable diseases. Eventually, many people began to cross the border into our side, though.

Thanks to God, I was also working on another project where I was performing health inspections on animals slated for slaughtering. We were inspecting the health conditions of animals before they were slaughtered to ensure they were healthy and thereby safe for human consumption. There were diseases that were in some animals' livers and if you were a trained public health care professional, we would notice the conditions' presence by simply looking at animals' vital organs. I would perform that job in the early morning hours every day. It was my job to inspect all the animals that were being slaughtered beforehand. The butchers were not allowed to slaughter one single livestock without my inspections.

**AY:** I got it. What sort of tool would you use to inspect the animal?

**AM:** I was not using any tool to perform the inspections. However, when I was in Mogadishu, I was trained how to visually inspect animals for diseases. So it was my technique.

**AY:** Was it your technique to physically touch the animal to inspect whether they have diseases or not?

**AM:** Not just touching, but by also visually inspecting the animals. By just looking at it, you could easily tell which animal is sick, which animal is healthy. It is a similar process as being able to tell whether someone is physically healthy or whether someone is ailing. Obviously animals are mute and can't communicate verbally.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** One of the areas that we would pay attention to when inspecting animals for diseases were the eyes. We also would look at the animal's mouth. If an animal was drooling too much or its mouth was extremely dry, that was a telltale sign of certain illnesses. We were not veterinarians, but we were trained as public health professionals to look for certain signs and symptoms.

**AY:** I got it. So you crossed the border and came to the refugee camps and you performed those jobs. When did you start to dream to go to America? Were you at all interested in going to America?

**AM:** I was not really planning to go to America at that time.

**AY:** Were you aware that there was this place called America?

**AM:** Yes, I was.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** Back in Mogadishu when we were still students, we were aware of the American pop culture icons like Michael Jackson. Some kids would even cut their hair in certain fashions to emulate and to copy their American pop culture idols.

**AY:** Were you one of those kids emulating the American popular culture icons' style?

**AM:** I was not one of them. I was actually very surprised by their dedication to their idols, you know. [chuckles] I was quite conservative in my cultural leaning. I mean, I was born into a Somali family.

**AY:** So you were content with your old-style cultural taste?

**AM:** The northerners were always culturally more conservative than the southerners.

**AY:** So they were rigid and strict culturally?

**AM:** For me, it was my faith that influenced my thoughts. You know, while I was performing my national service, I had experienced a mini religious awakening and enlightenment. Because of certain values that I was espousing, I was not one of the youths that were enticed by those things.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** To come back to your question, after working on those projects for several months and doing what I could to help out the community—and mind you I was still quite a young man—then what happened was I had a brother-in-law who came with us who had Tanzanian citizenship.

**AY:** That was when he went to Tanzania.

**AM:** He was a traveler, and he had been to many places and somehow obtained a Tanzanian citizenship.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** He also spoke Swahili since he was a Tanzanian citizen. He told the other family members that he intended to take me there with his wife and children.

**AY:** You?

**AM:** Yes. He said that he would like to try to look for a better future for me elsewhere.

**AY:** Forgive my interruption. Before he said that he wanted to try to find a better future for you and when you were busy with helping out the people, had you thought about your own future or you did not even have time for that?

**AM:** If I look back now at what my thinking was about my future at the time, there was a gentleman by the name of Jama Labo-qoys—he has passed away now—and when we were in Mogadishu, he was the head of the city's water supply department. I had heard at some point that the gentleman had received sponsorship from his relatives in the West and he might be allowed to immigrate there. I had heard that the man had passed on an opportunity to immigrate to America. I had told my friend Herb about what I had heard. I told him that the gentleman rejected the opportunity and the offer to go to America. At that point, I was convinced that there was something wrong with the gentleman. He liked what he was doing in the camps, and he was not willing to go to get a better life for him and for his offspring.

**AY:** Was he there with you at that time?

**AM:** Oh, the gentleman was one of the officials at the camp that was tasked to help the refugees.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Herb then was a bit older than me, and he said to me that this gentleman was a very intelligent and caring man. Herb said the reason he was not leaving was he did not want to leave behind his people while they were suffering. He wanted to help them as much as he could. You got it?

**AY:** Yes. He did not want to put his own interests ahead of everybody else.

**AM:** Yes. He was not too worried about his own interests. He was worried about the collective interest of his community at large. I did not appreciate the logic and concept behind his thinking at the time because I was a strapping young man who was just interested in finding a better life than the one I had.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I appreciate the depth of the man's compassion.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I also received advice from other people. They were advising me that I had a fine job and



my future may not be bright if I were to go ahead to move with my brother-in-law's family. They were saying that those Swahili-speaking countries were dead-end countries. They were telling me not to go there, that I had the best job in town. They were like, "Where are you rushing to?"

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** Then the elderly men actually admonished me by saying, "Don't neglect your job." Those elderly men, including my own father, may God have mercy on him.

**AY:** Let me take you back a bit to when you were in the camps. It appeared that you are suggesting that you were in search of a better future and everything you were doing was toward that journey. Is that accurate?

**AM:** Yes. The life that I was living was not a stable one, and, besides helping the people, it was not one that was satisfying me.

**AY:** I got it. Was it because you were keenly aware the fact that you were a refugee? Or was it because of the collapsing of the state? Or was it both?

**AM:** No. I was someone who was educated in a capital city and came from a clean, spacious environment. I was viewing myself as a cultured person, and when I was in Mogadishu, young men always dreamed of going abroad for a better life.

**AY:** Those things started at the time when the destruction of the country was about to happen.

**AM:** Yes. And back in Mogadishu, people who were able to go to abroad were looked up to. When we hear someone went abroad and requested for political asylum, he was accepted.

**AY:** They were given asylum.

**AM:** And then mostly it was the Scandinavian countries like Holland that were accepting refugees at that time.

**AY:** Was that big news then?

**AM:** Yes. We would hear so and so had requested an asylum and was accepted. Those two words were really powerful. And myself, I was just chasing that dream.

**AY:** So here you had an opportunity. Your brother-in-law came forward and said that he wanted to take you to where he was headed.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** I left with him. He was driving the same vehicle that he drove in Mogadishu. While he was

in Kenya, my brother-in-law obtained a driver's license. I mean, he was someone who was cultured and urbane.

**AY:** So he was sophisticated?

**AM:** He was quite sophisticated.

**AY:** Was he still maintaining his Tanzanian citizenship?

**AM:** Yes, he did. He still had his Tanzanian citizenship.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Although he did not get a Kenyan plate and registration for his vehicle, he had permit papers to travel the vehicle inside the country. He had his vehicle in the camp, though.

**AY:** What kind vehicle did he have?

**AM:** [chuckle] I think he had a vehicle, the Somalis nowadays called it Market-II.

**AY:** Was it a truck or was it a small vehicle?

**AM:** No, no. It was a sedan. A Cressida station wagon, you know.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Okay, it was a small car.

**AY:** Okay, I got it.

**AM:** [chuckles] Then my sister who was married to him and I had discussed the whole situation, and finally I made my mind up and said that I wanted to go with my sister's family. Then we all left the camps together and went to Nairobi. And then we continued our journey, and we eventually arrived in the Tanzanian capital, Dar es Salaam. We stayed there for almost a year. So we stayed in Dar es Salaam for a while. For those of us who were not citizens, we were given refugee status.

**AY:** So Tanzania had given you refugee status?

**AM:** They were temporary papers which were renewed once a month

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** So there was a small stipend that was given to everyone. I think the amount of the money was about sixty thousand in Tanzanian currency.

**AY:** Do the Tanzanians use the shilling as a currency unit?

**AM:** Yes. It wasn't really worth much.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I don't know. It was equivalent to about thirty dollars. They would give that small amount of stipend to every adult every month.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Securing that little support was difficult. We had to go through a lot to even get that. A lot of young people including myself went to the UNHCR office there to register with that agency as refugees. The UNHCR did not want to register us as refugees. Then we protested inside the agency's camp grounds.

**AY:** How many of you were protesting?

**AM:** Initially, there were about forty of us. They did not want register us as conventional refugees. There was this foreign lady from West Africa who was in charge of the agency's local office. There was lots of corruption and mismanagement there at the time, and they did not want accept anyone as a refugee.

**AY:** I got it. Did they want bribes from you to register or they just did not want to do it?

**AM:** Somehow there was an agreement between the Tanzanian government's foreign ministry and the agency's office stating not to give new refugees a legal status in the country.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then we conducted a sit-in at the agency's office to protest, and we told them that we were not going to leave until we got refugee status.

**AY:** Really?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it. So who else was with you? Were you one of the organizers of the protest?

**AM:** There were lots of people involved in the protest. I was one of the people.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then we refused to leave the facility that night and stayed there until closing time at 5:00 p.m. Then they called the security force on us. They brought in the Tanzanian policemen and when they ordered us to leave the premises, we refused to do so. Then they started to fire their

weapons into the air. They were blustering and trying to scare us. They did not appreciate the fact that we came from a place that had lots of gun violence. We didn't pay attention to their tactics. We gathered rocks and began to throw those rocks at them to fight back.

**AY:** You gathered rocks, is that right?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it. Weren't you inside the facility? Where did you get the rocks?

**AM:** We were inside. There were some rocks in there. I think they were remnants of some recent construction work.

**AY:** Yes, okay.

**AM:** I think the local police realized that if the situation escalated and they harmed us on UN [United Nations] grounds, it would be bad publicity for the UN for their country.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Then they decided to leave us alone. Then they made a decision to isolate us. In other words, they would not allow anyone to enter the facility. They also would not allow us to get food from outside. They were trying to test our resolve and how long we could stay there. They thought that we would get the heck out of there the next day. We stayed put at the UN office grounds for six long days.

**AY:** Had you had anything to eat or drink during this time?

**AM:** We'd had something to eat. There were Somali men who had lived in the city who offered us assistance.

**AY:** So, okay, you protested for some time, six days to be exact.

**AM:** The UN camp. Their main office, I mean, their headquarters.

**AY:** Yes, so, eventually you were recognized as refugees, correct?

**AM:** Yes, eventually we were given temporary refugee status and we began to receive that small stipend.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then I started to learn the local Swahili language. And I learned quite well because the Tanzanian life and the Kenyan life were not the same. In Kenya, everybody, even the janitors spoke in English. You could communicate with them. For the Tanzanians, unless they were college-educated senior government officials, the lay people mostly did not speak English.

**AY:** They would speak only in Swahili.

**AM:** Only in Swahili. They speak with the authentic Swahili language. The Tanzanians and the Kenyans in the coastal areas are the only people that speak the original authentic Swahili.

**AY:** Yes, I got it.

**AM:** The city looked like Mogadishu. I don't mean how it looks nowadays. I am talking about back in 1992. It was a very peaceful and stable city. The life in the city was not conducive to my dreams. I decided to leave there.

**AY:** I got it. Let me slow you down a little bit. How did you learn the Swahili language? Did you learn through reading materials or were you talking to people in Swahili? And how long had you been there?

**AM:** I was in Tanzania for nine months.

**AY:** So did you learn in your Swahili language in just nine months?

**AM:** The Swahili language is not that difficult to learn. First, it has lots of Arabic words, so if you know Arabic, it becomes easier to learn. Secondly, if you were relatively young and you had school experiences, you could buy some books to learn the language. I bought some books and started to use the language when I was interacting with the locals. As I used the language more and more with my limited skills, I gradually improved my language skills. I forced myself to learn easy phrases first and I moved to more complicated concepts. I can't say I was fluent, though, but by the time I left there I did not need anyone to act as an interpreter for me when I was communicating with the Swahili-speaking people.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** I analyzed my goals and my life in Tanzania, and I come to the realization that I did not have a bright future there. Most people at the time were headed to South Africa. You know, further migration to South Africa was what I was contemplating. That is how I ended up leaving there for another country.

**AY:** At that point you were still registering as a refugee, you did not wait around to see what happened? When you were a registered refugee, did that mean that you were hoping to be resettled in one of the western countries?

**AM:** No, we were not expecting resettlement in the West, but we had temporary legal papers there and we were getting the little stipend as well.

**AY:** Yes, that was what you were interested in.

**AM:** We had a legal status there that allowed us to stay in the country legally. Otherwise, if we

did not have the legal status, we would be considered refugees thereby we would be illegal immigrants.

**AY:** Yes. So you were in the process of regulations?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then, the city I was in was similar to Somalia in term of its climate. The weather was rather tropical. Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania were very similar in that aspect.

**AY:** Yes, those three cities.

**AM:** Their formulas and structures were the same. They were all coastal cities. There was religious diversity in the city as well. Muslims and Christians live side by side. Not just Muslims and Christians, but also other religious minorities, including locally-practiced African religions. The Tanzanians were probably the most tolerant people on earth.

**AY:** The Tanzanians?

**AM:** Yes. They are not violent people. The Christians and Muslims debated over religion all the day long. The townspeople would meet up at the town square called Mnazi Moja to debate all day long about religion.

**AY:** Mnazi Moja.

**AM:** Mnazi Moja.

**AY:** What does “moja” mean?

**AM:** Mnazi Moja means square one in Swahili.

**AY:** “Moja”?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The townspeople would meet at this public square. It is almost like a religious seminary. Every afternoon people would gather there. Back home there was a place called “Ceel-Gaab” that was similar to the town square. On one end of the square, there were vendors selling all kinds of traditional medicines and healing herbs. And on another corner of the square, there were magic practitioners dedicated to practicing sorcery and witchcraft. It was real wizardry. The third area of the square was a forum for religious discussions and debates.

**AY:** So there were three different sections on the square.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** So in the afternoon the townspeople go there to watch the spectacles there. At the religious debate forums, Muslim clerics gave their sermons. One way to distinguish those of Muslim faith from others was their skullcaps, the little skullcaps that they wore. They'd even question the authenticity of your Muslim faith if you were not wearing one.

**AY:** If you did not have one on you, they would get it for you.

**AM:** [chuckles] Yes. The clerics would debate about theological matters all day long.

**AY:** Were the debates taking place every afternoon?

**AM:** Yes, every afternoon. It was a public forum.

**AY:** I got it. So some of the people are just listening to the debates?

**AM:** Yes, they were.

**AY:** Was anyone who wanted to take part of the debate allowed to do so?

**AM:** Some people would convert to Islam. I had not seen anyone who had converted out of Islam. But there were strong and vigorous debates among the theologians about the truthfulness or the righteousness of their particular faith.

**AY:** There might have been some, but perhaps you were not paying attention to them. [chuckles]

**AM:** That was a possibility. That was quite possible. [chuckles]

**AY:** So the people participating in the debates about religion, were they clergies pre-selected to argue their points? Or were they just lay people who would just line up to opine about religion?

**AM:** No, the speakers were people who organized themselves beforehand. Recently you saw how different schools within Sunni Islam like Qadiria or Salafism would debate about the righteousness of their sect on TV. It was similar to that. But this was an open informal forum that was held every afternoon. And people would come and listen to the debates. You could debate and argue your religion's righteousness, but it was illegal and against the law to denigrate or disparage any particular religion. Open debates were allowed, but if someone were to make derogatory remarks about any particular religion, there were security personnel on the forum that would take that person into custody.

**AY:** Do you mean any religion, be it Christianity or Islam?

**AM:** Yes, yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** It was a nice, open, tolerant place. After I had been there for a while, I decided to continue my journey. This time I was headed toward South Africa. There [in Tanzania], I separated from the family I was with. I took a little vehicle that would travel through the countries in the area. Zambia, which was the country next to Tanzania, was a landlocked country. It would use the Tanzanian ports. My destination was South Africa, but there were a few other countries that I needed to go through to get there. I think I took a bus out of town initially that headed to the border.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** There was an eatery in Tanzania, a restaurant, eatery.

**AY:** Yes. A dining place.

**AM:** The people from the north called that kind of establishment *hudheel* [hotel].

**AY:** Yes, the northerners called it *hudheel*.

**AM:** So it was a *hudheel*. [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** We were trying to spell it out so people can get it.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** I met the distant uncle in Dar es Salaam at first. He used to visit Dar es Salaam while I was there. He lived near the border between the two countries, and I met him there. He welcomed me warmly. He told me that he would put me in a regular passenger vehicle. At that point, I had not gotten through the border checkpoint at immigration yet. I had some doubts about the legality of the documents that I had. I could not be certain whether my documents were legal or not. Somehow, I obtained them when I was there.

**AY:** So the place you were at when you were avoiding the border guards, was that in Tanzania or in Zambia?

**AM:** I was at the Tanzania-Zambia border. I was afraid that the Tanzanians would say that, “You were a Somali refugee who just had gotten into our country. How did you obtain these papers in our country?”

**AY:** Oh, okay.



**AM:** I was just new to the situation.

**AY:** You did not want to rock the boat?

**AM:** Luckily, my uncle had connections to local authorities. He took my passport and got entry-exit stamps from Tanzania to Zambia on it. The Somalis who lived near the borders were very resourceful. They would do everything to help their own fellow countrymen. My distant uncle did not ask anything from me. He was just helping me out.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Then we left there with a small car, one of those small cars that was imported through the Dar es Salaam port. It was a brand new car. I did not know who it belonged to—the government or some wealthy person. There were about six or seven other vehicles with it. So we traveled on those new cars. There were about four of us, all Somalis, traveling together. They were all young men just like me. We all knew each other in Dar es Salaam.

**AY:** I got it. Did you agree to meet up there?

**AM:** No. I was by myself at the beginning of journey. I met them up there and then we began to travel together. We rented out one of those rental vehicles for our travel. They did not even put plate numbers on it yet. That's how brand new it was. Those vehicles took us all the way to the capital of the country—Lusaka, Zambia

**AY:** I got it. Before you even start your journey, you would gather information about what was ahead.

**AY:** Yes. You would know who was on the way. The same way the nomadic travelers would inquire about the clans and sub-clan inhabitants on their way when traveling. You would ask who is there and then you learned so and so were there and living in that town or that area. You just gather information about the relatives on your way and the people in your own clan that might be there to help.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** So I had another uncle by the name of Abdi Aftaag who was living in Lusaka at the time. He ran small trucking business there.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** He owned a few lorries.

**AY:** I got it. One of the other strange things about the Somalis and their travels was that when they travel, they may have relatives or family members situated all along the route.

**AM:** That is true. They may have relatives living along their way.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Then my goal was to get to him in Zambia. I just wanted to stay with him for a little bit in Zambia.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** The other men that I was traveling with and I agreed to meet up at a place that belonged to a lady with whom we shared common ancestry. The lady's name was Mama Asha. This lady would allow the travelling Somalis and Ethiopians to stay at her home. She also owned a small motel there. If someone could afford to pay her for her hospitality, she would ask for payment. If someone did not have money to pay her, she would allow him or her to stay there free of charge.

**AY:** Fascinating!

**AM:** She was called Mama Asha.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The other guys were Somali Kenyan. Mama Asha's information would be given to the Somalis traveling through Zambia. For example, they would be told beforehand that when you get to Lusaka, Zambia, ask for Mama Asha motel.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** First there was this other town that you would go through called Kanyama. There was another town on the Ugandan border that had a similar name. You would tell your guide or driver to, "Take me to Kanyama."

**AY:** I got it. So does Kanyama mean what we the northerners used to call the bus station?

**AM:** No, Kanyama was a Somali neighborhood. It was a small mostly Somali enclave in the city. It was similar to Nairobi's Eastleigh slums.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** When you get there, whether you get there by bus or whether you could afford to take a taxi, you would ask the drivers to take you to Mama Asha's place. Everybody knew her. She had lived there for a long time. Mama Asha's establishment and the house for the uncle where I was going to stay were a few block apart. The Somali community in the city was very small, and there were two distinct groups within that small community in Lusaka. One of the groups was a wealthy group of people. They mostly owned and operated trucking businesses and some of them had many trucks. Some of them had as many as one hundred commercial vehicles.

**AY:** Did they really own that many vehicles?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** They would count and brand their trucks as you would count and brand your own flocks of camels. And I am only talking about the commercial over the road trucks. I am not talking about small passenger vehicles. I am only talking about transport vehicles. The impoverished Somalis lived in that neighborhood called Kanyama. The wealthier people lived in more affluent areas of the city.

**AY:** I got it. So was the Kanyama an area for the indigent and impoverished people?

**AM:** Yes, it was for the indigents. That's where we were headed.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We ended up getting there, and I found my distant uncle right away. I stayed there with my uncle, I think, for almost two months. My uncle told me to stay with him and he even offered me a job. He said I could work for him by running his trucking business for him. He was saying that I was an educated young man and he needed my assistance. I told him that I would think about the job offer.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** [chuckles] The uncle's wife, I was related to her, too.

**AY:** Yes?

**AM:** In fact, she was a distant aunt from my mother's side of my family. So I had a blood relationship to both sides of the family. Both the husband and the wife were decent people. They welcomed me with open arms.

**AY:** Did they have offspring of their own?

**AM:** No.

**AY:** So they did not have any children?

**AM:** No, they did not have children.

**AY:** No offspring of their own at all?

**AM:** No. No offspring of their own. When I was with them for almost two months, I told my uncle that I would like to continue to my journey toward South Africa. He was surprised by my

decision and he asked me why would I want to go to South Africa. I told him that I would like to migrate to faraway places.

**AY:** Okay. So your entire journey began in Somalia and then you went to Kenya?

**AM:** Tanzania.

**AY:** Tanzania. Then Zambia. Zambia was your fourth country that you had been to?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it. And you were still continuing your journey, right?

**AM:** Yes. When my uncle realized that I was determined to continue my journey, he gave me some money to use for my journey to South Africa and wished me luck. Then I found another guy.

**AY:** Before you left Tanzania—no—I mean before you left Zambia?

**AM:** In Lusaka, my uncle's home had a small shrine for prayers. So I met the guy at the shrine. At the time when we met at the shrine we did not know beforehand, but we became good friends fast. We began talking and then we both realized that we were both headed to the same place. We decided then to travel together to South Africa. We were told before we even left that the entire country of South Africa was surrounded by electric barbed wires. We were told that it was difficult for anyone to get into the country. It was not a place where one could easily get into. Before we started the journey, we left behind all of our belongings. On our earlier journeys, we were carrying luggage and everything. I was carrying everything that belonged to me. I was carrying my credentials and my passports, including the Tanzanian refugee papers and the Somali passports. All my legal papers and everything else I had, I left there. I left it at my uncle's home. Luckily, I was able to recover some of the materials that I left there later. My sister who came here recently brought that old history to me, including photographs I took before I fled Mogadishu. [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles] Those are the ones that I need to see.

**AM:** Some of these things that I recovered recently were away from me for more than twenty years.

**AY:** You probably could recognize your photos when you saw them recently.

**AM:** Yes. [chuckles] Then the guy that was traveling with me and I—by the way, his name was Hassan—had begun to plan our trip. Hassan and I were determined to get to South Africa. So there were two ways to get to South Africa. We could go through Zimbabwe or we could go to Zimbabwe and then Botswana.

**AY:** So then, okay, you would need to go through two countries. Why would you go through two

countries if you could get there by going through one country?

**AM:** We figured instead of going through two counties it would be easier to go through to only the country of Zimbabwe. We are talking about back in 1992 and there were not too many Somalis traveling at the time through those countries. People in those areas were not as familiar to the Somalis as they are now.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then after much trepidation, we started our journey by traveling on a bus together. None of us was carrying any luggage. Each one of us had three pants and we were wearing them over each other.

**AY:** Were you really wearing the pants over each other?

**AM:** Yes. Three shirts that we were also wearing, we wore them over each other as well as a jacket. The weather there was cold and foggy. That was how we were carrying our clothes.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** We were carrying our belongings without a suitcase.

**AY:** [chuckles] You put on all your clothes?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** So was it only the two of you that were traveling?

**AM:** It was Hassan and I only.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Hassan lives here now in Minneapolis with his family.

**AY:** Oh really?

**AM:** Oh yeah. His children and his entire family are here now. We came here together.

**AY:** You and Hassan?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** His name is Hassan, but he is affectionately known as “Hassan Dheere.”

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We were going by the information we were provided. One of the most harrowing pieces of information we had was that once we got to Livingston, which was a place located on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, then there was only one Somali guy known to be in that whole area. We were told to go to the mosque for assistance. There was one Somali guy that was attending college there.

**AY:** In Zimbabwe?

**AM:** The border town itself is Livingston. The town actually straddles on both sides of the border. One section of the city was in Zambia while another section was in Zimbabwe.

**AY:** I got it. Did both sections of city share the same name?

**AM:** Yes. And at the time Zimbabwe was not suffering the kind of devastations that it had endured lately. It was doing quite well in those days. Its cities Harare and Bulawayo were actually booming at the time. They were some of most beautiful places in Africa.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We learned while we were on the journey that there was a Somali man from the north who owned a butcher shop in Harare. There was an old funny story about the guy. The story was that he was working as a butcher for a white Rhodesia man and then he took a vacation to go to his hometown of Burao [Burco] in northern Somalia. Then he came back from that extended vacation, which lasted a year or two. His employer, an English man who was probably a member of the Smith ruling elite, said to him, "Where had you been?" [chuckles]

**AY:** They used to be called Rhodesia.

**AM:** Then the man said that his clan had chosen him to be their clan chief. Not just clan elder, but a full clan chief. He told his English employer that he was a chief now. [chuckles] The English man was really surprised by the sudden rise to power by his employee. He could not believe his employee was a king now and he said, "From butcher to king, that's a really big jump." [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles] Okay.

**AM:** I am talking about the guy in the story.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** I did not meet the guy, but we had heard the stories about him. Then we made it to the border town of Livingston. The city was located near a beautiful tourist destination that attracts thousands of foreigners every year called Victoria Falls. It had a waterfall, and it was a place where the widest river in Africa originates. It was called the Zambezi River. The Nile River was

the longest river, but this is the widest.

**AY:** Nile River is the longest, yes.

**AM:** This Zambezi River runs through several African nations. The river starts at Victoria Falls.

**AY:** Oh, that's where it starts?

**AM:** Yes. Have you seen the waterfall near Buffalo? What was its name?

**AY:** Niagara Falls.

**AM:** Niagara Falls pales in comparison to Victoria Falls. There's a helicopter hovering to protect the endangered species at the attraction.

**AY:** Oh really?

**AM:** You could not even imagine the number of wild and exotic animals that were in its wildlife refuge. There were alligator, hippopotamus, water buffalos, elephants, and other rare wild life. The white tourists from European countries like England and other places would rent the helicopter to fly over the wonder to view the wild and exotic animals from above. There were all kinds of wild and exotic animals in there.

**AY:** The wild animals.

**AM:** There were rhinoceros there too. We got to the Zambian side of the border. Zambia at the time was rather an impoverished country.

**AY:** Do you mean in terms of the economic output?

**AM:** Yes. Copper was the main commodity that the country was exporting and the copper price had been falling at the time. Zimbabwe, on the other hand, was the opposite of Zambia. Its economy was doing well. So Zimbabwe was guarding its border tightly to keep migrant workers from poorer countries out and at bay. The situation has reversed itself since. Now it is Zimbabweans that other countries want keep out of their countries.

**AY:** Robert Mugabe debased it.

**AM:** We were to pass through the Zambian border without difficulty. I am so sure that we can say with certainty, and I am sure I disagree with you on your statement.

**AY:** As far as my own personal view was concerned.

**AM:** Oh yes. That's your personal opinion. I understand you and I have had some disagreement over some matters. [chuckles] That's a long story.

**AY:** [chuckles] That is fine. Let us move on.

**AM:** So we finally made it to the Zimbabwean border. And at the border, we put some lotion on our skin and we also cleaned our clothes. We were trying blend in, in order to avoid detection. The border guards accosted us and asked us, “Where did you guys come from?” We told them that we were tourists.

**AY:** Perfect.

**AM:** Okay, then they asked us our nationality and we had the nerve to tell them that we were from Saudi Arabia. [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles] Okay.

**AM:** Hassan, my friend, he does not speak English that well. It is I who spoke some limited English. We told them that we were from Saudi Arabia.

**AY:** The limited English that you spoke, was that something you had learned in Mogadishu?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** And you learned while you were in school, right?

**AM:** Yes, and while I was in college as well. Yes, even when I was little in Las Anod, I had practiced some English language skills, albeit limited. No one formally taught us, but I would read books called Book-I and Book-II for Africa. Subsequently, I learned more English as I began to take classes and subjects in English. We told the border guards we were Saudi nationals. And they said okay, they believed us. Because Hassan was a tall, lanky, light-skinned guy. They thought what we were telling them was true given Hassan physical appearances. [chuckles] They released us and we toured the whole area including the nature conservation.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** One of the reasons we left all our belongings was that we were told that we might have to cross a river by foot in order to sneak into the country we were going to.

**AY:** Wonderful.

**AM:** The river they were talking about was not a regular river. You know, it was like where the Shabelle River ends, and it is like a delta. Hawaay [name of a town]. It was a lake or stream. It would flow like a river at first and then it would stop downstream and begin to expand sideways on flat land. And where the water falls was where the other river was starting. It was surrounded by lakes and streams and small ponds and pools of still waters. It was similar to Haramaya near Harar or ours right here.

**AY:** Yes.



**AM:** There were shallow lakes, ponds, and streams.

**AY:** And when you were claiming to be a tourists, were you trying to scout or perhaps probe the area?

**AM:** Yes, we wanted to find a place where we could cross the border. We were just looking for an easy spot to cross the border. Then we kept going and came to a place where we disrobed down to boxer shorts. We placed the rest of the meager clothing in plastic bags and carried them on our heads. We kept walking and walking. We were told to cross the river during the day because it was even more dangerous to cross the river at night. The river had all kind of dangerous wild animals including crocodiles, hippopotamus, and big poisonous snakes.

**AY:** Yes?

**AM:** Yes, it was filled with those kinds of untamed wild and weird animals.

**AY:** Now were you actually trying to walk through the river?

**AM:** Yes, we already had begun to wade in the river, and in fact we had already crossed most of the river. It was just one river that we were crossing. There were series of small rivers and streams to cross.

**AY:** Oh, they were shallow?

**AM:** It was shallow water. It was not that deep.

**AY:** Oh, while you were walking through, had you attempted to swim yet?

**AM:** No, not yet, we did not swim. The water levels might reach at about our chest level.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We kept going, and then at times we would come across just a still body of water, stream, river, or ponds. Eventually we came across the big wide river that had a strong current. The other rivers and streams that we had walked through until that point were small and narrow. This was a big one and the current flow was very strong. I said to my friend Hassan that we would not be able to cross the river here. I told him the water was too dangerous for even savvy swimmers. When a river's current flow was so strong, it could even wash away vehicles and even a savvy swimmer would have had a hard time navigating through that kind of current flow. So we got scared and turned and went back.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We went back to where we came from when we realized that we couldn't cross the river safely. We came back to the place that our journey started earlier that day, which was in the

outskirt of town. By the time we came back it was late in the afternoon. So we went to a guy and told him that we needed someone who could help us cross the border into the Zimbabwean side. We told him that we needed a guide who could help us and was familiar with the terrain. We also told them that we would prefer someone with a canoe. He said, "Fine. I could be of help."

**AY:** Yes?

**AM:** He said, "Well, right now the border guards were on duty watching us. Why not meet here in the early evening hours at around sunset?" He showed us where we should wait for him. We had gotten to where he told us to wait for him at the appointed hour. We kept waiting for him there all night long. The guy never showed up to meet up with us.

**AY:** I got it. Was he a Somali or a local person?

**AM:** He was a local man.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** At that point we were on the Zambian bank of the river dividing the two nations. We were not able to cross on the other side. So we went back to the mosque, and we slept another night there. The mosque where we were spending the second night had a junior seminary school. At the mosque's seminary we met a Muslim Ugandan young man who gave us excellent directions. He said to us, "Listen up, I know this area quite well. It's nearly impossible to cross the river, and whoever said you could cross the river to the other side of the border was misleading you. I have been though this area a lot trying to smuggle in contraband," he said. He said, "I would tell you something else." He said, "Don't drive yourself crazy." You know, local people in those areas were not familiar with mosques, but you were to tell them that you would like to go to the Indian churches and they would take you to the mosques. [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** So the only Muslim people that they were familiar with were the Indians. You would say the Indian churches and they would know what you were talking about.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** At the mosque they gave us a place to sleep. At that time there were not that many Somalis traveling through that area. The only thing that the local people knew about Somalia was what they were hearing from their local media, which was mainly about the civil war and destruction that the country was undergoing at the time. The people at the mosque told us that we could ask for help from the mosque's imam.

**AY:** Were the people the Somalis?

**AM:** No. They were the local people at the border town called Livingston. This town on the border that I am talking about, Livingston, was a fairly big city.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We spoke to the Indian imam at the mosque, and we told him the truth about our intentions and travels. The imam told us that he would arrange his underling to transport us in the mosque vehicle to the bus station. They attempted to give us a small amount of money. To protect our dignity and Somali pride, we refused to take their money. We were very proud people.

**AY:** Yes, yes, yes.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** In the early morning hours after morning prayers were said, the underling transported us in the mosque's vehicle to the bus terminal. There we rented a small mini-van to a faraway place near the Zambian-Namibian border. The area where we were going was still in Zambia. We were given information to go to this area. We had instructions to get off the mini-bus once it got to a particular small village. We were going by those instructions and information that we had been given. This small village had no paved roads, but it was located near a river-crossing spot that smugglers used to use for years to smuggle in and out their contrabands.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** The plan and information we were going by was to rent a canoe at the village to cross us into the other side of the border into Botswana. You would be leaving behind the Zambian-Zimbabwean border once and for all. We followed the plan and that's exactly what we did. We got off the rented mini-bus at a deserted place. The driver told us that the village was about five miles away and we should just walk toward the village on a narrow path that he said would lead us to the village.

**AY:** Similar to our own narrow paths that we had back home.

**AM:** Fortunately, there was a local man who also got off the mini-bus at the same place. The driver spoke to the man in their native language and told him to take us to the village that he was going to. So we just decided to follow him. We just followed the guy for five miles. We were not able to communicate to each other because the guy did not speak English.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We walked for five miles and finally got to the village. The village was a very tiny village. At most, the whole village inhabitants probably were not more than one hundred families. It was a small village. When we got to the village we did not know what to eat because the local foods were not prepared in accordance with halal foods [foods prepared as prescribed by Islamic law]. [chuckles] Then we brought some bread. We could not find anything else that was familiar that we could eat. Prior to now, we were with the Somali communities, but here we were now with no

Somalis. We were only with local African people who did not even know any Somalis or Muslim practices. They were preparing small fried fishes, locally called *kapenta*, for dinner. They would get the fish from the river. It was tiny and we ate the tiny fish with some bread and Coke. It had a musty odor.

**AY:** How big was the fish?

**AM:** It was as big as water stick insects.

**AY:** So it was similar to crab?

**AM:** I wouldn't even call it fish. It was very tiny. They would fry those numerous tiny fishes and as you put it in your mouth and taste it, you would feel an unpleasant taste. Do you know what I mean?

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** We also experienced some allergic reactions to it. We put the fried fish in the bread and ate them.

**AY:** Yes, because you were hungry.

**AM:** It was the closest you could get for meals prepared in accordance to halal. The cattle was not slaughtered in accordance to Islam, so it was not considered halal compliant. We simply could not eat the meat. The only thing that we could eat was fish.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** In any event, when we finished eating, we went to a shopkeeper in the village and told him we had Zambian currency [kwacha] and we would like to convert it to Botswana's currency [pula]. It was in pula currency. We had lots of Zambian money and we wanted to convert it into US dollars. When we converted my money into US dollars, it came out to about \$200 and Hassan's came out to about \$150.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We also had a lot of kwacha money. It was similar to the Somali money in term of its value. We converted our money into local money. It became a very small amount. Three pulas was equivalent to one US dollar.

**AY:** Do you get it?

**AM:** We did not know whether they cheated us with the exchanges or not. They gave us back a small amount in exchange for our money.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We thought we were smart. We eventually just took what they gave us for the money exchange although we haggled over the exchange rates the same way that the Somalis would haggle over the price. [chuckles] We did not know what we were doing. We just accepted what they offered us. Then we asked the villagers to help us cross the river. We specifically asked them to get us across the river by canoe. The villagers said they could help us. They pointed to a man and asked us to go to him for help. We went and talked to him. He explained to us what needed to be done to cross the river. He said the river was about five to ten kilometers away and after about an hour we would walk to the river. He said we should leave the village by about late afternoon.

**AY:** I got it. What time was it?

**AM:** It was about 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. We cut our hair short to blend in with the locals.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** He said there were two rivers to cross. In between those rivers, there was a little islet that belonged to not Botswana but Namibia. It was called Impalila Island. The border guards were white.

**AY:** Really?

**AM:** Yes, they were white Namibians. They guard against contrabands and poachers. The country was rich with natural resources and wildlife, so they had tight security around the country.

**AY:** Yes, yes.

**AM:** Yes. We were told their police and security people were very bad and brutal. I think it was right around the time that the country gained independence. Even South Africa was not independent at the time. So Namibia used to be called Southwest Africa, and at the time when I was there, it was a newly independent country. It used be part of South Africa and the country was a former colony of South Africa.

**AY:** Was it an independent country for only ten years at the time?

**AM:** No, it was independent for only one or two years. The country was doing quite well. In any event, we left with our guide. He brought along a young boy who was about ten or twelve years of age. He told us the boy was his. The four of us began to walk toward the river. He said he had a canoe by the river and demanded that we pay him beforehand for his services. By sunset we made it to the river's edge. At that point, he said to us, "Look." He showed us a bonfire at a distance and said that his canoe was near the house with the bonfire, and he needed to go there to get his canoe. He also told us to watch his son while he was away. I was sitting on the river's edge at that moment. We said, "Fine." We kept waiting and waiting for him and the guy never came back to us. We just sat there with the boy and at some point the boy said, "Okay, I don't

know what happened to my dad. Why don't I go to find out what was going on?" We did not know at the time, but we learned subsequently that the whole thing was set up to fool us. The guys were thieves who made an agreement to hoodwink us. The guy did not own anything. He had no canoe or boat or anything. What he told us was a trick to steal our money. It was designed to fool us. The little boy ran after his dad and never came back to us.

Then after we waited for them to come back for a long time, Hassan and I looked at each other and realized that we were duped. Then Hassan and I went to the house near the bonfire where the man supposedly went to get his canoe. The people at the house told us that they were not aware of anyone who had stored a canoe at the house. They also said that they did not know anyone that had the description of the person that we were looking for. [chuckles] Then we left there but we did not know where to go. It was in the middle of the night in a rural area, and we did not know where to turn.

**AY:** You did not know where to go, did you?

**AM:** We did not know where to go. Finally we decided to go back to the village that we left that afternoon. At about 9:00 p.m., as we walked back to the village, we ran into about six or seven men who were carrying several large paddles. We exchanged pleasantries, and it turned out that the men were foreigners like us, from Angola. They were migrants just like us.

**AY:** When you were exchanging the pleasantries, in what language were you communicating?

**AM:** In English.

**AY:** In English. Okay.

**AM:** The men turned out to be Angolan migrants. They were staying at the village temporarily. "Okay," we asked, "where are you guys going?" They said they were not going anywhere. Then we told them our story and what had happened to us, and they sympathized with us. They said that if we could hire them, they had canoes and could get us across the river. We said, "Fine." We could just forget the men who fooled us and move on. Well, we said to each other, "Let's forget about the one hundred pula that the other guy defrauded us of." It was equivalent to about thirty bucks. So we left with the men that we just met back to the river. They were good, decent men. The foreigners helped each other out because they had special bonds based on their shared experiences. We agreed to pay them a quarter of what we had agreed to pay the guy who tricked us for their services. They told us that the large paddles that they were carrying were for their handmade canoe that was used for crossing the river.

**AY:** So they were carrying their handmade canoe?

**AM:** They were carrying sticks and paddles for the canoe, the things that are used to push the canoes.

**AY:** The one for paddling the canoe?

**AM:** Yes. They were carrying large sticks that look like paddles.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** The men picked us up. I still remember that night as if it were yesterday. The night had a full moon.

**AY:** Wow.

**AM:** We began to travel on the big downstream. When we traveled about halfway to our destination, I still recall when the full moon shines on the water and then the river water would gleam. There were all kinds of wildlife and exotic, dangerous animals, including hippopotamus and crocodiles that inhabited the water park that we were traveling through. It was almost an adventure for us.

**AY:** Were you able to see any of the wildlife and those exotic, dangerous animals that you mentioned?

**AM:** No. We did not see any of the dangerous wild animals, but we were told that they were and we should be ready for them in the event they appear.

**AY:** Where you scared?

**AM:** That's what I am going to get to.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** I said to Hassan, "Tonight we are enjoying ourselves." He turned to me and said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Look at us, we are sailing on the river on a full moon night." I said, "This is an adventure. This is what some people experience when they are on vacation and touring on a safari." He laughed at me and said, "This is no vacation." [laughs]

**AY:** [chuckles] He was probably scared to death, and you were talking about tourism and adventure.

**AM:** [chuckles]

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We made it to the other side of the river and got to Impalila Island. This is the island that we had heard had tight security and stuff. It had immigration checkpoints and everything. Our Angolan guides told us, "If in the morning the border security sees you, they would take you into custody." They said that we should not stick around here. Well, they also told us that there was a Namibian man in the island who had another canoe that was located at the other river which was about two kilometers away. The two rivers were some distance apart. The two rivers were tributaries that split from the main river.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We walked with them and we got to the village. There, in the middle of night, they woke up a man. The men that we were with, the reason for their travel that night was to get a cow from Namibian side of the border and bring it to Zambia overnight. That was why they had canoe. Cows were contraband. They were not allowed to be trafficked between countries.

**AY:** How many men were there?

**AM:** They were six men, enough men to carry a cow.

**AY:** Interesting. Were they selling the cow or did they want to keep it for milk?

**AM:** I think they intended to sell the cow.

**AY:** Okay. I see.

**AM:** Maybe cows were cheaper over there. I mean, the Namibian side.

**AY:** Yes, that could be the case.

**AM:** They woke up the guy. The man had kept lots of dogs in his property. The dogs were awoken by the commotion, and the men spoke to the local man in his native language. The men we were with had lived in the area for a long time and knew the local language. They told him that they brought us to him in order for him to help us cross the river. He told us that it was too dangerous now to cross the river because all kinds of dangerous animal were active in the middle of the night in the river, including crocodiles and hippopotamuses. He told them that we should come back to him in the morning.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Then we said to ourselves, “Where will we spend the rest of the night?” He could not give us a place to stay because in the village if someone was harboring illegal aliens, other villagers would report to the authorities and that person could get in serious trouble. Then the Angolan men suggested that because they could not find the cow they had been looking for, that they intended to go back to their village. And if we came with them and went back to the village that we had left earlier that afternoon, we could spend the night there and tomorrow by sunrise they could bring us back here. But they said that we needed to pay them more money for their services. They could sneak us back in the morning before the police and the authorities woke up. We said, “Fine.”

Then they brought us across the river. We came back to the village where we were when we ate that funny-smelling fish called *kapenta* on the Zambian side. When we were en route back the village where we were that afternoon, we had had a conversation with the Angolan men about the man who fooled us when he promised that he could help us cross the river. We asked them to



show us the man's home once we got back to the village to confront him. They said "Well, we too were foreigners and we were afraid of retribution by the villagers if they suspect that we brought you to the man who stole your money." But they said, "We could point out to you the man's home from a distance." We said that was fine. As far as any weapons were concerned, when we left the village in the afternoon, we had grabbed a little dull knife with no handle from an abandoned place.

**AY:** You had gotten it from an abandoned place?

**AM:** That was the only weapon we were carrying. I am going to show you how crazy we Somalis were.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We went to the man's home. We knocked on his door and no one came to the door. First, the Angolan men had told us not go to the man's home. They said he was probably at the Jabuka place. Jabuka was a place where a local would go to drink African homemade alcohol made of fermented wheat because the locals generally would not be able to afford regular alcohol.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** If he had any money, he was probably there enjoying some homemade alcohol, they said. They pointed us to the establishment where they thought he'd be. They told us to go in there to see if he was there. We went in the bar and there were all kinds of drunkards there. We could not find him there. We just walked out of the place and went back to our guides and told them that the guy was not in there. Then they pointed out to his home for us from a distance. They said, "You see that hut?" That was his house. The whole village's homes were a few huts and shacks made of sticks. They pointed to a hut on a corner lot and said that was the man's hut. We went to the hut. We knocked on the door and when no one opened the door, we kicked the door open. The door itself was not that strong. It was made of stretched metal barrels similar to the doors used by Somalis back home. I went in and asked Hassan to stay outside to watch out for me. I was still carrying my little knife.

**AY:** I got it. So you didn't know the guy and you didn't know the local customs and traditions. How did you decide to confront the man?

**AM:** We were people who were guided by God.

**AY:** What an arrogant man? Okay.

**AM:** I wanted to demand that the guy to give us back our money.

**AY:** Was he there?

**AM:** Yes. When he saw me walk into his hut, he got up.

**AY:** What time was it when you were confronting him?

**AM:** Hassan was still outside, and it was about 1:00 a.m. or 12 o'clock midnight.

**AY:** At night?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** At night?

**AM:** Yes, at midnight.

**AY:** You were crazy, okay.

**AM:** [chuckles] After we kicked the door, Hassan had seen someone coming out of a door adjacent to the man's door. It turned out it was the man's mom who lived next door. When his mom came out, she began to scream in her native language. I confronted him and demanded that he gave us our money back.

**AY:** Okay. Were you able to communicate with him or not?

**AM:** I noticed that the man might have been intoxicated. He took a few steps and began to urinate on the hut's walls. He began to say in a rambling voice, "What do you want? I am going to give your money, man."

**AY:** Were you able to understand each other?

**AM:** He spoke in English.

**AY:** So was he speaking English?

**AM:** Mostly locals spoke in English.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** And then he handed over some money and said that was all he had on him now and the rest he used to buy booze. The money that was missing from the amount he gave me back was five thousand in Zambian money, and the rest of the money he gave back. As soon as he handed the money to us, we ran out as fast as we could. As we ran away from them, I could hear his mom still screaming and ranting. We ran back to the Angolan migrants.

**AY:** Were they still waiting for you?

**AM:** Yes, the whole crew, six of them. They took cover at a distant location waiting for us to come back to them because they were known by the villagers and they were afraid of retribution by the villagers. We gave them some of the money and told them that we did something that was

daring. [chuckles]

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** And we also told them that we still needed their help. They said, “Fine, let's go. No problem.” They took us to their place. They too bought some Jabuka, the homemade alcohol. Then they started a bonfire and locked us inside while they drank their alcohol in front of the house. They pulled out their machete to guard us against the man and the villagers.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** We could not sleep because we were worried that the entire village would come looking for us. We just could not sleep.

**AY:** [chuckles] Okay, we have thirty more minutes.

**AM:** [chuckles] The guys too did not sleep. When we stayed there for two or maybe three hours, they came to us and said, “Let's go, guys.” One of the Angolans could understand our English. So he was often acting as an interpreter for us. Three or four of the guys took us, and we crossed the river the same way that they did a day earlier. By the time we were crossing the river this time, it was at the crack of dawn. They took us to the Namibian side. The Namibian man then took us over and helped us cross the second river. Now we successfully crossed the second river and we were in Botswana.

In Botswana, there was this border town that was not that far from the river. We got to the town and the town's businesses were closed. It was a hot, humid day. We could not find an open place where we could buy a glass of water. We walked through the entire town up and down. No single door was opened. We thought it was a national holiday on that day or something.

**AY:** What time was it when you were looking for an open place in the town?

**AM:** It was around noon.

**AY:** And the town was closed for business?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Interesting.

**AM:** Wait. We were just as surprised and did not know what heck was going on. We were just looking for an open place to buy a bite to eat. All of sudden I heard someone calling out my name. “Ahmed! Ahmed!” We were like, “What the heck is going on?”

**AY:** Are you kidding?

**AM:** I swear to God. I kept hearing “Ahmed! Ahmed!” I could not see who was calling my

name. I thought I was hearing voices or the devil was calling me. I was like, who was calling my name in this place that was so alien to me?

**AY:** Maybe you were thinking that you were hallucinating and hearing voices.

**AM:** That's what I thought at first.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Maybe the devil was calling my name.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The person who was calling my name was the Ugandan man that we met in Livingston that gave us information about the route. This was the guy that we met at the mosque back in Zambia. At the time when we met there and he gave us the directions and information, we did not know that he was a smuggler. The reason he had so much excellent information about the route was that he traveled the route on a regular basis when he was conducting his business. He was involved in selling precious metals that were found in Zambia. He was not involved in the jewelry trade. That trade was nothing compared to what he was involved in. We were talking green tourmaline and emerald.

**AY:** Are you talking about copper and other precious metals?

**AM:** No, copper and all these other metals are like rubbish comparing to the expensive gemstones.

**AY:** Those things are obsolete right now.

**AM:** Those were metals that most of the people in here are not familiar. It's called green tourmaline.

**AY:** What is green tourmaline?

**AM:** Those are items ladies wear for glitter and glamour. Only high societies in the world could afford to wear them.

**AY:** So was it diamond?

**AM:** No, it was not diamond.

**AY:** So it was not even diamond?

**AM:** It was not. It was most likely less expensive than diamond.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** But green tourmaline and other items.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Those precious metals were one of the things that Zambia was exporting to South Africa. Those precious metals were even more expensive than gold.

**AY:** So the guy was smuggling those goods to the other countries?

**AM:** That was his business. However, it was contraband or illicit exporting those goods without an export license.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We just realized that the reason he had such detailed information about the route was because he himself traveled the same route so many times.

**AY:** Oh yes.

**AM:** He just made the same journey and took the same route that we did, and we met him again. We asked him, “Do you know where we could buy food and drinks?” He was like, “What do you mean?” We said the whole place was shut down. There was nothing open for business. He laughed at us and said that in Africa, from Somalia to Uganda, they use the same food supply chain. We didn’t use refrigerators to store foods.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** We just came to a prosperous country like America. I don’t know if you noticed in here or not but most store doors are closed. You would not know if they’re open for business or not unless you grab the door and push it or pull it. The doors were closed to keep the refrigerator cool. The stores had transparent glass doors. The commercial doors for the East African businesses were open for business. The people were inside, and when we saw the closed glass door we thought the businesses were closed. We left with the guy and went in a business and bought some food and water. The guy after that told us that he would take us to the town of Francistown bus station. This city that he was referring to was a fairly big city. I think it was the second largest city in the country. He said he’d put us in one of the Francistown buses.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** He took us to the bus station, and we boarded a bus there. Francistown actually very much looked like Hargeisa. Everything looked like Hargeisa in term of the terrain. The dales, creeks, and hills.

**AY:** And the rocks.

**AM:** Everything was like there. It was an exact copy and replica of that city. The only difference was it was much wealthier than Hargeisa.

**AY:** More beautiful than Hargeisa, is that what you meant?

**AM:** Yes, it had diamond. I had never seen towns with such resemblance.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We took a taxi, and we told the taxi driver we wanted to go to the “Indian church” and he took us to a mosque right away. If we did not say “Indian church,” the driver would not know what we were talking about.

**AY:** I got it. Were you in Namibia at that point?

**AM:** No, in Botswana. We had already left Namibia.

**AY:** So, at this point, were you in Botswana?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** When we got to the mosque, a Somali man just walked out of it. We asked him where we could go to get halal-compliant foods. He said there was no halal meat or food in here. He also said it was permitted to eat some of the meat in here as long as they were prepared by the Messiah’s people. He chastised us for not knowing those theological details. We told him we could not eat the local foods if they were not halal diet compliant. Well, he said that was fine. The man was actually carrying some chicken legs. He just felt comfortable about his environment.

**AY:** You were supercilious, okay.

**AM:** This was a time before we had gone through lots of suffering. At the mosque, we met the Indians who were in charge of mosque. They asked us where we were headed, and we told them that we were heading to the neighboring country of South Africa. The men at the mosque told us we were welcome to stay with them as long as we wanted, you know. But they told us also that a Somali man by name of Hassan who stayed at the mosque in the recent past stole the mosque imam’s cane. This was one of those long wooden canes that imams use for support when they are providing their Friday sermons from the pulpit.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** [chuckles]

**AY:** This Hassan guy?

**AM:** A man by the name of Hassan.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** They said he stole the imam's holy cane.

**AY:** How did that happen?

**AM:** He was under a curse.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** [chuckles] We assured them that we were not going to steal anything. We told them that during our stay nothing nefarious would happen. We told them also that everything should be above board. The only complications were that my travel companion's name was Hassan.  
[chuckles]

**AY:** Okay. They may have thought that he was the same Hassan who stole the imam's cane.

**AM:** No, they knew it was not him. The Indian men were decent, good men. We joked with them. We socialized with them a lot.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The following morning, we were transported in the mosque vehicle by the imam's assistance to the bus station in Francistown. It was the provincial capital of that area. Then we caught a bus going to Botswana's capital which was about twenty kilometers away from the South African border. We got to Gaborone, and we had anecdotal information that a Somali man from the Buuhoodle region had settled that area a long time ago. He married a woman of Indian ancestry and had biracial children with her. We had heard they were a wealthy and well-to-do family. Hassan and I had learned about the man and family, and our goal was to get to the man to ask for help. We were also told that a Somali man by the name of Engineer Isse from the El Afweyn [Ceel Afweyn] area works for the family. Do you know what I mean?

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** We turned to Isse to help us out. We found him eventually. He told us that he had not worked for the Indians recently. He said, "If you guys needed a place to stay, I could take you in."

**AY:** The Somali-Indian family?

**AM:** No, Engineer Isse.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** He said the Somali-Indians were not authentic Somalis. In any event, he said in the past they used to help the fellow Somalis, but now there were too many Somalis around that they no longer help anyone.

**AY:** There were too many needy people.

**AM:** But he welcomed us and took us in. And in his home there were other Somalis who were staying with him. He had a roommate from the Banadir [Banaadir] region. He was one of those light-skinned Somalis.

**AY:** Don't worry about his skin pigmentations.

**AM:** He too is here in town.

**AY:** Is he in here as well?

**AM:** He is right here in this town, you understand?

**AY:** I need to talk to those people as well, okay?

**AM:** The roommate's dad was a college professor there, in Botswana.

**AY:** Okay, the light-skinned man from the Baraawa district?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** He was not from the Baraawa district. He was from the Banadir region. From the Banadir region. We, the northerners, can't usually distinguish those two ethnic groups. [chuckles]

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We went to Isse and the guy from the Banadir region's home. They welcomed us with open arms, and in the morning they asked one of their friends to take us to the local UN refugee office. They were discouraging us from going to South Africa. They were telling us that we should stay there and claim refugee status. They said if you were to claim refugee status in here, you would mostly likely get that status.

**AY:** Oh really? I got it.

**AM:** They dispatched a gentleman by the name of Ali who is now here in Minneapolis.

**AY:** He's here as well.



**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Interesting.

**AM:** Everyone got here.

**AY:** Okay. That shows that everybody is here.

**AM:** Everyone has managed to get to Minneapolis.

**AY:** Okay, okay.

**AM:** They said, “Hey, Ali. Take those men to the local refugee office to get the refugee claim process started.” The first place you go to to register your refugee claim was the local national security service office.

**AY:** Yes, the UNHCR office.

**AM:** No, the local government had to register and screen the new refugees. The government would give you an application.

**AY:** First. I got it.

**AM:** In the morning, Ali took us to the local office for refugee processing. There we were interviewed by local staff. They questioned us about claims, and we told them everything that we had been through. They were questioning if we were genuine Somali refugees. They were asking why we did not claim our refugee status in Kenya if we were refugees from Somalia. We said that we had not been through there and came by boat in Mozambique because there was no land to cross between Mozambique and Somalia, just high seas.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** The staff asked why we didn’t apply for refugee status in Mozambique. We told them, “Oh, our father and our family were noble people. They were the heads of their own clan kingdoms. When we fled we were worried that if we stayed in neighboring countries, our enemies would find out that we were there and then would come for us.” We told them we were fleeing for our own lives. The local authorities looked at our cases and concluded that we were a security risk and a danger to the community.

**AY:** Oh really?

**AM:** We were in serious trouble.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** They based their conclusion on the fact that we stated that we did not feel safe in

Mozambique. The fact that we claimed that we had our own clan kingdom made them concerned for our safety.

**AY:** Absolutely.

**AM:** They concluded that we had to be taken to a safe place.

**AY:** Really? [chuckles]

**AM:** The question then became where was the safest place that they could put us?

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** They took us to this secluded place. It almost felt that we were in a penitentiary.

**AY:** Oh my goodness.

**AM:** It was a jail that they put us in.

**AY:** Were they keeping an eye on you?

**AM:** Oh, they were watching us. And when we were being transported to the facility, we had a police escort. When we were being taken to a place, we asked the officers where they were taking us. They lied to us by saying we were being taken to this mansion that was prepared just for us. In reality we were taken to a prison.

**AY:** An actual prison?

**AM:** A real prison.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** They threw us in prison.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** At the prison the first thing they did was to strip search us. They took our belongings and money for safekeeping. At the prison, they issued each one of us two brand new blankets and pillows. When we actually walked into the prison grounds, the other inmates in the prison began to scream at us. Many of the inmates were from Zimbabwe. The inmates were just criminals doing time, but there were also some who were claiming refugee status and political persecution. Everybody was housed there together.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** They bellowed at us to scare us. Then we grabbed two brooms that were there, and we too

begun to scream “God is great” as you would do to make martyred expression. They wanted to take our blankets away from us.

**AY:** My God!

**AM:** Yes. We were screaming “God is great” and all of sudden this mean-looking man from Malawi came out of his cell. He must have heard our “God is great” battle cry. I still recall his nick name was “Salvadino,” but he would go by the name of Hassan Salvadino. He was so mean, most inmates were scared of him. He was a very vicious man. He said to the inmates who bothered us to leave us alone. At the time when he came out to tell the inmates to leave us alone, we have not been assaulted yet by the inmates but they were just about to. Salvadino took us under his wings and told the inmates that anyone who tried to harm us, he would snap their necks. Then they walked away from us.

**AY:** Wow.

**AM:** Salvadino took us to his cell and told us to put our blankets there. There were no beds. He told us to put our blankets in the cell and invited us to live with him in his cell. He was a dissident from a dictatorship of his country. He had all kinds of drinks in his cell. He was an army officer who was involved in efforts to overthrow the dictatorship in his native country. After the attempted overthrow of the government failed, he fled there to seek asylum just like us. Other than Salvadino, there were other Muslim men from South Africa who were involved robbing banks there. Those men were also vicious and mean, and other inmates were terrified of them.

**AY:** They too were incarcerated there, right?

**AM:** Yes. We got to know to those men as well. We would pray and socialize together afterwards. There were fourteen inmates who converted to Islam at the facility.

**AY:** While you were there?

**AM:** Yes, the brief time that we were there. We got our preacher training in the open Mnazi Moja forum for religious debates in Tanzania. We began to proselytize to the inmates at the facility. They were all Christians beforehand.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** On the Eid holiday prayer services, there were two different lines of prayer. At the time when we got there, there were only three of us—Abu-bakar and few others.

**AY:** At the time, how long had you been there?

**AM:** At the time, we were there for about four months.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** When we were there for four months only, the Eid holiday prayer services, there were two lines of prayer services. When we got there, only four Muslims were in the facility. Most inmates were impressed by our tenacity. Here we were, two small skinny men who took on the entire prison. The help we got from the South African and our screams to “God is great,” all of those things impressed the inmates. They thought we were some kind of new gang group. They began to convert to Islam. Each day one inmate would come forward to affirm the oneness of God. In any event, we stayed there for several months, and eventually we were transferred to a refugee detention facility. We filled out an application for asylum in America at the facility. They sent the application to us because they were made aware of the fact that we were there. There were no other Somalis in the facility. There were several other Somali men who were at the refugee detention center.

I forgot to mention one thing to you. When they did not release us from the detention center, we began on hunger strike along with many Ugandan Muslim refugees. We were protesting against living conditions of the detention. We wanted to be transferred to a UN-run facility. There were eight of us who were protesting. For Salvadino, he was about to leave for America. He was given asylum there. The Ugandans, some of them were Muslim, others converted to Islam. Eight of us decided to go on a hunger strike. We were on hunger strike. We refused to eat. The first day, no one talked to us about the hunger strike. The second was the same. By the third day, Hassan was taken out. He was taken to another facility where they wanted to force feed him. He refused to be fed. They tried to open his mouth to feed him, and then he spat on the official who was in charge of operations. They thought he was wild. The next night, the Ugandans and I were taken the same facility where he was taken. The facility they took us to was a clinic, and it was owned by the state. They tried everything, but they could not force feed us.

In the town where we were, there was a man from Hargeisa who was working for the United Nations. His name was Abdurrahman Hersi. He would visit us at the facility from time to time to bring fresh vegetables and apples. He was looking after us. Ali, the guy, is in here in town now. He, too, also would visit us, as well as some white American ladies. They visited us. The other guy that I was mentioning to you earlier, Isse the engineer, he too comes by from time to time. When we were taken to the new facility, all the Ugandans who were on the hunger strike began to eat food on the fourth day. Hassan and I were the only holdouts.

**AY:** I got it. Were you eating anything at all?

**AM:** Hassan and Abdurrahman belonged to the same sub-clan.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** They called Abdurrahman to talk Hassan into eating. Abdurrahman was a senior UN official there. He used to drive an expensive Land Cruiser VX, the very latest model at the time. The guards, you know, they were surprised by the high level visitors that we were receiving. Abdurrahman talked to Hassan and told him that he should start eating and he would talk to the UN about his case. When the two were talking, it was prior to my transfer there. Hassan refused to listen to Abdurrahman. He said that, “Without my friend’s approval I wasn’t going to eat.”

**AY:** So were you eating anything at all? Were you drinking water?

**AM:** We were not even drinking even plain water.

**AY:** Are we talking about the fourth day?

**AM:** Yes. The Ugandans, after they started eating, they were brought back. Hassan and I were left behind. We were transferred again. This time we were taken to the major hospital in the city. For eighteen days we did not eat anything at all.

**AY:** Eighteen days?

**AM:** Eighteen days.

**AY:** Both of you?

**AM:** But we were hooked up with IV fluids.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** As long as you are hooked up with IV fluids, you were not going to get into any trouble. You could survive with only IV fluids for up to sixty days. Abdurrahman would come by frequently and would say to us that we should start eating, that our cases would be looked at. We would say to him, “No way.” We wouldn't stop our hunger strike until the UN official came to us and our paperwork was done.

Finally, the local UN official from Haiti had come to see us. She was almost white and she had fairly light skin. The lady came to us, and our application process was started. When the lady came by and assured us that our application would be processed in a timely fashion, that was when we stopped the hunger strike and started eating foods.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** When we were on the hunger strike, Hassan and I were in different rooms. The people at the facility would try to trick Hassan into eating by telling him that, “Your friend broke the hunger strike and was eating. Why did you not do the same?” He would say to them, “Take me to him to see if that was the case.” [chuckles]

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** They were trying to fool us.

**AY:** How did you learn to be aware of their tricks?

**AM:** At times, they would put Abdurrahman and other Somalis on the line to cajole us into

stopping the hunger strike.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Anyways, on the eighteenth day, when the lady from the UN visited us and the government and everybody else learned of our situation, then we said to ourselves that if the UN was processing our applications, then we could stop the hunger strike and started eating. Then after we started eating foods, we were transferred to a refugee processing detention. The camp was located in a remote village away from Francistown. The camp's living conditions were horrible. We were told to stay there while our application for asylum was being processed. We were in the camps for less than a week. We ran away from the camp.

**AY:** Look at those people...

**AM:** Initially at the camps they gave the two brick cells. The camp was made up of small brick cells.

**AY:** Okay. [chuckles]

**AM:** I said to Hassan that we did not go through all of the troubles that we had gone through to be housed in little camp cells. He agreed and said to Ahmed that this was not a place for us.

**AY:** [chuckles]

**AM:** In any event, we ran away from the camps.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** We arrived in Kakhison Center in Gaborone where the white American ladies that Ali had hooked us up with were. The ladies gave us a lodging house to stay. We were there when our resettlement application was granted.

**AY:** How long did it take to have your application be granted?

**AM:** The entire time that we were in Botswana was a close to a year.

**AY:** Fascinating. Then you left for America?

**AM:** Yes, to Fargo.

**AY:** Did you arrive directly in Fargo?

**AM:** Hassan, Ali, and I left together for America. [chuckles] In fact, we were on the same airline flight to America.

**AY:** Really.

**AM:** Yes. His application process for resettlement was pending at the time when we met him.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** We left there for Fargo.

**AY:** Okay.

**AM:** Subsequently, the entire family came, including my father and my siblings. They too initially arrived in Fargo and stayed there for a while, and eventually the family moved to the Twin Cities. What prompted me to move to the Twin Cities was the fact that the rest moved here, and I followed them.

**AY:** Yes, and you followed them?

**AM:** Yes, because the family unification was paramount.

**AY:** Okay. We discussed at length the struggles and hardships that you had to go through prior to coming to this country. However, one aspect of your life that I want to touch on is that you are a noted poet, and your poetry is slightly different than the other Somali genre. What I mean by that is the theme for your genre and poetry focuses on justice and equality themes, what the Americans and English-speaking people may call “social justice.” Having said all of that, first of all, when did you first realized that you were a talented poet and what do you think helped you realize your talent?

**AM:** I started out to fashion some limited poems when I was still quite young.

**AY:** Just to fashion limited poems.

**AM:** I would put a few words together, and I would realize that the few words would fit together to fashion to a poem. However, at those early stages, I was not really putting too much effort into it.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** For me, mostly poetry was an outlet to express the feelings of grief and anguish that I had following the civil war. At the time, when I was in Tanzania, there was conflict between two rival warlords named Ali Mahdi and Aidid.

**AY:** Would you listen to the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] Somali Language Service?

**AM:** When I listened to the radio war reports, I would almost cry about the senseless violence that was being perpetrated. I would pray for the safety of the innocent people there, for God to give safety and sanctuary for the innocent. The feelings you have when you are in the country and the feelings you have when you’re abroad are not the same feelings. When you’re in the

country, you would be like someone who is in a box. You have a numb feeling. Your conscious and your feelings are frozen. However, when you are abroad in a safe environment with other cultures, all you could see is your own people harming each other while other people are moving forward and progressing. Then that would create upheaval and emotional distress.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** So at the early stage, I started out by putting a few poems together in an effort to create reconciliation and goodwill. I was in Fargo attending school there when I mostly realized that I could compose and put together serious poetry.

**AY:** Yes. Were there other poems or legendary poets that influenced or inspired your poems?

**AM:** First, my father was not a poet, nor was anyone else on the paternal side of my family.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** [chuckles]

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** My mom, may God rest her soul, had at times used a poem when, for example, she was amusing children or expressing her feelings about sensitivity towards certain things. She may use a little bit of poetry to get her message across. You know what I mean?

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** When we were little schoolchildren, we would compete in reciting old poems, the poems taught in the literature classes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Anyways, I was good at reciting those poems in the literature classes, but I did not have any other formal experiences in poetry or literature. A few occasions when the school was not in session, I would travel to rural areas to be exposed to the Somali language and the nomadic culture and the lifestyle. I would also experience the whole nomadic existences and experiences, including tending the herds and flocks. I think those experiences help me a great deal.

**AY:** In the Somali language, though, I do feel that your grasp and command of the Somali language is far better than mine, and I was raised in a nomadic culture whereas you only visited a nomadic environment on several occasions. In terms of the ability to gain so much knowledge about the nomadic experiences on the occasions you visited there, was that a unique talent that you had that others didn't have or what was it something else?

**AM:** First of all, I was in high school when I first experienced a nomadic environment. Mostly, the Somali literature or genre is rooted in the nomadic way of life.



**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Someone who is from urban areas may not understand certain terminologies or lexicons that are prevalent in the nomadic lifestyle's lexicon. There were many words and special lexicons that I gained through my exposure to the nomadic lifestyle.

**AY:** Did you realized at the time that you had gained those lexicons through those experiences?

**AM:** Yes. For example, I did not know much about plant or tree names.

**AY:** I don't much about tree or plant names at this point.

**AM:** In the jungle, there are all kinds of tree-naming and nomenclatural terminologies used by the nomads. There are many names for wild fruits and nuts that the nomadic people are familiar with. Just to give you examples, the nuts and fruits included *dhafaruur*, *yicib*, garlic, *hohob*, *xangeeyo*, *mircanyo*, *xamakaa*, *carab lo'aad* [plant names]. You can't even count how many kinds of edible things are found in our country. *Marooro*, *gacayro* [plant names]. One can become familiar with all of those things, including the tree names, the grass names.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** One also becomes familiar with the people and their habits and customs and their general way of life. The urban people can expand their knowledge about the nomadic people.

**AY:** I am afraid that all of those rich trees and fruits may have decayed already by environmental degradations now.

**AM:** The urban people use limited words and terminologies, just enough words to go by every day.

**AY:** Yes, yes.

**AM:** But the nomadic people are repositories of the Somali language. The language is mostly rooted in that environment and lifestyle in which it is used. So I think that too facilitated for me to develop my deep understanding and appreciation of the culture and its language. But more importantly, my quest and desire to be part of the Somali poets was the driving force behind my interest.

**AY:** What do you mean by that?

**AM:** One learns the literary language separate from the common language, and one also learns the calibrations of words to balance and to measure the language and words you choose when expressing your feelings through poetry. At times you don't even know that you learned those skills. It is the desire that drives the learning of those important attributes.

**AY:** We have covered a lot and actually we have been having this discussion for just over two hours now and we still have a lot to cover. However, I would like to recapitulate our conversation in two important points. In the Somali community here in the city or the state of Minnesota at large, do you think the help the community is receiving from the state was a help designed just for the community needs or was it help that was already there for anyone who needs it? Also do you think the community's impact on the state is a net negative or net positive impact?

**AM:** Before I get to that question, the previous question that you had asked me—I forgot to adequately address what you termed as “social justice.”

**AY:** Oh, we forgot about that.

**AM:** My poetry is about social justice. You know, mostly the Somali poets' themes focus on issues related to clan rivalries and clan bravado. They talk about how one clan is gallant warriors and how they vanquished the rival clan in the battlefield.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** As you correctly mentioned, I don't go into that.

**AY:** So you are interested not in those themes.

**AM:** I speak up for the weak through my poems.

**AY:** So you support the weak?

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** Do you know where you got the concept of social justice when you were living in such a violent culture?

**AM:** You know how much effort we put into publicizing and championing for the *Midgan* [or low caste] people's causes. And the slogan we used for that campaign, “Can dishonor be justified?”

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** The articles you published about that cause to advocate for the suffering *Midgan* people. We all knew how we stood up for that particular cause.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** I would speak up for the oppressed minorities in our society, including the Jareer people, Barawani people, and women's rights.

**AY:** The crippled.

**AM:** The crippled, the enfeebled, the blind, the disabled.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Oh, and the challenged peoples that are marginalized by the society.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** I speak up for them through my artistic expressions.

**AY:** I got it. From where do you think you get that sense of collective justice?

**AM:** I think, you know when I was back in Somalia—and I think I may have mentioned it to you in the past—when I was in Las Anod we were taken to place called Dalyare to complete military trainings for our national service. At the time I was only seventeen years old. The people that were there were mostly from my city, but I chose to be friends with military soldiers from the Jareer people and others like them from the south as opposed to people from my own neighborhood or clan. When I completed the trainings and I was transferred to Buhoodle district, I was a close friend of a guy named Abdinur from El-buur [Ceel-buur], a town from the south central part of the country. That friend taught me some of his people's traditional folk genres.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** Even when in school back in Mogadishu, I used to go to this neighborhood in the outskirts of town. The people there were the untouchables. They lived in shantytowns under dire and deplorable conditions. I would go there to see if I could be of help to alleviate their sufferings. I had another friend at the time named Abdirashid Geel-Qaad who lives in Chicago now. We hung out together a lot, and at times we would go to the shantytowns where those people lived and try to document their plights to show them to the regional government officials or nonprofit foreign aid agencies that were there at the time to help the needy people in the city. We would say those suffering brothers today need our support. They lived behind the city's biggest public hospital called Digfeer. They were so desperate that they would go out in the bushes at night to hunt wild rabbits and small animals for subsistence.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** So to come back to your question, I don't really recall how I started my social activism, but trying to help out those suffering was one of the things I did early on that I remember.

**AY:** Let me switch gears a little bit. The people that society used to call *Eyle* or the untouchables, do you know if any of those people survived through the catastrophes? It is likely that some of

them survived.

**AM:** I think there may be some who survived. The last time I was in Mogadishu was in '91, so I would not know. I don't know what their situation is now or where they ended up. In any event, there were lots of injustices that were committed against those people. They were urban people and yet they would go out to hunt wild rabbits for food.

**AY:** Let us go back to something that we touched on briefly. In this state, our community is large and still growing.

**AM:** Yes.

**AY:** How would you evaluate the community as a whole in term of its socioeconomic and sociopolitical progress?

**AM:** You asked earlier on balance what was the net effect from the community's experience in Minnesota—positive or negative. When I did my own analysis, Minnesota is one of the coldest places in America, at least as far as the mainland is concerned. I think Fargo and here have a similar weather pattern.

**AY:** I got it. They are just about the same.

**AM:** I think the majority of the people in here are of Scandinavian ancestry. The Scandinavian people are generally compassionate and caring people. Even the ones back in Europe, they are quiet and unassuming people who are less prejudicial than others. We did not come here for the reason that Minnesota is nice only. Tanzania is also nice. I could have stayed there. [chuckles] There were some employment opportunities here. You literally wrote a book about it. Everybody defers to Ahmed Yusuf in terms of finding out what brought the Somalis here in the first place.

**AY:** Yes, I hope that is the case.

**AM:** Somalis were just low-skill laborers. My first job in Fargo, I was paid \$4.25 an hour. That was the minimum wage at the time.

**AY:** And today you own your own companies.

**AM:** I was surprised by the fact that an American-born person and I were paid the same wages if we had similar skills. In Somalia when job openings were posted on the newspapers, one of the first qualifications for those jobs was that the person applying for the job be a Somali native.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** There were many people that paved the way for our easy ride here. For example, the historic black civil rights movement's gains helped us tremendously, in terms of employment equity or housing or any other social conditions. In any event, the opportunity was there for us to take advantage of and we did. And the people we joined here were decent and warm and

welcoming people. There were many layers of support networks that were there that helped us out to integrate and assimilate in our new land.

**AY:** It was not always an easy sailing, though.

**AM:** That is my personal opinion.

**AY:** Thank you, by the way. The way you answered that question was spot on. I would just add to that, now we've been here for about twenty years, from 1993 to present about twenty years...

**AM:** About twenty years.

**AY:** What do you think that the community will be like twenty years later from today?

**AM:** That is a good question. I would say that only God knows what the future would be like for the community.

**AY:** That is true.

**AM:** If you want know what the Somali community as a whole would be like in the near future in this country, in term of social mobility and progress, you have to look at other Somali communities in the diaspora. For example, the Somali community in London has been there for a long time. And they're not faring that well. The only difference between the community here and the one in England is that we don't chew khat in here as much as they do over there.

**AY:** I don't think we will be the same as those ones. I think we will fare better than them.

**AM:** [chuckles] Khat was outlawed over there now. Maybe they will wake up now.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** Having said that, some of seamen that I saw in London, some of those guys had been there for fifty or forty years, and they have not lost their Somali heritage and tradition. They were with their children and wives. I think there is hope that the Somali community in the diaspora will retain its culture and tradition. They may become more sophisticated and enlightened, but their future as a community looks bright. I think they will not be lost in the new world.

**AY:** Do you think we will be open to integration and assimilation to the large communities that the diaspora is in?

**AM:** Yes, I believe so. I believe already we are assimilating and interacting with other communities in a positive manner.

**AY:** Is that right?

**AM:** The attitude of the community toward other communities now is not the same attitude that

the community had when it started to come to here. For example, when I first moved to here, it was difficult for the Somalis to live in Eden Prairie and other far off places. Now you would find Somalis in far away rural places.

**AY:** I have nothing further to ask you. I don't know if I have any more questions to ask you. Is there anything else that is of special interest to you that you would like to share? Or is there something that you are passionate about that you want to add to our conversation?

**AM:** I just would like to add to our conversation, you know, that the Somalis generally practice Islamic faith, they share a common language, common culture and tradition, common religion. They have so many things in common. They have so many commonalities.

**AY:** That's what we used to say in the past, but I don't think the rest of world would believe us anymore.

**AM:** There are people whose goal in life is to create discord and division, conflict among the Somalis. I would urge the fellow Somalis not to be a supporter or follower of those who are only interested in furthering and advancing their narrow personal interest. You see how much we can accomplish together if we only focus on the common interest. For example, you see how many mosques have been built. Just last week, the community bought an old church in Saint Paul. Tonight, there will be some congregations that will be saying their evening prayer services there. You understand. Every day a new mosque is being opened.

**AY:** Yes.

**AM:** The community can retain its culture and religion and at the same time can assimilate and integrate to the larger community. The community is grateful for the generous help and support it has received from its brethren communities that were here before it.

**AY:** I got it.

**AM:** I would like to see the Somali come together and hold hands and forget and leave behind the kind of political and senseless violence that literally destroyed our country. We need to do things that would save and protect our Somalism, our culture, our religion.

**AY:** As well as the people that we joined in here.

**AM:** I would also say lastly that we have to collaborate and conform with cultures and customs of the community in which we live.

**AY:** That is good. Thank you very much. That was a positive point. That was the end of our conversation.