

# A Delicate Hope

---

Ahmed Ismail Yusuf  
(Translated from Somali by  
Ahmed Ismail Yusuf and Fred Pfeil\*)

Ever since word arrived from the Saudi Embassy that a letter was going to be hand delivered to him in a matter of days, Aar had chosen to imprison himself in the house where he was raised. It was consoling, of course, that the diabolically corrupt government of Mogadishu would have no knowledge of the letter and no way to intercept it. On the other hand, the message was so ambiguous that there was no way to tell when it was best to wait. So Aar came up with an idea of his own, which he called an “Ambition Imprisonment,” for he decided to wait for the letter, day and night, in his home.

His identical twin Arbaab offered to give him a hand. In more normal times, Arbaab would have amused Aar with his sarcastic humor. But these days Arbaab himself was very tight on time, given the fact that he was attending the National University of Lafoole (the best in the nation), double majoring in math and physics. Yet still when they got together, they would argue about anything and nothing in particular.

This afternoon, however, when Arbaab arrived home from college for the weekend, he placed his book-bag on the living room sofa and greeted everyone. Then, before his shower, he went right to his brother, a promising, talented writer who had secured numerous publications already. Aar was sitting at the front door. Arbaab sat next to him on the front steps. “Aar,” he said, looking right into his brother’s eyes, “from now on, every Thursday afternoon and all Friday, I will be here waiting for your letter. So please go try to have a bit of fun with the girls or at least gossip about them.”

"Come on, Arbaab," Aar said. "In all honesty, do you think that when Asha, Hibo, or Anisa calls or stops by, you'll remember why you've promised to stay home?"

"Okay, okay," Arbaab smiled. "Yes, when it comes to women, I am prone to disavow my loyalty to men, including my own twin brother. But in all seriousness, Arbaab, you are turning into a prisoner in solitary confinement. The only difference is that yours is voluntary. Let me ask you this: What can I do to share some of the burden with you?"

"Arbaab, listen. Have as much sex as you can for both of us but please, don't mention my name."

"Well, Aar," Arbaab said, "I'm not going to win this, am I?"

"No," Aar said. "Not this time."

"I'd better hit the shower then," said Arbaab. Then he stood up, dusted off his pants, and went in.

\*\*\*\*\*

This delicate hope had begun to bloom a few months ago at King Saud University, when a prominent faculty member and Saudi writer, Dr. Qasim, had come across one of Aar's published short stories. He had seen Aar's name in a magazine and at first thought it was a former student of his. By the time he got to the middle of the story, however, he knew that he had never seen this writing style before. He turned the pages back to take another look at the writer's name. It wasn't anybody he knew, but the short story intrigued him enough to make him look around for more work by this distinctive young writer. After reading the few other stories he could get his hands on, Dr. Qasim found himself writing to this young man he had never met. In his letter, he asked if Aar had more stories, and what he could do for him that might enhance the prospect of sharing his writing with a wider audience.

"Such a talent as yours," Dr. Qasim wrote, "especially in a young man for whom Arabic is not his native tongue, is an inspiration to us native speakers. I am positive that all scholars of our language who come to know your art will cheer your craft."

"Would you please be kind enough to enlist me as your friend? And likewise, please do not hesitate to let me know if there is anything humanly possible that I could do to enhance the opportunity to share your writing with better judges than myself."

Upon receiving and reading the letter, Aar was numb for quite some time. He could not believe that a rich Saudi writer and faculty member had not only taken an interest in his stories, but had also responded by writing to him.

Aar immediately called his brother on the phone and recited the letter, word by word. Once they were done shouting for joy, they agreed that if Aar could secure a residential visa plus a full scholarship with the accompanying generous allowance from the Saudi government, then he would manage to find a way out of Mogadishu to India for both Arbaab and their mother. They decided to tell their mother only that a prominent King Saud University faculty member had read Aar's short stories and liked them well enough to respond, so she wouldn't be too disappointed if the whole thing fell through.

The next day Aar didn't waste a minute. "Dear Dr. Qasim," he wrote, "Your letter has come to find me. It has lifted my spirit, lit up my house of hope and elevated my pride. I would like to thank you for the time you took to read my stories and for your kind words, which you showered upon my work. You have no idea how much these words from a prominent writer and scholar like you mean to me. I hardly have words to explain but can only say that your letter has been inspirational and encouraging. I never thought this miracle could happen to me, yet you have proven me wrong. What a surprise!"

"Finally, I hope that you will not mind if I take you up on your kind offer to give me some assistance, since I would like to request admission into your University. I am sending you my transcript along with some other negligible work of mine, both published and unpublished. Please evaluate them all as one, and let me know whether or not I am worthy of your University's excellent instruction."

Aar did not say in the letter what was really on his mind. He did not let on that he was wandering the streets of Mogadishu, that he had been expelled from the National University of Lafoole when he refused to spy on his fellow students for the N.S.S., the National Secret Service. It was his nature to avoid politics in general, yet he couldn't help but fall victim to the severity of injustice in his motherland.

So, as the days passed, Aar wondered whether Dr. Qasim was for real, and if he were, whether the letter had reached him, and if it had, whether he still cared about it enough to respond, and if by a miracle of God he had responded, whether it would arrive in Aar's hand safely.

A month later, at 7:00 at night, someone knocked on the door. When Aar's mother opened it, she found a tall, white, Arabian-looking man standing on the doorsteps. As he tried to greet her, she flinched and almost slammed the door in his face but caught herself.

"I am sorry," she said in Arabic. "I guess I was expecting a Somali face. What can I do for you?"

"Is Aar in?" the Arab asked.

The mother was so consumed with fear. She had no idea who this man standing in front of her was. She had not heard Aar mention any foreign friends of his. Frantically but without success, she searched for reasons why a stranger would ask for Aar. "Ah, um, eeh, no," she said. "He isn't...he isn't in the house."

The stranger let out what seemed to her a million words in Arabic that she, with her meager hoard of the Arabic language, couldn't possibility keep up with. As the mother stood there staring, though, it must have occurred to him that she did not know enough of the language to give him a satisfactory answer. He turned his back on her and walked toward his American Cadillac with a diplomatic license plate while the mother looked on apprehensively. "Anyone can have any license plate they wish these days," she whispered to herself. After all, it wasn't every day an Arab man would come to her door, asking for her son. Was government security masquerading as an Arab in order to come here to arrest her child? If so, what was the reason?

But she knew, of course, that there didn't have to be any reason at all. While the twins were in high spirits most of the time, their mother didn't share their lighthearted mood. She was gravely concerned about what the days ahead might hold for her adored sons, and anxious about her status in a society that had no place for a poor, divorced, middle-aged mother. The dark blanket of corruption that covered her nation and the senseless human slaughter the so-called government had waged against the northern people (and would no doubt soon be unleashed here in the south) gnawed constantly at her mind. Though she had dreamed of watching her twins bloom, go to college, marry and have their own children, lately her main goal had become simply their survival, nothing more than that.

Now, however, just before the man vanished into his car, Aar, always on guard, came out of his room and quickly asked his mother who had rung the doorbell. Fortunately, as she began telling him about the Arab man who had just been there looking for him, he saw the man through the window, getting into his car. Aar dashed out of the house

screaming, "I am Aar, I am Aar," and caught the man half in and half out of his car.

The man stopped, got out, turned around, and leaned against his car. "Are you hiding from Barre?," he said with a sarcastic tone.

Surprised that an Arab diplomat would be so bold as to say something about a repressive regime whose sovereignty his own government had pledged to uphold, Aar said, "My mother is a little overly cautious. Please excuse her uncharitable behavior."

"Well, I have been in Somalia long enough to know that isn't so odd. Who would blame her?," said the Arab man. "Oh, please forgive me for not introducing myself to you," he went on, holding his hand out. "*Asalaama alayka*, my brother. My name is Faruq Essah, from the Saudi Embassy. Call me Faruq."

"*Wa alaka masalaam*, my brother. My name is Aar Saeed, please call me Aar." Aar approached and extended his hand.

"Aar, let me tell you why I am here," said Faruq as they shook hands. "I have a message from Dr. Qasim for you. You know, of course, that in my country he is a national treasure, an expert on the Islamic world, and a brilliant scholar of the Arabic language. He is now, however, quite concerned about Somalia and wants to help as best he can."

As he spoke, Faruq gradually straightened up from where he had been leaning against his car. Now, standing fully erect, he pulled out a telegram from his pocket. "Hold on, hold on," he said. "I am awfully sorry, I should have given you this telegram first."

"No, no, that's okay," responded Aar as he took the telegram and unfolded it with trembling hands.

"My dear brother, Aar," the letter read, "King Saud University is glad to have you as a student and happy to be able to provide you a scholarship. We feel privileged to offer you the guidance that you have asked of us. The details of this scholarship will be fully explained to you by my young friend Faruq, who has agreed to be emissary in mission for this matter. Soon after you have met him, we will send you a package including a visa. Like this telegram, however, any messages passing between us will be hand delivered. *Inshaa Allah*, you will hear from us shortly. Until then, stay calm and keep praying."

When Aar finished reading, he folded the telegram and clutched it in his hand so tightly that it hurt. Tears formed in his eyes, and in humility he surrendered himself to the total gratitude he felt. He searched for words but could not find them. He tried to constrain the

tears and calm himself, but he couldn't. Finally he muttered, "I, I, I don't know what to say, Faruq. At this moment, it is all too much for me."

"You don't have to say anything, Aar. From what I have heard, you deserve it. Now let us work on the rest. First, let me explain a little bit about your scholarship: housing will be provided for you. Are you married?" Faruq asked.

"No, at least not yet," Aar replied.

"Is there a marriage on the way in the coming days?" Faruq asked.

"Oh, no, no," Aar laughed. "I only meant, *Inshaa Allah*, maybe one day but not now, nor in the days ahead."

"I only asked because if you were, we have to make housing arrangements accordingly. Anyway, as I was saying, the housing is provided, the tuition is paid, and an allowance of \$1500 per month is paid to you by the government. The other news that I would like you to hear is that the Saudi Embassy, like the rest of the world, has decided to pull its staff out of Mogadishu. But don't despair. I am going to stay behind with the Egyptian Embassy, which has decided against pulling out, long enough to insure your departure. Aar, I have to leave now, but remember—you are going to hear from us in person. Expect me to show up at any moment, for I will be back again as soon as your package arrives from Saudi Arabia. Until then, so long, friend," Faruq concluded. "I leave you in the hands of Almighty God."

They shook hands, bade each other farewell, and Faruq disappeared into his car and drove off into the mist of the streets of Mogadishu, leaving Aar to take the few steps back to his front door, wobbling under the weight of joy. As he sat on his doorstep, for a while his thoughts traveled through galaxies unknown to men, begging heaven's angels to explain why he had been so blessed.

Eventually, alarmed at her son's motionlessness, his mother came out of the house calling his name. When he didn't respond, she sat beside him, put her hand on his shoulder, and asked a thousand questions. "Aar, what happened? Who was that man? What did he say? Oh God, is Arbaab okay?"

Finally, when Aar still didn't answer, she resorted to the natural relief of tears. Only then did Aar come back to mother earth. He hugged his mother and began recapping the news to her.

"Mom," he said, "Remember the King Saud University faculty member I told you about, the one who read my stories?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, I didn't tell you the whole story. I wrote to him and now he has written me back. I asked him for admission to the University, Mom, and the upshot is that they granted me not only admission but a full scholarship too. Mom, I have a telegram stating all the facts. That man you spoke with was from the Saudi Embassy, and he explained everything about the scholarship to me. But Mom," Aar continued, "I have not even begun to tell you where you and Arbaab come into all of this."

"Son," she interrupted, "we are already part of anything that concerns you."

"Yes, Mom," Aar said, "but this is very special. There is a \$1500 per month allowance that I am not going to need since the housing, books, and tuition are all paid. That means you and Arbaab are going to be able to get out of here, too. With that kind of money, in fact, Arbaab can go to any school he wants to in India, and there will be more than enough left over for you to live the life you're entitled to. There is only one catch."

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Mom, I have to wait a few days for the visa and scholarship package," he said, "but no one knows when it will arrive."

"Perhaps it isn't so wise to pin your hopes on a promissory note," his mother warned.

"Maybe so, Mom," Aar said, grinning from ear to ear. "But you know I am a sucker for optimism and live off my high hopes."

"Now," he proceeded, "I have to imprison myself in the house to wait for this package since my entire future and the future of my family depends on it. The man told me that the package will be hand delivered to me but there is no definite time to expect it. So I am going to be here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the day after that. Mom, the farthest I will go will be right here on our front doorsteps. *Ambition Imprisonment* it is—yes, that's exactly what it is, *Ambition Imprisonment*, Mom."

His mother could not share his confidence — not after learning about the uncertainty of the waiting involved. But she was not about to let her doubts and fears puncture his pouch of hope. "*Inshaa Allah*," she said, "it will all come true for you," as she rose and went into the house, leaving him there, waiting.

\*\*\*\*\*

Three weeks later, at ten at night, the ring of the doorbell rippled three times through the house. Since it was raining, Aar did not expect it to be his messenger. But his vigilant mind impelled him to rush for the door. There was Faruq, standing in the doorway, anxious to be let in. The Islamic greeting rituals ensued and he was quickly let into the house. "Listen," he said, "I have everything in hand — the visa, the ticket, the scholarship package, and the information that goes along with it. I've also got the stamper to validate your visa, so please get your passport out."

Aar dashed into his room and returned with the passport. Faruq plugged in the stamper and applied it to the passport. "There," he said, "you're all set to sail. But there's just one more thing."

"What?," said Aar.

"The Saudi airline is going to suspend its service in Somalia indefinitely. The last flight leaves tomorrow afternoon at 4:00 p.m. Please, whatever you do, be there! *Inshaa Allah*, Aar," he murmured. "You will make it."

Again they bade each other a hasty farewell, and Faruq left the house as quickly and silently as he had come. Aar closed the door behind him and, a moment later, slowly lowered himself to the carpet to sit and think. This should have been the moment for a victory dance but he was in no mood for celebration. The worst civil war ever in his country was fast approaching from the north, where Isaaq, a tribal-based rebel group, had seized control of the devastated cities, mined wells, and scorched farmland that the regime's militia had left behind in its retreat. Now that the fighting was only miles away from the capital Mogadishu, Barre's army desperately needed manpower to turn the tide, so it was conscripting any man who could lift a gun. Even now, sporadic gunfire erupted in the city streets every so often, and the BBC, the Voice of America, and other international radio stations were carrying the news of foreign embassies' emergency evacuations.

Aar sat in the middle of the living room, riffling through the pages of his scholarship booklet. Everything was there, just as he'd been told. Yet all he could do was sit and stare at the words.

A few minutes later, his mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel, and found her son sitting in a silent heap on the floor. Her hands stopped moving; her mind became still with alarm. "What is it, my son?," she asked.

When Aar showed her the package and restated what Faruq had told him about the urgency of his departure, she lowered herself down beside him and forced her mind to focus, and took heart. "Well, my son, we don't have much time to waste. Let us get to it and weigh every available option."

They started with the vexing problem of how to reach the airport the next day, knowing full well that Aar would be sent to fight against his own people if the military got hold of him on his way there. Finally, after frustrating, fruitless hours, Aar stood up and walked in a circle in the living room. The thought of calling Arbaab occurred to him but then he looked at the clock and realized it was almost midnight. In the next instant, though, the ringing of the phone broke the silence. Frantically, Aar rushed over and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"How are you doing, guys?," said a cheerful voice on the other end.

"Oh, thank God, Arbaab. I was going to call you, but then I thought of how late it is and those killer Saturday classes of yours."

"Actually," Arbaab said, "I had gone to bed earlier but something woke me up, and then I had this urge to call. You know how it is, Aar. The 'telepathic twins' thing, I guess! So, what's up with you and Mom?"

"We are both fine," said Aar, "but my scholarship package and the visa arrived this evening. Arbaab, I have to get to the airport and catch the last flight of Saudi Airline at 4:00. You know what the situation is like. How I am going to...?"

"4:00 this morning?," Arbaab interrupted.

"No, no, 4:00 in the afternoon. But how am I going to get to the airport, let alone secure a seat on that flight?"

"You almost gave me a heart attack for a moment there, buddy. Relax, Aar, please," said Arbaab. "We have plenty of time and I assure you, we will have a plan by then."

"Arbaab," Aar sighed, "all this bloodshed, the conscription, foreigners' evacuations...are taking a toll on me."

"I know, brother, I know," Arbaab said. "But we have to beat it, and we will. We will beat it, you'll see. Tell you what," he continued, "here's a plan. Tomorrow you get dressed up like a religious woman, call a cab, and sit in the back. That'll give the impression that a sister with veil is sitting in the back seat, avoiding close proximity with the driver, so no one will bother you. Then, when you get to the airport, change back to your regular clothes before you get out of the cab."

“Well, that may not be bad at all, Arbaab, but do you really think it’ll work?”

“Why not? It must work, and it will,” said Arbaab. “Besides, we have no alternatives, nor do we have the luxury of time.”

“Okay, okay, Arbaab. I will do just that. But I guess that means I won’t get to see you then. Because I beg you, don’t even think about coming to the airport. Do you hear me, Araab? Please, Arbaab. Please.”

Silence on the other end of the phone lingered a bit, then softly Arbaab said, “Sure, Brother. I will not. I will not come to the airport.”

“And promise that you’ll take care of Mom for me.”

“Of course, I will,” Arbaab murmured.

“I’ll send for you as soon as I get situated there, Arbaab.”

“I’m sure you will, Brother,” Arbaab said.

“Goodbye for now, Brother,” said Aar, choking out the words.

“Goodbye, Aar,” said Arbaab, barely holding the tears back himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

As soon as Aar and his mother woke up the next morning, they embarked on their next step of securing transportation to the airport. They agreed that the mother would go out to hire a reliable cab to pick up Aar an hour and a half before the airplane’s departure. As agreed upon, Aar’s mother ventured out and fortunately ran into a young man whose family she had known. She promised five times more than the regular fare to the airport, sealed the deal with him, and came back home.

By noon of that fateful day, Aar’s mother was trying out women’s religious garb on him, together with the latest facial adornment, just in case anyone might peep through the veil. She did so well that when Aar looked at himself in the mirror he was shocked and a bit embarrassed to see his feminine side staring back at him.

At 2:30 p.m., the cabdriver blew the horn. Prior to the taxi’s arrival, mother and son had agreed to take leave of each other at home, and for Aar to get word of his departure to her through a friend of his who worked for the Saudi airline in Dahrán.

Tearfully, mother and son kissed each other goodbye for the first time in twenty-one years. A moment later, a young, proper Muslim woman slid into the back seat of the cab, with only a single small package and purse as “her” luggage. Aar waved goodbye to his mother one more time as the driver pulled away from the house.

The driver sped west, weaving through Mogadishu streets, and reached the airport gate unmolested. Quickly, Aar shed his shell, put his shirt and pants back on, got out and took off to get in line. Before reaching the ticket counter, Aar's progress was arrested by a melee of people roaming around like mad cows in their desperate attempts to reach the same destination. Swallowed up in the chaotic wave, he managed to learn that the damnable *Duubcas*, an especially oppressive unit of the military police that also served as dictator Barre's bodyguards, were holding the crowd back, with orders to shoot to kill all those who would break through the line. So people would stampede back onto each other every time one of the ghoulish soldiers turned towards them.

In a few minutes, Aar learned that the Saudi airline itself had been given an ultimatum: take Barre's relatives and immediate family out of the country or else ground its planes altogether. Now reality was staring back at him with naked eyes. His hope to board the airplane was hanging from a thread.

And then the thread snapped. At 4:30 p.m., from within the roiling crowd, he was able to see the Saudi airplane taxi down the runway and lift off into the air. Too distraught even to feel despair, he walked out of the airport, oblivious to all that was around, got into the first cab he saw, and called out his home address in a hollow voice.

A mile or so away from the airport, Aar realized that the cabdriver had just made a wrong turn. Trembling with a sudden, overwhelming rage, he yelled at the driver to turn back and take the right road. But instead of complying, the pseudo cabdriver pulled a pistol and badge. "Welcome to the army," he announced with a grin. "You are now a proud member of the infantry, Division 21st October."

"Thank you, Sire," Aar said. "Well, well, well. What a surprise! Aren't we all proud of shedding brethren blood, or shall I dare say *fratricide*, just for the heck of a fancy word?"

The officer-cabdriver swerved to the curb and yelled, "If you say that again—one more time—I am going to empty this barrel on your fucking head. Do you understand that, you bastard?"

"Go ahead, why don't you?," Aar shouted back. "Go ahead and prove to yourself what a worthy authority figure you are. I am sure that will make you a hero."

The militia officer double-checked the security locks on the car and got out. The man he had captured was clearly a loose cannon, so loose that he did not trust himself, alone and unaided, to drive him to the

camp. So he called on his walkie-talkie for backup, which soon arrived, and transferred Aar to the back of a prisoner's truck, which rolled away, its destination unknown.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two weeks later in training camp, Aar had feigned fervent loyalty successfully enough to be allowed to join a Special Intelligence Unit, which he did merely to avoid the battlefield and the risk of having to kill another mother or child. By this time, through her frantic effort, his mother had managed to locate Aar's friend in Saudi Arabia and learned that he had not been on the passenger list of the last Saudi plane out. Not long after, National University of Lafoole suspended all classes indefinitely, since half of the student body had been taken off to mysterious camps somewhere outside of the capital.

For Aar's family, the only bright spot in this world of woes was that Arbaab had made it home from the University without being nabbed as well. Then, one uneventful day, two months after Aar had disappeared, Arbaab and his mother received a letter from him, with his passport enclosed. Aar's letter told them to be patient and take care of his passport for him. Soon, he thought, he would get a chance to escape.

Just knowing that Aar was still alive warmed his mother's heart and sent his brother's soul to seventh heaven. Though his mother was skeptical of his chances of safe escape, she wanted, impatiently, to move on to the next hurdle.

"Arbaab," the mother called out, "of course we are ecstatic that he is alive and well, but we have to get to the next stage of planning a getaway to the north as soon as he arrives, if he ever makes it, that is. And before my sons leave for the north, you have to know your maternal clan affiliation and my ancestors' names, to use them if need be, all by heart."

"Mom," Arbaab pleaded, "What in the world is in the north for us? Over and over you keep insisting that we have to know the names of a bunch of ancestors who've been dead for centuries. Mom, I know you're from the northern clan of Isaaq and I know my father is Darood, also from the north. So Mom, I will never affiliate myself with either one if I can't belong to both. And you know Aar and I are in the same boat on this. If we are going to die anyhow, Mom, for an unjust tribal

war, let us not sow a poison seed for the generations to come by choosing one tribe over the other.”

Pondering the power of his sermon, the mother retired into heart-wrenching tears. Yet she was unable to let go of her point once and for all. Hours later, they had agreed that their only choice was to escape to the north for the time being, but the question of the tribal allegiance remained unsettled between the two.

“As far as I am concerned,” the mother persisted, “Isaaq is your maternal clan, and so they will not harm you. . . .” “Mom,” Arbaab interrupted, “you’re at it again! Please let’s not go down that road, all right?”

“Okay, okay,” she sighed. “Then what different escape plan do you have in mind?”

Arbaab was silent for a moment, and then he threw his arms up. “I don’t have a clue, Mom, not a clue.”

“Well, Arbaab, I know someone who used to travel around with his donkey wagon, selling hay off the back of it. But now he transports human cargo along with the hay. He takes two or three passengers at a time, covers them with hay, reaches a rendezvous point, and then off to the north they go. The militia never searches the wagon since they think all it’s carrying is frivolous, just heaps of hay.”

“Wow, that is it, Mom. That is it!” said Arbaab. “Now all we have to do is find the guy.” They agreed that she would go out looking for the hay seller. When she found him the very next day, he agreed to pick up her sons when and where she said, and assured her that the operation was virtually risk free. Their plan was sealed. Days dragged on and turned into weeks, and then to months. But one bright day, a shabbily dressed man with a wild scraggy beard and a twisted, flimsy cane came to the window and knocked. Arbaab angrily signaled for him to go away but the beggar would pay no heed. Finally, Arbaab opened the front door to tell him they had nothing to offer so he might as well move on. There was something in the beggar’s faint smile, however, that seemed vaguely familiar so Arbaab leaned forward on the doorstep to get a closer look. At that point, the beggar could no longer hold his muffled laughter in. Arbaab was forced to open his trembling arms to embrace the stranger before he realized, all at once, that the gaunt, ragged beggar in his arms was his brother. A second later, their mother, who was awakened by their howls of joy, came out to the front room and over to the door and joined her cries with theirs.

Within a few minutes, the three of them, still holding on tightly to one another, were sitting side by side in the living room where they let questions and replies fly free. Arbaab could not get over the brilliance of Aar's disguise, which seemed equal to anything the infamous CIA and its counterpart, the KGB, of many years past could have concocted. Then Aar took the reins and talked awhile about what seemed to him just a mere fraction of his odyssey, but to his mother and brother sounded like the tales in *A Thousand and One Nights*. He told them how he had stashed his passport and the scholarship package in a bathroom in the first camp he had been sent to, and boasted gleefully of having fooled the militia into trusting him as a trained intelligence officer. He described how he had planned and hatched his own escape. His account was only interrupted by trips to the bathroom and bites of the food his mother cooked, running back and forth to the kitchen, making sure he had enough. Before any of them noticed, the clock on the wall pointed to well after midnight, so they had to adjourn.

Ironically, throughout this chronicle of his adventures in hell, Aar showed no sign of fatigue. The next day, though, when Arbaab and his mother woke up, Aar remained motionless in his bed. The only sign of life was his breathing. So Arbaab and the mother moved on to plan the departure to the north without his input, concluding that it was best for Aar to have a whole day of rest before taking the trip early the next morning. When Aar finally woke up that afternoon, they told him about the arrangements. The two brothers were to take the trip; their mother would stay behind in hopes of joining them later. Knowing that the risk of staying in Mogadishu increased with every minute, Aar had no choice but to agree to their plan.

Once again, the mother went out to the streets to find the hay seller and tell him that it was time. The two of them agreed that he would pick the brothers up the next morning at 4:00. Sure enough, at 4:00 a.m., the hay seller arrived. This time, all eyes were dry as Aar and Arbaab bade their mother goodbye, jumped on board, and took refuge in the thick pile of hay. At several checkpoints on the road, they came very close to the dreaded militia on guard. Fortunately, though, no one took any interest in a donkey wagon full of hay.

Finally, many miles away, the wagon came to a halt. The hay seller put his fingers in his mouth, letting out a sharp, piercing whistle. In no time, a beat-up jeep with two girl passengers and a male driver in it came into view. Before the jeep came to a stop, the hay seller shouted

to Aar and Arbaab to get off and get on board the car. The next thing they knew, they were on the highway to the north.

\*\*\*\*\*

By noon, the car was passing by Beled Weyn. Aar pinched his brother and beckoned to the sky. It was a brilliantly clear and sunny day in the middle of an exceptionally harsh and prolonged winter. The trees were naked and the land was dry. The sand was a reddish dust, disturbed here and there by dead animals lying along the side of the road. Yet to the right of them, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, half a dozen hawks were diving, one after the other, down from the open sky, zeroing in on two rabbits, which collided with each other in their desperate flight for their lives. On their left, hundreds of migrating geese flew next to their speeding car as though in a losing race with it, until the distance between them grew so great that they were swallowed up by the horizon's haze.

Hours upon hours later, approaching the outskirts of the liberated city of Burco, Aar and Arbaab felt no fear when their car was brought to a halt by soldiers of the rebel army controlling the region. Feeling no allegiance to either their paternal or maternal clan, they wanted to be part of the emancipated city instead, and saw the entire northern dissenters as liberators, whose resistance to human degradation offered an indelible lesson for all oppressed men around the world.

The "liberators" ordered everyone out of the car, and instructed them to identify themselves. To Aar and Arbaab's utter dismay, the women not only told their clan and subclan but recited a list of their forefathers' names in reverse order—the same way their mother tried to teach them, but to no avail. The driver followed and did same, and the three of them were quickly released, hassle free.

Now, quite clearly, it was up to Aar and Arbaab to do the same. But the two could go no further than stating their names and their father's name. They were quick to protest that although they had been born in Mogadishu, their father and mother both had come from the north. But as they realized that what they were saying wasn't what the crazed guards waited to hear, the enormity of their mistake sank in. Frantically, they babbled what little they knew about the clan identity that they despised. But they knew full well that the little information they could provide failed to verify the subclan connection of either of their parents. And their unconventional twins' names—Aar, the male lion,

and Arbaab, the male elephant, in Somali language—only added fuel to the fire.

The head of the guards, a man about the same age as Aar, was not amused. “You, Aar, are a lion,” he bellowed, “so you are a terror to Isaaq. And since you, Arbaab, are an elephant, you are supposed to march on us, just as freely as the elephant saunters across open land.”

The suspicion that the young brothers were spies for Barre’s regime hung thickly in the air. The next thing the two knew was that they had been arrested for espionage. The guards dragged them into a shanty jail and told them that their fate would be decided within thirty minutes—by a kangaroo court composed of the jailors themselves.

Then, in the shanty jail, the final blow fell on their heads. A man who had escaped from the same battalion of Barre’s army from which Aar had fled, recognized him and quickly confided this piece of information to his rebel colleagues. A minute later, the brothers were told they had been found guilty, and that the penalty for their crime was death. As spies and traitors to the nation, the two of them were not deemed worthy of bullets. As they were led in shackles out of the jail and toward the gallows, Aar made one last valiant effort to save his brother but not himself. “Do whatever you wish with me!” he cried out. “But know that my brother Arbaab has never, never served in the military!”

As Aar pleaded with his captors not to spill any more innocent blood on land already saturated with it, Arbaab plodded along in silence broken only by the grating of his chains. By the time they reached the gallows, Aar’s voice was no longer audible, yet his mouth remained open as though he were gasping for air to hoard. Beneath the menacing square of the gibbet, they were brought to a halt and, in the same instant, felt the rope from above descending to rest softly on their shoulders. The executioners tightened the nooses around their necks and hoisted them up like two flimsy flags.

Before the corpses were lowered to the ground, a senior commander stopped by to check on his guards. Taking in what had just happened, he requested a briefing. The guard in charge went on and on about where the two boys came from and what they had been accused of but it was some time before he finally referred to their names.

The commander could not believe his ears. Three times more he made the guard repeat himself before walking over from his Land Rover to examine the bodies now lying on the ground. He turned the bodies over, one by one, and then drew back from them, writhing like

a man in flames. "Aar and Arbaab," he wailed. "My flesh and blood... they were my nephews, they were my nephews, my nephews..." "

Insane and consumed with grief, he turned around and opened fire with his AK-47 on the guards, killing five and wounding four before running out of bullets. Then, out of his side arm holster, he pulled a pistol and shot himself.

### **Acknowledgment**

\*I am grateful for the translation assistance provided by my mentor and friend, Fred Pfeil, a professor of English at Trinity College.