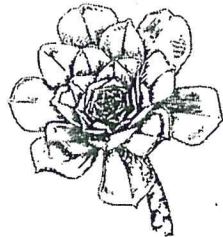


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DESERT FLOWER



The Extraordinary Journey
of a Desert Nomad

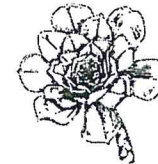
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WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, INC.

New York

1.

RUNNING AWAY



A slight sound woke me, and when I opened my eyes, I was staring into the face of a lion. Riveted awake, my eyes stretched wide—very wide—as if to expand enough to contain the animal in front of me. I tried to stand up, but I hadn't eaten for several days, so my weak legs wobbled and folded beneath me. Collapsing, I slumped back against the tree where I had been resting, sheltered from the African desert sun that becomes so merciless at noon. I quietly leaned my head back and closed my eyes, and felt the rough bark of the tree pressing into my skull. The lion was so near I could smell his musty scent in the hot air. I spoke to Allah: "It's the end for me, my God. Please take me now."

My long journey across the desert had come to an end. I had no protection, no weapon. Nor the strength to run. Even under the best of circumstances, I knew I couldn't beat the lion up the tree, because like all cats, lions with their strong claws are excellent climbers. By the time I got halfway up—BOOM—one swipe

and I'd be gone. Without any fear I opened my eyes again and said to the lion, "Come and get me. I'm ready for you."

He was a beautiful male with a golden mane and a long tail switching back and forth to flick away flies. He was five or six years old, young and healthy. I knew he could crush me instantly; he was the king. All my life I'd watched those paws take down wildebeest and zebras weighing hundreds of pounds more than me.

The lion stared at me and slowly blinked his honey-colored eyes. My brown eyes stared back, locked on his. He looked away. "Go on. Take me now." He looked at me again, then looked away. He licked his lips and sat down on his haunches. Then the lion rose and paced back and forth in front of me, sexily, elegantly. Finally, he turned and walked away, no doubt deciding that I had so little flesh on my bones, I wasn't worth eating. He strode across the desert until his tawny-colored fur was lost against the sand.

When I realized he was not going to kill me, I gave no sigh of relief, because I hadn't been afraid. I'd been ready to die. But evidently God, who has always been my best friend, had something else planned, some reason to keep me alive. I said, "What is it? Take me—direct me," and struggled to my feet.

This nightmare journey began because I was running away from my father. I was about thirteen at the time, and living with my family, a tribe of nomads in the Somalian desert, when my father announced he had arranged my marriage to an old man. Knowing I had to act fast or suddenly one day my new husband would come to get me, I told my mother I wanted to run away. My plan was to find my aunt, my mother's sister, who lived in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. Of course I had never been to Mogadishu—or any other city for that matter. Nor had I ever met my aunt. But with the optimism of a child, I felt somehow things would magically work out.

While my father and the rest of the family were still sleeping,

my mother woke me and said, "Go now." I looked around for something to grab, something to take, but there was nothing, no bottle of water, no jar of milk, no basket of food. So, barefoot, and wearing only a scarf draped around me, I ran off into the black desert night.

I didn't know which direction led to Mogadishu, so I just ran. Slowly at first, because I couldn't see; I stumbled along, tripping over roots. Finally, I decided to just sit down because snakes are everywhere in Africa, and I was terrified of snakes. Each root I stepped on I imagined to be the back of a spitting cobra. I sat watching the sky gradually lighten. Even before the sun came up—*whoosh*—I was off like a gazelle. I ran and I ran and I ran for hours.

By midday I'd traveled deep into the red sand, and deep into my own thoughts. Where in the hell was I going? I wondered. I didn't even know what direction I was heading in. The landscape stretched on to eternity, the sand broken only occasionally by an acacia or thorn tree; I could see for miles and miles. Hungry, thirsty, and tired, I slowed down and walked. Strolling along in a bored daze, I wondered where my new life would take me. What was going to happen next?

As I pondered these questions, I thought I heard a voice: "W-A-R-I-S . . . W-A-R-I-S . . ." My father was calling me! Whipping around in circles, I looked for him, but saw no one. Maybe I was imagining things, I thought. "W-A-R-I-S . . . W-A-R-I-S . . ." the voice echoed all around me. The tone was pleading, but I was frightened all the same. If he caught me, he would surely take me back and make me marry that man, and probably beat me besides. I was not hearing things; it was my father, and he was getting closer. In earnest now, I started to run as fast as I could. Even though I had gotten a head start of several hours, Papa had caught up with me. As I later realized, he'd tracked me down by following my footprints through the sand.

My father was too old to catch me—so I had thought—because I was young and fast. To my childish thinking, he was an old man. Now I recall with a laugh that at the time, he was only in

his thirties. We were all incredibly fit, because we ran everywhere; we had no car, no public transportation of any kind. And always I was fast, chasing the animals, heading after water, racing the oncoming darkness to reach home safely before the light was lost.

After a while I didn't hear my father calling my name anymore, so I slowed down to a jog. If I kept moving, Papa would get tired and go back home, I reasoned. Suddenly I looked back toward the horizon and saw him coming over the hill behind me. He'd spotted me, too. Terrified, I ran faster. And faster. It was as if we were surfing waves of sand; I flew up one hill, and he glided down the one behind me. On and on we continued for hours, until eventually I realized I hadn't seen him for some time. He no longer called out to me.

My heart pounding, finally I stopped, hiding behind a bush, and looked around. Nothing. I listened closely. No sound. When I came across a flat rock outcropping, I stopped to rest. But I'd learned from my mistake the night before, and when I began to run again, I went along the rocks where the ground was hard, then changed my direction so my father couldn't follow my footprints.

Papa, I reasoned, had turned around to try to make it back home, because now the sun was setting. Still, he would never make it back before the light faded. He'd have to run back through the darkness, listening for the nighttime sounds of our family, tracing his path by the voices of children screaming, laughing, the animal noises of the herds mooing, bleating. The wind carries sounds great distances across the desert, so these noises acted as a lighthouse when we were lost in the night.

After walking along the rocks, I changed my direction. It didn't really matter what direction I chose, since I had no idea which was the right one to lead me to Mogadishu. I kept running until the sun set, the light was gone, and the night was so black I couldn't see. By this time I was starving, and food was all I could think about. My feet were bleeding. I sat down to rest under a tree and fell asleep.

In the morning, the sun burning my face woke me. I opened

my eyes and looked up at the leaves of a beautiful eucalyptus tree stretching to the sky. Slowly the reality of my circumstances came to me. *My God, I'm all alone. What am I going to do?*

I got up and continued to run; for days I managed to keep it up. How many days, I'm not sure. All I know is that for me, there was no time; there was only hunger, thirst, fear, pain. When the evening grew too dark to see, I would stop and rest. At midday, when the sun was at its hottest, I would sit under a tree and take a siesta.

It was during one of these siestas that I fell asleep and the lion woke me. By this point I no longer cared about my freedom; I simply wanted to go back home to Mama. What I wanted more than food or water was my mother. And even though it was common for us to go for a day or two without food or water, I knew I couldn't survive much longer. I was so weak that I could barely move, and my feet were so cracked and sore that each step was agony. By the time the lion sat in front of me licking his lips in hunger, I had given up. I welcomed his quick kill as a way out of my misery.

But the lion looked at the bones jutting out of my skin, my sunken cheeks and bulging eyes, and walked away. I don't know if he took pity on such a miserable soul, or if it was simply a pragmatic decision that I wouldn't even make a worthy snack. Or if God had interceded on my behalf. But I decided God wouldn't be so heartless as to spare me, simply to let me die in some other, crueller way, like starving to death. He had another plan in store for me, so I called out for his guidance: "Take me—direct me." Holding on to the tree to steady myself, I rose to my feet and called out for his help.

I began to walk again, and within a few minutes came to a grazing area with camels everywhere. I spotted the animal carrying the most fresh milk, and ran to it. I nursed, sucking the milk like a baby. The herdsman spotted me and yelled out, "Get out of there, you little bitch!" and I heard a bullwhip crack. But I

was desperate, and kept right on sucking, draining the milk as fast as my mouth could take it.

The herdsman ran at me, yelling, loud and mean. He knew that if he didn't scare me away, by the time he reached me, it would be too late. The milk would all be gone. But I'd had plenty, so I started to run. He chased after me, and managed to lash me with the whip a couple of times before I outran him. But I was faster than he was, and left him behind me, standing in the sand, cursing in the afternoon sun. 6

Some years later, when she is working in London, she is "Discovered"

My auntie said her friends had mentioned that I should try modeling. But Auntie's response was "Um-hmmm. But we don't do that sort of thing, being from Somalia and being Moslem, you know." However, my aunt never seemed to object to the modeling career of her old friend's daughter, Iman. Auntie had known Iman's mother for years and years, so whenever either of them were in London, Aunt Maruim insisted they stay with us. Listening to discussions of Iman was how I first became acquainted with the idea of modeling. I had cut many of her pictures from my cousin's magazines and taped them to the wall in my little room. If she's a Somali woman and she can do this, I reasoned, why can't I?

When Iman came to our house, I always wanted to find the right opportunity to talk to her. I wanted to ask, "How do I become a model?" I barely even knew that such a thing existed; I certainly had no idea how to become one. But each time she'd visit, she would spend the evening talking with the elders; I knew my aunt and uncle would never approve of my interrupting their conversation for such nonsense as my desire to be a model. Finally, one night I found the right moment. Iman was in her room read-

ing, and I knocked on the door. "Can I get you something before you go to sleep?"

"Yes, I'd like a cup of herbal tea." I went down to the kitchen and brought back a tray.

As I set it down on the nightstand, I began. "You know, I have so many of your pictures in my room." I listened to the clock ticking on the nightstand, feeling like a perfect idiot. "I'd really like to do modeling, too. Do you think it's hard . . . how did you do it . . . how did you start, anyway?"

I don't know what I expected her to say; maybe I hoped she'd wave a magic wand over me and turn me into Cinderella. But my dream of modeling was an abstract one; the whole idea seemed so far-fetched that I didn't spend much time thinking about it. Instead, after that night, I went on with my daily chores, focusing on the day-to-day business of breakfast, lunch, dishes, and dusting.

By this point I was about sixteen, and had lived in London for two years. I had actually become acclimated enough that I knew what date the Western world attributed to this span of time: 1983.

During the summer of that year, Uncle Mohammed's sister died in Germany, leaving behind a young daughter. Her daughter, little Sophie, came to live with us, and my uncle enrolled her in All Souls Church School. My morning routine now also included walking Sophie several blocks to her school.

On one of those first mornings, as Sophie and I strolled toward the old brick building, I saw a strange man staring at me. He was a white man around forty with a ponytail. He didn't try to hide the fact he was staring at me and, in fact, he was quite bold. After I left Sophie at the door, the man walked toward me and started speaking to me. But of course I didn't speak English, so I had no idea what he was saying. Frightened, I wouldn't look at him and ran back home. This routine continued: I'd drop off Sophie, the white man would be waiting, he'd try to talk to me, and I'd run.

On the walk home after I met Sophie in the afternoons, she'd frequently mention a new friend—a little girl she'd met in her class. "Yeah, um-hmmm," I'd say, completely uninterested. One day I was a little bit late arriving to pick up Sophie. When I got there, she was waiting outside the school, playing with another little girl. "Oh, Waris, this is my friend," Sophie said proudly. Standing next to the two girls was the pervert with the ponytail, the guy who had been bothering me for nearly a year.

"Yeah, let's go," I said nervously, eyeing my man. But he bent over and said something to Sophie, who spoke English, German, and Somali. "Come on, Sophie. Get away from that man," I warned, and snatched her hand.

She turned to me and said brightly, "He wants to know if you speak English." Sophie shook her head at the man. He said something else and Sophie translated, "He wants to ask you something."

"Tell him I'm not talking to him," I replied haughtily and looked in the other direction. "He can just go away. He can just . . ." But I decided not to finish my sentence, because his daughter was listening, and Sophie would immediately translate. "Forget it. Let's just go," and I grabbed at her hand and pulled her away.

Shortly after this encounter, I dropped Sophie off one morning as usual. Then I walked back home and was upstairs cleaning when the doorbell rang. I headed downstairs, but before I could reach the door, Aunt Maruim was opening it. Peering through the railing from the stair landing I couldn't believe what I saw; there stood Mr. Ponytail. He must have followed me. My first thought was that he was going to make up some stories to tell my aunt—say that I was doing something wrong. Some lies, like I was flirting with him, slept with him, or he'd caught me stealing something. Auntie said in her fluent English, "Who are you?"

"My name is Malcolm Fairchild. I'm sorry to bother you—but can I talk to you?"

"What do you want to talk to me about?" I could see Auntie was shocked.

Walking back upstairs, I felt ill, wondering what he was going to say, but within two seconds I heard the door slam shut. I rushed into the living room as Aunt Maruim was storming toward the kitchen.

"Auntie, who was that?"

"I don't know—some man who said he's been following you, wanted to talk to you, some nonsense about wanting to take your picture." She glared at me.

"Auntie, I didn't tell him to do it. I didn't say anything to him."

"I KNOW THAT! That's why he's here!" She marched past me. "Go do your work—don't worry about it. I took care of *him*." But Auntie refused to go into details about their conversation, and the fact that she'd been so angry and disgusted led me to believe he wanted to take some sort of porno pictures. I was horrified and never brought up the incident after that morning.

From then on, each time I saw him at All Souls Church School, he never talked to me. He simply smiled politely and went on about his business. Until one day when I was picking up Sophie, he startled me by walking up and handing me a card. My eyes never left his face as I took it and stowed it in my pocket. I watched him steadily as he turned around to walk away, then started cussing him in Somali: "Get away from me, you dirty man—you fucking pig!"

When I got home, I ran upstairs; the kids all slept on the top floors, so this part of the house was our sanctuary from the adults. I went into my cousin's room and, as usual, interrupted her reading. "Basma, look at this," I said, fishing the card from my pocket. "This is from that man, remember that man I told you about, the one who's always bothering me, and who followed me here? He gave me this card today. What does it say?"

"It says he's a photographer."

"But what kind of photographer?"

"He takes pictures."

"Yeah, but what kind of pictures?"

"It says, 'fashion photographer.'"

"Fashion photographer," I said, sounding out each word slowly. "You mean, he takes pictures of clothes? He'd take pictures of me wearing clothes?"

"I don't know, Waris," she sighed. "I really don't know." I knew I was bothering her, that she wanted to get back to her book. Standing up from the bed, I took the card and left. But I hid the fashion photographer's card in my room. Some little voice told me to hang on to it.

102

"Free / Abandoned in London"

The next morning the entire four-story mansion was in complete chaos with everyone packing, the phone ringing, and swarms of people running in and out of the house. Upstairs, I prepared to leave my little room under the eaves, packing my cheap bag with

108

what few belongings I'd accumulated during my stay in England. In the end, I threw most of the hand-me-down clothes in the trash, deciding they were too ugly and old-womanish for me. Why haul around a bunch of garbage? Still a nomad, I'd travel light.

At eleven o'clock, everyone gathered in the living room as the chauffeur loaded the bags into the car. I paused for a second to remember this was the way I had come so many years ago—the chauffeur, the car, walking into this room, seeing the white sofa, the fireplace, meeting my aunt for the first time. That gray morning was also the first time I'd seen snow. Everything about this country had seemed so bizarre to me then. I walked outside to the car with my distressed Aunt Maruim, who said, "What am I going to tell your mother?"

"Tell her I'm fine, and she'll hear from me soon." She shook her head and got into the car. I stood on the sidewalk and waved good-bye to everyone, then walked into the street, watching the car until it was out of sight.

109

I'm not going to lie—I was scared. Up until that moment I hadn't really believed that they would leave me there all alone. But as I stood in the middle of Harley Street, I was exactly that—all alone. I have no hard feelings toward my aunt and uncle, though; they're still my family. They gave me an opportunity by bringing me to London, and for that I will forever be grateful. When they left, I guess they thought, "Well, you wanted to stay—here's your chance. Go ahead then—do what you want. But we're not going to make it easy for you, because we think you should come home with us." I'm sure they felt it was a disgrace for a young woman to remain in England alone, unchaperoned. However, in the end the decision had been mine, and since I had chosen to remain, I would have to take charge of my own destiny now.

Fighting an overwhelming feeling of panic, I went back inside the house. I closed the front door and walked into the kitchen to talk to the only other person left—my old friend the chef. He greeted me with "Well, you know, you've got to go today. I'm

109

the only one who's staying on—not you. You've got to leave." He pointed toward the front door. Oh, yes, the minute my uncle was gone, he just couldn't wait to give it to me. The smug look on his stupid face showed that ordering me around gave him great pleasure. I stood there leaning against the door frame, thinking how quiet the house seemed now that everybody was gone. "Waris, you've got to go now. I want you to get out . . ."

"Oh, *shut up*." The man was like an obnoxious barking dog. "I'm going, okay? I just came in to get my bag."

"Grab it now—quickly. Quickly. Hurry up, because I have to—" By this time I was climbing the stairs, paying no attention to his noise. The master was gone, and in the brief interim before the new ambassador arrived, Chef would be master. I walked through the empty rooms, thinking of all the good and bad times here, wondering where my next home would be.

110

I picked up my little duffel from the bed, slung it over my shoulder, walked down the four flights of stairs, and out the front door. Unlike the day I had arrived, today was a gorgeous, sunny day with a blue sky and fresh air like springtime. In the tiny garden, I used a stone to unearthen my passport, slipping it out of its plastic bag and stowing it in my duffel. I brushed the soil from my hands and headed down the street. I couldn't help smiling as I walked along the sidewalk—free at last. My whole life stretched before me with nowhere to go, and no one to answer to. And somehow I knew things would work out.

Close to my uncle's house was my first stop: the Somalian embassy. I knocked on the door. The doorman who answered knew my family well, since sometimes he also drove for my uncle. "Hello, miss. What are you doing here? Is Mr. Farah still in town?"

"No, he's gone. I wanted to see Anna, to find out if I can get a job at the embassy." He laughed, returned to his chair, and sat down. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back against the wall. As I stood there in the middle of the lobby, he made no attempt to move. His attitude puzzled me, as this man had always been polite to me. Then I realized that—like Chef's—his

110

attitude had changed with the departures that occurred that morning. My uncle was gone, and without my uncle, I was nobody. I was less than nobody, and these oafs were thrilled to have the upper hand.

"Oh! Anna's far too busy to see you." The doorman grinned.

"Look," I said firmly, "*I need to see her.*" Anna had been my uncle's secretary, and she'd always been kind to me. Luckily, she heard my voice in the lobby and walked out of her office to see what was happening.

"Waris! What are you doing here?"

"You know, I really didn't want to go back to Somalia with my uncle," I explained. "I just didn't want to go back. So I—I'm not staying at the house anymore, you know. And I was

111

wondering if you know anybody who maybe—anybody I can work for—anything—I don't care what it is. I'll do anything."

"Well, my darling"—she raised her eyebrows—"it's a bit too short notice. Where are you staying?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't worry about that."

"Well, can you give me a number where I can find you?"

"No, because I don't know where I'm staying. I'll find some cheap hotel tonight." I knew she would invite me to stay at her place if she hadn't had a tiny little flat. "But I can come back and give you a number later, so you can let me know if you hear of anything."

"Okay, Waris. Listen, take care of yourself—are you sure you're going to be all right?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine." From the corner of my eye I saw the doorman constantly grinning like a fool. "Well, thanks—look, I'll see you later."

With relief I headed out into the sunlight again, and decided to go shopping. All I had to live on until I landed a job was the small sum of money I'd squirreled away from my maid's wages. But now that I was a woman about town, I needed to buy something decent to wear, a new dress to lift my spirits. I walked from

111

the embassy to the big department stores at Oxford Circus. I'd been there before with my cousin Basma when I'd first come to London. Aunt Maruim had sent us down to buy me a few things, since when I arrived I had no winter clothes. Actually I'd had no clothes at all, except the outfit I'd worn on the plane and one fine leather sandal.

Strolling through the racks at Selfridges, I found the enormous variety of choices mesmerizing. The thought that I could stay here as long as I wanted and try on all these clothes—all these colors, styles, sizes—was intoxicating. The thought that for the first time in my history, I was in charge of my own life was intoxicating—nobody yelling at me to milk the goats, feed the babies, make the tea, scrub the floors, scour the toilets.

112

For the next several hours, I set to work trying on outfits in the dressing room with the help of two salesclerks. Using my limited English and sign language, I communicated that I wanted something longer, shorter, tighter, brighter. At the end of my marathon session, when dozens of discarded garments lay in stacks outside my fitting room, one of the clerks smiled at me and said, "Well, love, what did you decide to have?"

The sheer volume of choices overwhelmed me, but by this point I was getting nervous that down the street, in the next store, there might be something even better. Before I parted with any of my precious pounds, I'd better find out. "I'm not having anything today," I said pleasantly, "but thank you." The poor clerks, standing with their arms full of dresses, looked at me in disbelief, then at each other in disgust. I sailed past them and continued on my mission: to examine every inch of Oxford Street.

After several places, I still hadn't bought anything; but as always, the true joy for me was simply to try on things. As I left one building and entered another, I realized the springlike day was fading, the winter evening coming on, and I still had no place to spend the night. With this thought in mind, I entered the next store and saw a tall, attractive African woman examining a sale table of sweaters. She looked like a Somalian, and I studied her, trying to decide how to talk to her. Picking up a sweater, I

112

smiled at her and said in Somali, "I'm trying to buy something, but I can't decide what I want. And believe me, girl, I've seen a lot of clothes today."

We began talking and the woman said her name was Halwu. She was quite friendly and laughed a lot. "Where do you live, Waris? What do you do?"

"Oh, you're going to laugh. I'm sure you'll think I'm crazy, but I live nowhere. I don't have any place to live, because my family left me today. They went back to Somalia." I saw the look of empathy in her eyes; as I later learned this woman had been through a lot herself.

"You didn't want to go back to Somalia, huh?" Without saying it, we both knew: we missed our home and our families, but

113

what opportunities did we have there? Being traded for camels? Becoming some man's property? Struggling every day just to survive?

"No, but I have nothing here, either," I said. "My uncle was the ambassador, but now he's gone and the new man is coming. So this morning they kicked me out, and right this minute, I have no idea where I'm headed." I laughed.

She waved in the air to silence me, as if the movement of her hand could sweep away all my problems. "Look, I live around the corner at the YMCA. I don't have a big place, but you can come and stay for the night. I just have a room, so if you want to cook, you'll have to go to a different floor to make some food."

"Ooohh, that would be wonderful, but are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I mean, come on. What are you going to do otherwise?"

We walked together to her room at the Y. The YMCA was located in a modern brick high-rise normally occupied by students. Her room was a tiny space with a twin bed, a place for books, and Halwu's big, beautiful television. "Oh!" I threw up my hands. "Can I watch TV?"

The woman looked at me like I was from outer space. "Oh, yeah—sure. Switch it on." I plopped down on the floor in front of it and stared greedily at her TV. After four years, I could look

113

at it without somebody chasing me out of the room like a stray cat. "Didn't you ever watch television at your uncle's?" she said curiously.

"Are you kidding? Sometimes I would sneak in, but I'd always get caught. 'Watching TV again, Waris?'" I mimicked my aunt's snottiest voice and started snapping my fingers. "'Back to work, now, come on. We didn't bring you here to watch television.'"

My real education on life in London began with Halwu as my professor; the two of us became close friends. I spent that first night in her room, and the next, and the next. Then she suggested, "Why don't you get a room here?"

"Well, first of all because I can't afford it, and I need to go to school, which means I won't have time to work." I asked her shyly, "Can you read and write?"

"Yeah."

"And speak English?"

"Yeah."

"See, I can't do any of those things and I need to learn. That's my biggest priority. And if I start working again, I won't have time."

"Well, why don't you go to school part-time and work part-time? Don't worry about what kind of job it is—just take anything until you learn English."

"Will you help me?"

"Sure, I'll help you."

I tried to get a room at the YMCA, but it was full with a waiting list. All the young people wanted to be there because it was cheap and very social, with an Olympic-size pool and fitness center. I added my name to the list, but in the meantime I knew I had to do something because I couldn't keep taking up poor Halwu's space. Right across from the YMCA, however, was the YWCA; it was full of elderly people, and fairly depressing, but I took a room there temporarily and set out to find a job. My friend suggested logically, "Why don't you start by looking right here?"

114

"What do you mean? Right where?"

"Right here. Right here," she said, pointing. "McDonald's is just next door."

"I can't work there—there's no way I can serve people. Don't forget, I can't speak English or read. Besides, I don't have a work permit." But Halwu knew the ropes, and following her suggestion, I went around back and applied for a job cleaning the kitchen.

When I began working for McDonald's, I found out how right she was—everybody working in the back was in exactly the same situation as I was. This permitted the management to take advantage of our illegal status, because they didn't have to pay us the same wages and benefits as they normally would have. They

115

knew that as illegal aliens we survived by being invisible to the government; we certainly wouldn't be filing a complaint about low wages. As long as you were a hard worker, the management didn't care about your story; they kept everything strictly hush-hush.

My career as kitchen help at McDonald's put to use the skills I'd learned as a maid: I washed dishes, wiped counters, scrubbed grills, and mopped floors, in a constant effort to erase the traces of burger grease. When I went home at night I was coated with grease and stank like grease. In the kitchen we were always short-staffed, but I didn't dare complain. None of that mattered because, at least now I could support myself. I was just grateful to have the job, and besides, I knew I wouldn't be there for long. In the meantime, I'd do whatever it took to survive.

I began going part-time to the foreigners' free language school, improving my English and learning how to read and write. But for the first time in years, my life wasn't only about work. Sometimes Halwu took me to nightclubs, where the whole crowd seemed to know her. She talked, laughed, and was hysterically funny—just generally so lively that everybody wanted to be around her. One night we went out and had been dancing for hours until I suddenly looked up to realize we were surrounded by men. "Damn!" I whispered to my friend. "Do these men like us?"

115

She grinned. "Oh, *yeah*. They like us very much." This notion astonished me. I scanned their faces and decided she was right. I had never had a boyfriend, or even the attention of any male other than some weirdo like my cousin Haji—which hadn't exactly flattered me. For the past four years I'd simply considered myself Miss Nobody—the maid. Now here were these guys lining up to dance with us. I thought, *Waris, girl, you have finally arrived!*

Oddly enough, even though I always liked the black men, it was the white guys who were most interested in me. Overcoming my strict African upbringing, I chatted away, forcing myself to talk with everyone—black, white, male, female. If I was going to be on my own, I reasoned, I had to learn survival skills for this

116

new world, which were different from the ones I was raised with in the desert. Here I needed to learn English, and how to communicate with all sorts of people. Knowing about camels and goats wasn't going to keep me alive in London.

Halwu supplemented these nocturnal nightclub lessons with further instruction the next day. She went through the entire roster of characters we'd met the night before, explaining their motives, their personalities—basically giving me a crash course in human nature. She talked about sex, what these guys were up to, what to watch out for, and the special problems in store for African women like us. Nobody had ever discussed this topic with me in my life. "Have a good time talking, laughing, and dancing with these guys, Waris, then go home. Don't let them talk you into having sex. They don't know that you're different from an Englishwoman; they don't understand that you've been circumcised."

117

Later, still in London.

Immediately after my family returned to Somalia, I called and made an appointment, but the soonest I could get was two months. As the two months ticked by, I remembered the horror of my circumcision. I thought the surgery would be a repeat of that process, and the more I thought about it, I decided I couldn't go through that again. When the day came, I simply never went to the hospital and never called.

By this point I was living at the Y. The problems with my periods hadn't decreased, but now I was having to earn my living outside the home. You couldn't just miss a week of work each month and hope to keep a job. I struggled along, but my friends at the Y saw I was in bad shape. Marilyn kept asking me what was wrong. I explained to her that I'd been circumcised as a girl in Somalia.

But Marilyn was raised in London, and she couldn't fathom what I was talking about. "Why don't you show me, Waris? I really don't know what you're talking about. Did they cut you here? This? That? What did they do?"

146

Finally one day I pulled my pants down and showed her. I'll never forget the look on her face. Tears poured down her cheeks as she turned away. I felt so desperate, because I thought, *Oh, my God, is it really that bad?* The first words out of her mouth were "Waris, do you feel *anything?*"

"What are you talking about?"

She just shook her head. "You know, do you remember how you looked when you were a little girl? Before they did this?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's how I am now. You're not the same." Now I knew for sure. No longer did I need to wonder—or maybe even hope—that all women had been mutilated the way I had. Now I knew for certain that I was different. I didn't wish my suffering on anyone else, but I didn't want to be on my own. "So this hasn't happened to you, to you and your mother?"

She shook her head and began crying again. "It's horrible, Waris. I can't believe that anybody would do this to you."

"Oh, come on, please don't make me feel sad."

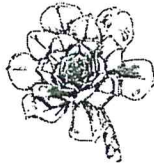
"I feel sad. Sad and angry. I'm crying in a way because I can't believe there are people in the world who would do this to a little girl."

We sat there in silence for a few moments, and while Marilyn continued to sob quietly I couldn't look at her. Then I decided I'd had enough. "Well, fuck it. I'm going to have this surgery. I'm going to call this doctor tomorrow. At least I can enjoy going to the bathroom. That's all I can enjoy, but at least that much."

"I'll go with you, Waris. I'll be right there. I promise."

147

THE AMBASSADOR



This is after she has been a huge success as a fashion model, married and had a son. Warning, some details about the "circumcision" are given here.

In my culture, a woman earns a badge of respect when she becomes a mother. She has brought another human being into this world, contributed to the gift of life. When Aleeke was born, I, too, was a mama, a woman who had come of age. After going through the cycle of womanhood that began prematurely with my circumcision at age five, and came full circle with my baby's birth when I was about thirty, I had even more respect for my own mother. I understood what incredible strength the women in Somalia possess to bear the burden they carry simply because they're born female. As a woman living in the West, I struggled to do what I had to do, and some days didn't think I'd make it: trying to work scrubbing floors at McDonald's when my periods were so painful I thought I'd pass out. Having surgery to open the crude scars of my genitals so that I could urinate properly. Waddling around nine months pregnant, taking the subway uptown to Harlem, climbing the stairs, and shopping for food at the market. Spending three days in labor and thinking I would surely die right there in the delivery room in front of the doctors.

The reality is that I'm the lucky one. What about the girl back in the bush, walking miles and miles to water her goats, while she's in such pain from her period that she can barely stand up straight? Or the wife who will be sewn back up with a needle and thread like a piece of cloth as soon as she gives birth, so her vagina will remain tight for her husband? Or the woman nine months pregnant hunting for food in the desert to feed her other eleven starving children? Or what happens to the new wife who's still sewn up tight, and it's time for her first baby to be born? What happens when she goes out into the desert alone, as my mother did, and tries to deliver it by herself? Unfortunately, I know the answer to that question. Many bled to death out there alone, and if they're lucky, their husbands will find them before the vultures and hyenas do.

As I grew older and more educated, I learned that I was not alone. The health problems I've coped with since my circumcision also plague millions of girls and women throughout the world. Because of a ritual of ignorance, most of the women on the continent of Africa live their lives in pain. Who is going to help the woman in the desert—like my mother—with no money and no power? Somebody must speak out for the little girl with no voice. And since I began as a nomad just like them, I felt it was my destiny to help them.

I could never explain why so many things happened in my life by pure chance. But I don't really believe in the concept of pure chance; there has to be more to our lives than that. God saved me from a lion in the desert when I ran away from home, and from that moment on, I felt he had a plan for me, some reason to keep me alive. But if it was for a reason, what was that reason?

Some time back, a writer for the fashion magazine *Marie Claire* made an appointment to interview me. Before our meeting, I gave a lot of thought to what I wanted to say in the article. When I met the writer, Laura Ziv, for lunch, I took one look at her face and liked her right away. I said, "You know, I don't know what

kind of story you wanted from me—but all of that fashion model stuff's been done a million times. If you promise to publish it, I'll give you a real story."

She said, "Oh? Well, I'll do my best," and switched on her tape recorder. I began telling her the story of my circumcision when I was a child. Suddenly, halfway through the interview, she started crying and turned off the tape.

"Oh, what's the matter with you?"

"I mean, it's horrible . . . it's disgusting. I never dreamed such things still happen today."

"Now there you go. That's the whole point, people in the West don't know. Do you think you can put that in your magazine—your fabulously glossy, gorgeous magazine, which nobody reads but women?"

"I promise I'll do the best I can. But the decision will be up to my boss."

The next day after the interview, I felt stunned and embarrassed at what I'd done. Everybody would know my business now. My most personal secret. Even my closest friends didn't know what had happened to me as a little girl. Being from a very private culture in Somalia, it simply wasn't the type of thing I could ever talk about. Now here I was talking about it to millions of strangers. But finally I decided: Let it be. Lose your dignity if that's what it takes. So I did. I removed my dignity, as if I were taking off my clothes. I put it to the side and walked around without it. But I was also worried about the response of other Somalis; I could imagine them saying, "How dare you criticize our ancient traditions!" I could imagine them echoing my family when I saw them in Ethiopia: "You think because you moved to the West, you know everything?"

After much thought, I realized I needed to talk about my circumcision for two reasons. First of all, it's something that bothers me deeply. Besides the health problems that I still struggle with, I will never know the pleasures of sex that have been denied me. I feel incomplete, crippled, and knowing that there's nothing I can do to change that is the most hopeless feeling of all. When

I met Dana, I finally fell in love and wanted to experience the joys of sex with a man. But if you ask me today, "Do you enjoy sex?" I would say not in the traditional way. I simply enjoy being physically close to Dana because I love him.

All my life I've tried to think of a reason for my circumcision. Maybe if I could have thought of a good reason, I could accept what they'd done to me. But I could think of none. The longer I tried to think of a reason without finding one, the angrier I became. I needed to talk about my secret, because I kept it bottled up inside me all my life. Since I didn't have any family around me, no mother or sisters, there was no one I could share my grief with. I hate the term "victim" because it sounds so helpless. But when the gypsy woman butchered me, that's exactly what I was. However, as a grown woman, I was no longer a victim, and I could take action. By doing the *Marie Claire* article, I wanted the people who promote this torture to hear what it feels like from at least one woman, because all the females in my country are silenced.

It occurred to me that after people learned my secret, they were going to look at me oddly when they saw me on the street. I decided I didn't care. Because the second reason for doing the article was the hope of making people aware that this practice still occurs today. I've got to do it not only for me but for all the little girls in the world who are going through it now. Not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of girls are living with it and dying from it. It's too late to change my own circumstances, the damage has already been done; but maybe I can help save somebody else.

When my interview "The Tragedy of Female Circumcision" came out, the response was dramatic. Laura did a great job, and publishing it was a courageous act on the part of *Marie Claire*. The magazine and Equality Now, an organization that fights for women's rights, were swamped with letters of support. Like Laura the day I told her, the readers were obviously horrified:

One month ago today I read with horror the story in the March issue of *Marie Claire* on female "circumcision," and have not been able to get it off my mind. I would find it difficult to believe that *anyone*, male or female, could forget or pass off something as cold and inhuman as this treatment of the gender which God created as man's friend and companion, his "helpmate." The Bible says men are to "love their wives." Even if living in a culture where God is not known to exist, people cannot help but realize that by the pain, trauma, and even death this inflicts on their women that it is SO WRONG! How can they continue to allow this to happen to their wives, daughters, and sisters? Surely they must know they are destroying their women in so many ways!

God help us, we have to DO SOMETHING. I wake up thinking about it, I go to bed thinking about it, and throughout the day I cry about it! Surely with World Vision or another such organization these people can be educated and taught how their marriages and intimacy could be so much better for the men as well as for the women, *as it was meant to be*, and that women were born with certain body parts for good reason, just as men were!

And another:

I just finished reading your article on Waris Dirie, and am sick to my soul that such torture and mutilation is still endured by little girls. I can hardly believe that something this sadistic is being practiced today. The problems these women face their whole lives resulting from this are incredible. Tradition or not, these outrages against females worldwide need to end. Let me slice open one man's genitals and sew them back up and I can guarantee this practice would stop. How can you want to be with a woman physically when her pain is severe and never-ending? This story has brought me to tears and I am writing the Equality Now organization for information on how to help.

Another letter addressed to me read:

There are a lot of tragic stories that have been told, and there will be more told in the future, but Waris, there are not any more to be told of an entire culture that can be more horrifying than what these people are doing to their children. I cried and felt deeply when I read this. I want to do something to change things, but I don't know what one person can do.

I was relieved by the letters of support; I received only two negative responses criticizing me, and not surprisingly they came from Somalia.

I began giving more interviews and speaking at schools, community organizations, and basically anywhere I could to publicize the issue.

Then another stroke of fate occurred. A makeup artist was on board a plane flying from Europe to New York; she picked up *Marie Claire* and read my interview. During the flight she showed it to her employer, and said, "You should read this." Her employer happened to be Barbara Walters. Barbara later told me that she couldn't finish the article because it was so disturbing. However, it was a problem she felt needed to be addressed. She decided to do a segment for *20/20* using my story to make viewers aware of female circumcision. Ethel Bass Weintraub produced the award-winning segment titled "A Healing Journey."

While Barbara was interviewing me, I wanted to cry; I felt so naked. Telling the story in an article somehow put a distance between me and the reader. I only had to tell Laura, and we were just two women in a restaurant. But when they were filming me for *20/20*, I knew the camera was doing a close-up of my face as I revealed secrets I had guarded my entire life; it was as if someone had cut me open and exposed my soul.

"A Healing Journey" aired in the summer of 1997. Soon after that I received a call from my agency saying they had been contacted by the United Nations. The UN had seen the *20/20* segment and wanted me to contact them.

Events had taken another amazing turn. The United Nations

Population Fund invited me to join their fight to stop female circumcision. Working with the World Health Organization, they had compiled some truly terrifying statistics that put the extent of the problem in perspective. After seeing those numbers, it became clear that this wasn't just my problem. Female circumcision, or as it is more aptly referred to today, female genital mutilation (FGM), occurs predominantly in twenty-eight countries in Africa. The UN estimates that this practice has been performed on 130 million girls and women. At least 2 million girls are at risk each year of being the next victims—that's 6,000 a day. The operations are usually performed in primitive circumstances by a midwife or village woman. They use no anesthetic. They'll cut the girl using whatever instruments they can lay their hands on: razor blades, knives, scissors, broken glass, sharp stones—and in some regions—their teeth. The process ranges in severity by geographic location and cultural practice. The most minimal damage is cutting away the hood of the clitoris, which will prohibit the girl from enjoying sex for the rest of her life. At the other end of the spectrum is infibulation, which is performed on 80 percent of the women in Somalia. This was the version I was subjected to. The aftermath of infibulation includes the immediate complications of shock, infection, damage to the urethra or anus, scar formation, tetanus, bladder infections, septicemia, HIV, and hepatitis B. Long-term complications include chronic and recurrent urinary and pelvic infections that can lead to sterility, cysts and abscesses around the vulva, painful neuromas, increasingly difficult urination, dysmenorrhea, the pooling of menstrual blood in the abdomen, frigidity, depression, and death.

When I imagine that this year two million more little girls will go through what I went through, it breaks my heart. It also makes me realize that each day this torture continues, angry women like myself will be produced, women who can never go back and recapture what was taken from them.

In fact, instead of dwindling, the number of girls being mutilated is growing. The large numbers of Africans who have emigrated to Europe and the United States have taken the practice

with them. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 27,000 New York State women have had or *will* have the procedure performed. For this reason, many states are passing laws to make FGM illegal. Legislators feel that separate laws are necessary to protect the children at risk, because the families will claim it is their "religious right" to mutilate their daughters. Many times an African community will save enough money to bring a circumciser, like the gypsy woman, all the way from Africa to America. Then she'll cut a group of little girls all at once. When this is not possible, families take matters into their own hands. One father in New York City turned up the stereo so his neighbors couldn't hear the screams. Then he cut off his daughter's genitals with a steak knife.

With great pride, I accepted the UN's offer to become a Special Ambassador and join its fight. One of the highest honors of my position will be working with women like Dr. Nafis Sadik, the executive director of the UN's Population Fund. She is one of the first women who took up the fight against FGM, raising the issue at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. I will travel back to Africa again soon to tell my story, and lend support to the UN.

For over four thousand years African cultures have mutilated their women. Many believe the Koran demands this, as the practice is nearly universal in Moslem countries. However, this is not the case; neither the Koran nor the Bible makes any mention of cutting women to please God. The practice is simply promoted and demanded by men—ignorant, selfish men—who want to assure their ownership of their woman's sexual favors. They demand their wives be circumcised. The mothers comply by circumcising their daughters, for fear their daughters will have no husbands. An uncircumcised woman is regarded as dirty, oversexed, and unmarriageable. In a nomadic culture like the one I was raised in, there is no place for an unmarried woman, so mothers feel it is their duty to make sure their daughters have the best possible

opportunity—much as a Western family might feel it's their duty to send their daughter to good schools. There is no reason for the mutilation of millions of girls to occur every year except ignorance and superstition. And the legacy of pain, suffering, and death that results from it is more than enough reason for it to stop:

Working as a UN ambassador is the fulfillment of a dream so outrageous that I never dared dream it. Although I always felt I was different from my family and fellow nomads when I was growing up, I could have never foreseen a future for myself as an ambassador working for an organization that takes on solving the problems of the world. On an international level, the UN does what mothers do on a personal level: it gives comfort and provides security. I guess that's the only past inkling of my future role with the UN; during my early years my friends constantly referred to me as Mama. They teased me because I always wanted to mother them and look after everybody.

Many of those same friends have expressed concern that a religious fanatic will try to kill me when I go to Africa. After all, I'll be speaking out against a crime many fundamentalists consider a holy practice. I'm sure my work will be dangerous, and I admit to being scared; I'm especially worried now that I have a little boy to take care of. But my faith tells me to be strong, that God led me down this path for a reason. He has work for me to do. This is my mission. And I believe that long before the day I was born, God chose the day I will die, so I can't change that. In the meantime, I might as well take a chance, because that's what I've done all my life.

220

18.

THOUGHTS OF HOME



Because I criticize the practice of female genital mutilation, some people think that I don't appreciate my culture. But they're so wrong. Oh, I thank God every day that I'm from Africa. Every day. I'm very proud to be Somali, and proud of my country. I guess some other cultures might consider that a very African way of thinking—you know, being proud for nothing. Arrogant, I guess you'd call it.

Other than the circumcision issue, I wouldn't trade with anyone the way I grew up. Living in New York, although everyone talks about family values, I've seen very little of them. I don't see families getting together like we did, singing, clapping, laughing. People here are disconnected from one another; there's no sense of belonging to a community.

Another benefit of growing up in Africa was that we were part of pure nature, pure life. I knew life—I wasn't sheltered from it. And it was real life—not some artificial substitute on television where I'm watching *other* people live life. From the beginning, I had the instinct for survival; I learned joy and pain at the same

221

time. I learned that happiness is not what you have, because I never had anything, and I was so happy. The most treasured time in my life was back when my family and I were all together. I think of evenings when we'd sit around the fire after we'd eaten, and laugh about every little thing. And when the rains began and life was reborn, we celebrated.

When I was growing up in Somalia, we appreciated the simple things in life. We celebrated the rain because that meant we had water. Who in New York worries about water? Let it run from the tap while you walk away and do something else in the kitchen. It's always there when you need it. BOOM, you turn on the faucet and out it comes. It's when you don't have something that you appreciate it, and since we had nothing, we appreciated everything.

My family struggled every day to have enough food. Buying a sack of rice was a big occasion for us. In this country, however, the volume and variety of food is astonishing to anyone who comes here from a Third World nation. Yet, sadly, so many Americans are preoccupied with *not* eating. On one side of the world we're struggling to feed people. On the other side of the world, people are paying money to lose weight. I watch commercials on TV for weight-loss programs and I scream, "You want to lose weight—go to Africa! How about that? How about if you lose weight while you're helping people? Do you ever think about that? You'll feel good *and* different, too. You'll accomplish two powerful things at one time. I promise you, when you come back you will have learned so much. Your mind will be much clearer than when you left home."

Today, I cherish the value of the simple things. I meet people every day who have beautiful homes, sometimes several homes, cars, boats, jewels, but all they think about is getting more, as if that next thing they buy will finally bring them happiness and peace of mind. However, I don't need a diamond ring to make me happy. People say, oh, that's easy for you to say now that you can afford to buy what you want. But I don't want anything. The most valuable asset in life—other than life itself—is health. But

people ruin their precious health worrying about all kinds of pointless little irritations—"Oh, here comes that bill, and another bill, and bills flying in from every direction, and . . . oh, how am I going to pay them all?" The United States is the wealthiest country in the world, yet everybody feels poor.

And more than bankrupt of money, everyone is bankrupt of time. Everybody's got no time. No time at all. "Get out of my way, man, I'm in a hurry!" The streets are packed with people rushing here and there and chasing God only knows what.

I *am* grateful that I've experienced both lives—the simple way and the fast way. But without growing up in Africa, I don't know if I would have learned to enjoy life the simple way. My childhood in Somalia shaped my personality forever, and has kept me from taking seriously trivial issues like success and fame that seem to obsess so many people. Frequently I'm asked, "How does it feel to be famous?"—and I just laugh. What does that mean, famous? I don't even know. All I know is that my way of thinking is an African way, and that will never change.

One of the greatest benefits of living in the West is peace, and I'm not sure how many people realize what a blessing that is. True, there is crime, but that is not the same thing as having a war raging around you. I have been thankful for shelter here and the opportunity to raise my baby in safety, because Somalia has seen constant fighting since rebels ousted Siad Barre in 1991. Rival tribes have fought for control ever since, and no one knows how many people have been killed. The beautiful city of white buildings that the Italian colonists built, Mogadishu, has been destroyed. Nearly every structure bears the marks of seven years of nonstop fighting, with buildings bombed or shot full of bullet holes. There is no longer any hint of order in the city—no government, no police, no schools.

It is depressing for me to know that my family has not escaped this fighting. My uncle Wolde'ab, my mother's brother who was so funny and looked so much like Mama, died in Mogadishu.

He was standing by a window when his house was sprayed with gunfire. The entire building was shot full of holes, and a bullet came through the window and killed my uncle.

Even the nomadic people are affected now. When I saw my little brother, Ali, in Ethiopia, he had been shot also, and narrowly escaped getting killed. He was walking alone with his camels, when poachers ambushed him and shot him in the arm. Ali fell down and pretended to be dead, and the poachers made off with his entire herd.

When I saw my mother in Ethiopia, she told me she was still carrying a bullet in her chest after being caught in crossfire. My sister had taken her to the hospital in Saudi, but they said she was too old for them to operate. Surgery would be dangerous, and she might not survive. Yet, by the time I saw her, she seemed strong as a camel. She was Mama, tough as always, and cracking jokes about getting shot. I asked her if the bullet was still inside her, and she said, "Yeah, yeah, it's in there. I don't care. Maybe I melted it down by now."

These tribal wars, like the practice of circumcision, are brought about by the ego, selfishness, and aggression of men. I hate to say that, but it's true. Both acts stem from their obsession with their territory—their possessions—and women fall into that category both culturally and legally. Perhaps if we cut their balls off, my country would become paradise. The men would calm down and be more sensitive to the world. Without that constant surge of testosterone, there'd be no war, no killing, no thieving, no rape. And if we chopped off their private parts, and turned them loose to run around and either bleed to death or survive, maybe they could understand for the first time what they're doing to their women.

My goal is to help the women of Africa. I want to see them get stronger, not weaker, and the practice of FGM simply weakens them physically and emotionally. Since women are the backbone of Africa, and they do most of the work, I like to imagine how much they could accomplish if they weren't butchered as children and left to function maimed for the rest of their lives.

In spite of my anger over what has been done to me, I don't blame my parents. I love my mother and father. My mother had no say-so in my circumcision, because as a woman she is powerless to make decisions. She was simply doing to me what had been done to her, and what had been done to her mother, and her mother's mother. And my father was completely ignorant of the suffering he was inflicting on me; he knew that in our Somalian society, if he wanted his daughter to marry, she must be circumcised or no man would have her. My parents were both victims of their own upbringing, cultural practices that have continued unchanged for thousands of years. But just as we know today that we can avoid disease and death by vaccinations, we know that women are not animals in heat, and their loyalty has to be earned with trust and affection rather than barbaric rituals. The time has come to leave the old ways of suffering behind.

I feel that God made my body perfect the way I was born. Then man robbed me, took away my power, and left me a cripple. My womanhood was stolen. If God had wanted those body parts missing, why did he create them?

I just pray that one day no woman will have to experience this pain. It will become a thing of the past. People will say, "Did you hear, female genital mutilation has been outlawed in Somalia?" Then the next country, and the next, and so on, until the world is safe for all women. What a happy day that will be, and that's what I'm working toward. *In'shallah*, if God is willing, it will happen.