

From: Infidel by: Ayaan Hirsi Ali

CHAPTER 1

Bloodlines

"Who are you?"

"I am Ayaan, the daughter of Hirsi, the son of Magan."

I am sitting with my grandmother on a grass mat under the talal tree. Behind us is our house, and the branches of the talal tree are all that shields us from the sun blazing down on the white sand. "Go on," my grandmother says, glaring at me.

"And Magan was the son of Isse."

"And then?"

"Isse was the son of Guleid, was the son of Ali. Was the son of Wai'ays. Was the son of Muhammad. Ali. Umar." I hesitate for a moment.

"Osman. Mahamud." I catch my breath, proud of myself.

"Bah?" asks my grandmother. "Which consort?"

"Bah Ya'qub, Garab-Sare." I name the most powerful of Osman Mahamud's wives: daughter of Ya'qub, she of the highest shoulder.

My grandmother nods, grudgingly. I have done well, for a five-year-old. I have managed to count my forefathers back for three hundred years—the part that is crucially important. Osman Mahamud is the name of my father's subclan, and thus my own. It is where I belong, who I am.

Later, as I grow up, my grandmother will coax and even beat me to learn my father's ancestry eight hundred years back, to the beginning of the great clan of the Darod. I am a Darod, a Harti, a Macherten, an Osman Mahamud. I am of the consort called the Higher Shoulder. I am a Magan.

"Get it right," my grandmother warns, shaking a switch at me. "The names will make you strong. They are your bloodline. If you honor them they will keep you alive. If you dishonor them you will be forsaken. You will be nothing. You will lead a wretched life and die alone. Do it again."

* * *

Somali children must memorize their lineage: this is more important than almost anything. Whenever a Somali meets a stranger, they ask each other, "Who are you?" They trace back their separate ancestries until they find a common forefather.

If you share a grandfather, perhaps even an eighth great-grandfather, with a Somali, the two of you are bound together as cousins. You are members of the great family that forms a clan. You offer each other food and hospitality. Although a child belongs to the clan of his father, it may be useful to remember the details of your mother's bloodline, too, in case you travel and need a stranger's help.

So, though the sweat perled down our backs on those long afternoons, my big brother, Mahad, and I learned to chant, in unison, the names of both our lineages. Later, my grandmother began teaching my little sister, Haweya, to do the same, but she never got as far with her. Haweya was quick and bright, but she sat still even less often than Mahad and I.

The truth is that this ancestral knowledge seemed pointless to us modern children, brought up in concrete houses, with hard roofs, behind fixed, fenced walls. Mostly we pranced off, dodging the sharp smacks my grandmother aimed at our legs with the switches that she broke off our tree. We would rather climb the tree and play in its branches.

Above all, we loved listening to my grandmother's stories while my mother cooked over a charcoal brazier and we lay, on a mat, under our tree. These stories never came when we begged for them. They arrived by surprise. My grandmother would be weaving a mat, muttering to herself, and suddenly we would realize that the muttering had turned into a fairy tale.

"There was once a young nomad who married a beautiful wife, and they had a son," my grandmother would begin. The three of us knew to settle down instantly and pretend to be occupied with something; the slightest interruption could break her mood, and she would growl at us and go back to weaving the thin strips of dried grass that she sewed night and day into large, elaborate matting.

"The rains didn't come, so the nomad set out to walk across the desert, looking for pasture where he could settle with his family. Almost as soon as he began walking he came upon a patch of green young grass. On it was a hut made of strong branches, covered with freshly woven mats and swept clean.

"The hut was empty. The man went back to his wife and told her that

after just one day of walking, he had found the perfect place. But two days later, when he returned to the pasture with his wife and baby, they found a stranger standing in the doorway of the hut. This stranger was not tall, but he was thickly built, and he had very white teeth and smooth skin."

Haweya would shiver with pleasure, and I with fear.

"The stranger said, 'You have a wife and child. Take the house, you're welcome to it,' and he smiled. The young nomad thought this stranger was remarkably friendly, and thanked him; he invited the stranger to visit any time. But the wife felt uncomfortable around the stranger. The baby, too, cried as soon as he cast eyes on this man.

"That night an animal sneaked into their hut and stole the baby out of his bed. The man had eaten well and slept heavily; he heard nothing. Such misfortune. The stranger visited the nomad and his wife to tell them of his sorrow. But when he spoke, the wife noticed that there were tiny pieces of red meat between his teeth, and one of those strong white teeth was just a little bit broken.

"The man stayed on with the couple in the house. For a whole year, the grass stayed green and the rains came, so there was no reason to move on. The wife had another baby in that hut, another beautiful son. But again, when the child was barely one season old, an animal came in the night and grabbed the baby in its jaws. This time the child's father ran after the creature, but he was too slow to catch up.

"The third time, the nomad caught up with the creature, and struggled with it, but the animal overpowered him. Again, it ate the baby! Finally, after her third baby was eaten, the wife told the nomad she would leave him. So now that stupid nomad had lost everything!

"So what have you learned?" my grandmother would shout at us. We knew the answer. That nomad had been lazy. He had taken the first pasture he found, even though there had to be something wrong with it. He had been stupid: he had failed to read the signs, the signals, which the baby and the woman had instinctively felt. The stranger was really He Who Rubs Himself with a Stick, the monstrous being who transforms himself into a hyena and devours children. We had spotted it. The nomad had been slow of mind, slow of limb, weak in strength and valor. He deserved to lose everything.

My grandmother's stories could be chilling. There were stories about an ugly old witch woman whose name was People Slayer or People Butcher, who had the power to transform herself, to adopt the face of someone you liked and respected, and who at the last minute lunged at

you, laughing in your face, HAHAHAAAAHA, before she slaughtered you with a long sharp knife that she had been hiding under the folds of her robe all along and then ate you up. My grandmother told us tales from when she was young, of the bands of fighters who raided the desert, stealing animals and women, burning settlements. She told us about all the unrecorded disasters of her life and her parents' lives: the pandemics of plague and malaria and drought that left whole regions barren of life.

She told us also about her life. The good times, when the rains came and made everything green, when streams of water suddenly raced through the dried riverbeds and there was milk and meat in abundance. She tried to teach us how that led to decadence: how when the grass grows green, herders become lazy and children grow fat. How men and women mix, in singing and drumming at twilight, and how that erodes their watchfulness, so that they fail to spot danger. Such mingling, she warned us, leads to competition, conflict, disaster.

Sometimes in my grandmother's stories there were brave women—mothers, like my mother—who used their cunning and their courage to save their children from danger. This made us feel safe, in a way. My grandmother, and my mother, too, were brave and clever: they would surely be able to save us when our time came to face the monsters.

In Somalia, little children learn quickly to be alert to betrayal. Things are not always what they seem; even a small slip can be fatal. The moral of every one of my grandmother's stories rested on our honor. We must be strong, clever, suspicious; we must obey the rules of the clan.

Suspicion is good, especially if you are a girl. For girls can be taken, or they may yield. And if a girl's virginity is despoiled, she not only obliterates her own honor, she also damages the honor of her father, uncles, brothers, male cousins. There is nothing worse than to be the agent of such catastrophe.

Even though we loved her stories, mostly we ignored my grandmother. She herded us around, much as she did the goats that she would tether to our tree, but we were more unruly. Stories and squabbles were our pastimes; I don't think I even saw a toy till I was eight and we had moved to Saudi Arabia. We pestered each other. Haweya and Mahad ganged up on me, or Haweya and I ganged up on Mahad. But my brother and I never did anything as a team. We hated each other. My grandmother always said this was because I was born just one year after Mahad: I stole Ma's lap from him.

We had no father, because our father was in prison.
I had no memory of him at all.

Most of the adults I knew grew up in the deserts of Somalia. The eastern-most country in Africa and one of the poorest, Somalia juts into the Indian Ocean, cradling the tip of the Arabian peninsula like a protective hand before dropping down the coast to Kenya. My family were nomads who moved constantly through the northern and northeastern deserts to find pasture for their herds. They would settle sometimes, for a season or two; when there was no longer enough water and pasture, or if the rains failed, they picked up their hut and stacked their mats onto camels and walked, trying to find somewhere better, to keep their herds alive.

My grandmother learned to weave dried grass so tight you could carry water for miles in one of her pitchers. She could make her own small domed house out of bent boughs and woven mats, then dismantle it and load it onto a nasty-tempered transport camel.

When my grandmother was about ten years old, her father, an Isaq herder, died. Her mother married her uncle. (This is a common practice. It saves a dowry and trouble.) When my grandmother was about thirteen, that uncle received a proposal for my grandmother's hand from a wealthy nomad named Artan, who was about forty years old. Artan was a Dhulbahante, which was a good bloodline of the Darod. He was widely respected, skilled with animals, and a good navigator: he could read his environment so well that he always knew when to move and where to go to find rain. Other clan members came to him to arbitrate their disputes.

Artan was already married, but he and his wife had only one child, a daughter who was a little younger than my grandmother. When he decided to take another wife, Artan first chose the father of the bride: he must be a man from a good clan, with a decent reputation. The girl must be hardworking, strong, young, and pure. My grandmother, Ibaado, was all that. Artan paid a bride price for her.

A few days after Artan married her and took her away, my grandmother bolted. She managed to walk almost all the way back to her mother's camp before Artan caught up with her. He agreed to let her rest for a bit with her mother, to recover. Then, after a week, her stepfather took her to Artan's camp and told her, "This is your destiny."

For the rest of her life, my grandmother was irreproachable in every way. She raised eight girls and one boy, and never was there a whisper of

gossip about their virtue or their work. She instilled willpower and obedience and a sense of honor in her children. She grazed animals, fetched firewood, built fences of sticks laced with thorn branches. She had hard hands and a hard head, and when her husband hosted clan meetings in his role as a clan arbiter, she kept her girls safely apart from the men and the singing and the drums. They could listen only from afar to the poetry competitions and watch as the men traded goods and tales. My grandmother showed no jealousy toward her older co-wife, though she stayed out of her way; when the older wife died, my grandmother tolerated the presence of her haughty stepdaughter, Khadija, the girl who was almost her own age.

Artan had nine daughters and a young wife. Guarding the honor of his women was of paramount importance. He kept them well away from any other nomads, roaming for weeks to find a place with pasture and no young men. They navigated endlessly through the remotest deserts. As we sat under the talal tree outside our house in Mogadishu, my grandmother often told us about the beautiful emptiness of sitting in front of a hut she had built with her own hands, staring into the vast, never-ending space.

In a sense, my grandmother was living in the Iron Age. There was no system of writing among the nomads. Metal artifacts were rare and precious. The British and Italians claimed to be ruling Somalia, but this would have meant nothing to my grandmother. To her there were only the clans: the great nomad clans of the Isaq and the Darod, the lesser Hawiye farmers, and, lower still, the inferior Sab. The first time she saw a white person my grandmother was in her thirties: she thought this person's skin had burned off.

My mother, Asha, was born sometime in the early 1940s, along with her identical twin sister, Halimo. My grandmother gave birth to them alone, under a tree. They were her third and fourth children; she was about eighteen, leading her goats and sheep to pasture when she felt the pains. She lay down and bore forth; then she cut the umbilical cords with her knife. A few hours later, she gathered together the goats and sheep and managed to bring the herd home safely before dark, carrying her newborn twins. Nobody was impressed by the exploit: she was only bringing home two more girls.

To my grandmother, feelings were a foolish self-indulgence. Pride was important, though—pride in your work, and your strength—and self-reliance. If you were weak, people would speak ill of you. If your thorn

fences were not strong enough, your animals would be raided by lions, hyenas, and foxes, your husband would marry another, your daughters' virginity would be stolen, and your sons seen as worthless.

In her eyes, we were useless children. Bred in a cement-block house with a hard roof, we had no skills of value. We walked on roadways; the road in front of our house wasn't paved, but still, it was a marked passage in the dirt. We had water from a tap. We could never have found our way home after herding animals through the desert; we couldn't even milk a goat without getting kicked over.

My grandmother reserved particular scorn for me. I was terrified of insects, so in her eyes I was a truly stupid child. By the time her daughters were five or six, my grandmother had already taught them every major skill they would need to survive. I lacked all of them.

My mother told us stories, too. She had learned to care for her family's animals, and herded them through the desert to places that were safe. The goats were easy prey for a predator; so was a young girl. If my mother or her sisters were attacked by men out in the desert it would be their own fault: they should have fled at the first sight of an unknown camel. If they were ever captured they were to say, three times, "Allah be my witness, I want no conflict with you. Please leave me alone." To be raped would be far worse than dying, because it would tarnish the honor of everyone in their family.

If the invocation to Allah had no effect, my grandmother taught her daughters to run around behind a man, squat down, reach between his legs under his sarong, and yank his testicles hard. They were not to let go. He might hit or kick, but they were to tuck in their heads and take the blows on their backs and hope to hang on long enough to cause the attacker to faint. This move is called *Qworegoys*, and the women of my grandmother's family taught it to their daughters just as they taught them to make thorn-bush fences to protect the hut from hyenas.

I remember one afternoon when Haweya and I were small children, watching my grandmother rubbing sheep fat into a long coil of woven rope before she steeped it in the plant dye that would make it hard and black.

"A woman alone is like a piece of sheep fat in the sun," she told us. "Everything will come and feed on that fat. Before you know it, the ants and insects are crawling all over it, until there is nothing left but a smear of grease." My grandmother pointed to a gobbet of fat melting in the sun,

just beyond the talal tree's shadow. It was black with ants and gnats. For years, this image inhabited my nightmares.

When my mother was a child, she was always dutiful, always obedient. But as she grew up, the world began changing. The old traditions of the nomads were shifting as modern life lured them to villages and cities. And so, when she was about fifteen years old, my mother walked out of the desert. She left her parents and her older sisters and even her twin sister behind her, and began walking. Then she got on a truck and went to the port city of Berbera, and she took a ship across the Red Sea, to Arabia.

Khadija had preceded her. Khadija was her older stepsister, the child of her father's first wife. Another of my mother's older sisters made the trip, too. I don't know what led them to do it; my mother rarely confided her private emotions. But it was the 1950s, and modern life was jabbing its sharp elbows into the farthest parts of the world. My mother was young, after all, and I think perhaps she simply didn't want to be left behind in the desert when all the young people had left for the city.

My mother went to Aden, where Khadija had already settled: a big city, a center of Britain's colonial rule over the Middle East. She got a job cleaning house for a British woman. She learned about forks and chairs and bathtubs and cleaning brushes. She loved the strict rituals—cleaning, folding, ironing—and the elaborate paraphernalia of settled life. My mother became even more scrupulously attentive about such matters than the woman she worked for.

Although she was alone in Aden, without parental supervision, my mother was supremely virtuous. She was determined that nobody would ever have grounds to gossip that she, Asha Artan, had behaved improperly. She never took a taxi or a bus for fear of being seated beside a strange man. She shunned the Somali men who chewed *gat* and the girls who brewed tea for them and joked around as the buzzy euphoria of the short, fat little leaves got them talking and laughing. Instead, in Aden, my mother learned to pray in the proper Islamic manner.

Living in the desert, my grandmother had never really had the time to pray. Among the nomads, women weren't expected to. It was men who spread their prayer mats on the sand five times a day and faced Mecca, chanting the Quran. But now, on the Arabian peninsula, where the Prophet Muhammad received Allah's revelation, my mother learned the ritual ablutions. She learned to cover herself with a plain cloth and pray—

standing, sitting, prostrating, turning right and left: the ballet of submission to Allah.

In the desert, nomad women were not covered. They *worked*, and it is hard to work under a long veil. While my grandmother herded and cooked, she draped herself in a roughly woven long cloth, the *goh*, leaving her arms, hair, and neck bare. In my grandmother's day, men were commonly present while women breast-fed their children; if there was anything arousing about seeing a few inches of female flesh, the men never showed it.

My mother had no protector in Aden—no father, no brother. Men leered and bothered her on the street. She began wearing a veil, like the Arab women who robed when they left their houses in a long black cloth that left only a slit for their eyes. The veil protected her from those leering men, and from the feeling of vileness it gave her to be looked at that way. Her veil was an emblem of her belief. To be beloved of God, you had to be modest, and Asha Artan wanted to be the most proper, most virtuous woman in the city.

One day my grandfather Artan came to Aden. He told my mother that he had received a request for her hand in marriage and had accepted. My mother was about eighteen; she could not defy her father. So she stayed silent. A virgin's silence is the proper answer to a marriage proposal; it signifies a dignified consent.

So my mother married this man, whose name was Ahmed, although she disliked him on sight: he was too short and too dark, and he smoked, which to her was as bad as chewing *gat*. Ahmed was a Darod, as she was, and of the Harti, too, like her; but instead of being a nomad Dhulbahante, like my mother, he was a trader, a Wersengeli. My mother therefore looked down on this man, although he was wealthy.

This Wersengeli man moved my mother to Kuwait, where she was mistress of a big house with a tile floor, hot running water, and electricity. The first thing my mother did was fire all the maids: nobody could clean the house well enough for Asha Artan. She set about creating an exemplary household. She had a son and called him Muhammad, after the Prophet, the proper name for an oldest boy.

Then her father, who was an old man now, died, and my mother did something extremely surprising: she told her husband that she wanted a divorce.

Of course, my mother had no right to a divorce under Muslim law. The only way she could have claimed one was if her husband had been impotent or left her completely indigent. All the members of her clan in Kuwait told her she was being ridiculous. Her husband was wealthy, and although he could have afforded several wives, he came home to her every night. What more could she want? If she divorced, my mother would be used goods—no longer a virgin. And besides, they argued, she would get a reputation that she was not *baarri*.

A woman who is *baarri* is like a pious slave. She honors her husband's family and feeds them without question or complaint. She never whines or makes demands of any kind. She is strong in service, but her head is bowed. If her husband is cruel, if he rapes her and then taunts her about it, if he decides to take another wife, or beats her, she lowers her gaze and hides her tears. And she works hard, faultlessly. She is a devoted, welcoming, well-trained work animal. This is *baarri*.

If you are a Somali woman you must learn to tell yourself that God is just and all-knowing and will reward you in the Hereafter. Meanwhile, everyone who knows about your patience and endurance will applaud your father and mother on the excellence of your upbringing. Your brothers will be grateful to you for preserving their honor. They will boast to other families about your heroic submission. And perhaps, eventually, your husband's family will appreciate your obedience, and your husband may one day treat you as a fellow human being.

If in the process of being *baarri* you feel grief, humiliation, fatigue, or a sense of everlasting exploitation, you hide it. If you long for love and comfort, you pray in silence to Allah to make your husband more bearable. Prayer is your strength. Nomadic mothers must try to give their daughters this skill and strength called *baarri*.

For years, my ma had been perfect. Her virtue had been legendary, her work habits impeccable. Partly it was her nature: my mother found strength and comfort in clear-cut rules and the dead certainty that if she were good, she would go to Paradise. I think, though, that she also feared her father might curse her if she disobeyed. A father's curse is the worst thing that can happen to you, a ticket straight to Hell.

But after her father died, my mother defied her husband. She turned away from him with the full force of the scorn she had stored up for so long. She refused even to speak to him. Finally, he agreed not to contest her claim for a divorce. The Kuwaiti judge granted her seven more years

with her son. When he was ten, Muhammad would return to live with his father; till then, my mother was permitted to bring up her son alone.

When my mother was growing up, Somalia didn't exist. Although all the clans spoke the same language, albeit different dialects, they mostly lived in separate territories and saw themselves as distinct. The territory that is now Somalia was divided between the British and the Italians, who occupied the country as colonizers, splitting it in two. In 1960 the colonists left, leaving behind them a brand-new, independent state. A unified nation was born.

This new country, Somalia, had a democracy, a president, a flag, an army, even its own currency: sepiá banknotes with dignified portraits of farm animals and people working in fields, like no scene my mother had ever witnessed. People who had always lived deep in the rural areas began streaming to the country's new capital, which the colonizers called Mogadishu. They thrilled to the idea of building one nation, great and powerful. So many hopes would be dashed in the coming years by the clan infighting, the corruption and violence into which the country, like so much of Africa, fell. But my mother couldn't have guessed what would happen, so, like so many others, she packed her bags, took her son and the dowry her husband had given her when she married him, and returned to Somalia, to Mogadishu, the capital, where she had never been.

For the rest of her life my grandmother berated my mother for this decision. Mogadishu was not Darod land. It was not even Isaaq. It was deep in Hawiye territory, where my mother didn't belong. My grandmother always said that my mother's ex-husband must have cursed her, causing this foolhardy choice. Or maybe a djinn was let loose by my mother's bare-faced defiance of the marriage made for her by her father. My grandmother hated the hard cement houses, the narrow streets, the lack of a horizon in Mogadishu, and she hated knowing that her family was no longer safe in the Darod lands in the north. But once again, my mother departed from the traditions of her parents. And once again, she was following her half-sister, Khadija Artan, who had settled in Mogadishu with her husband.

Khadija was a striking woman, as tall as my mother and just as lean. She had taut, angular features, hawklike eyes, and a domineering manner. Her voice was powerful and her gestures dignified and elaborate. My grandmother loathed her. Khadija was bold; she wore long Western

dresses that went down to her ankles but were held slim against her body with zips and buttons. She also draped cloth of the rural *goh* and the urban *dirha* around her. But Khadija's *gohs* and *dirhas* were made of the choicest fabrics, expensive silks and chiffon instead of the basic cottons, and the way she wore them made other women seem clumsy and inadequate. Khadija held her hair high in a turban of cloth. She was modern. She was ecstatic about independence, the politics, and nightly discussions on the street. She positively bustled with self-importance through the new capital city.

Although she was married (and well married, too), Khadija was barren: a terrible destiny. Some people said it was because she was a witch and strong-willed. My grandmother muttered that it was a curse for disobedience and waywardness. If there was a curse, Khadija managed to ignore it.

Khadija counseled my mother to buy a plot of land opposite a trucking business owned by her husband's oldest son by a previous wife. It was a new neighborhood, and now that Mogadishu had become the capital, Darod had begun moving in there. This area, Hoden, was cleaner and healthier than the center of town, where the graceful old Italian buildings were surrounded by filthy, densely packed streets. The roads were unpaved in our neighborhood, and not many houses had electricity; our house never did. But Ma bought the land. She moved into Khadija's place and began planning to build her own house.

My mother's idea of a house emerged in fits and starts, as materials became available. There were just two big rooms, with whitewashed cinder-block walls and a cement floor. The area in front of the main door was also cement; the rest was sand. Building this house took a long time. Everything was painted white, except the doors and shutters, which were green, the color my mother felt was appropriate for a proper Muslim door. The cooking fire was outside, under an awning, beside a tall talal tree, where a man might spread his mat in the shade on a hot afternoon.

Khadija was a busybody, always directing other people's destinies and arranging marriages. My mother was young, and she didn't have much to do; it would not have been proper for her to work. Khadija suggested that she leave little Muhammad with her and go out, perhaps attend a literacy class. A young man called Hirsi Magan had just returned from a university in America, and he was teaching ordinary people in Mogadishu to read and write.

That young man, Hirsi Magan, would become my father. When I was little, he was like a hero in a fable to me, only a little more real than my

grandmother's werewolves. My father's older sister, Aunt Hawo Magan, used to come to our house and tell us stories about him, how he grew up in the northern desert. Their father, Magan, had been a legendary warrior. His name meant "The Protector"—or more specifically, "The Protector of those he conquered". Magan was an Osman Mahamud, from the Darod subclan that always claimed the right to conquer and rule over other peoples. Magan had fought for King Boqor, who ruled the Macherten lands near the sea, and then around 1890 he switched allegiance to Boqor's rival, Kenaidiid, who was a younger man and more eager to wage war and lead raids. (Boqor, Magan, and Kenaidiid were all cousins.)

Kenaidiid and Magan led their warriors through the southern lands of Senag and Mudug, which were occupied by smaller clans, including many Hawiye. The Hawiye were passive people, mostly farmers, and they had no army. Magan despised them. There is a story that he once had Hawiye villagers gather stones into a circle and then herded them inside it to be killed. Then he commanded his warriors to take the women and settle there, on Hawiye land, north of Mogadishu. According to my grandmother, the Hawiye in the Mudug region never forgot the name of Magan.

My father grew up in the northern desert, the son of Magan's last and youngest wife. She was twelve or thirteen when she married the old warrior, who was close to seventy. My father was Magan's youngest son, and the old man doted on him. When Magan died, my father was raised by his older brothers, some so old they already had grandchildren. They took him riding across the desert almost before he could walk.

Magan's sons were rich and powerful traders and warriors. My father grew up well cared for—bright, self-assured, pampered. He became friends with an older man, Osman Yusuf Kenaidiid, the grandson of the Kenaidiid whom his father had served. Magan had always mocked this man; he was quiet and covered his mouth with a cloth, because words are not something you should waste; they should come out of deep prior reflection.

Eloquence, the use of fine language, is admired in Somalia; the work of great poets is praised and memorized for miles around their villages, sometimes for generations. But few poets or people had ever written down any Somali words. The schools the colonizers had left behind were simply too few to educate a nation that now consisted of millions of people.

Osman Yusuf Kenaidiid was learned. He had invented a script to write

down the sounds of the Somali language for the first time. People called it *Osmaniya*. It was slanted and curly and ingenious, and my father set about learning it.

Osman was a good tutor, and he had many connections with the Italian colonists who ruled southern Somalia. My father, his protégé, began attending a school in Mogadishu, the Italians' colonial capital. He joined the Somali Youth League and had heated discussions about the future, when the colonial powers who ruled over the great Somali nation could be cast off and one country formed, to dazzle Africa. He learned Italian, and even went to study in Rome for a period: this was a rare opportunity for a Somali, but Magan's descendents were wealthy. He married a woman, Maryan Farah, from the Marehan subclan of the Darod.

Then my father decided to attend college in the United States: Columbia University, in New York. He was inspired by America. He used to say, "If they can achieve what they have after only two hundred years, then we Somalis, with our endurance and our resilience—we can make America in Africa." My father insisted that his wife, Maryan, join him, and she began studying there, too. Their infant daughter, Arro, born in 1965, was left behind in Somalia with her grandmother.

When he graduated from Columbia with a degree in anthropology, he returned to Somalia, like many other privileged young men, to help shape the future of their nation. Maryan had failed her course; he required that she stay in America until she completed it. It seemed only natural to him to proceed to the new nation's capital, Mogadishu.

My father thought that if a bold new nation were to be established, then the people must become literate. He started a campaign to teach people to read and write. To set an example, he himself went to teach in one of the classes.

In Somalia, language is precious. It is all that binds the warring clans into what passes for a single nation. People flocked to Hirsi Magan's literacy class in Mogadishu. He was dark-skinned, long-nosed, with a high forehead; my father had the charm of a rather intellectual crooner. Though he was not tall, he had a presence. People loved to be around him; all his life, they listened to him with respect.

My mother was a graceful, clever poet in her own right, and became one of his best students. She learned quickly. One day she even dared to contest the way her teacher pronounced a Somali word, flicking back her shawl with haughty disdain. It was daring of her, and surprising. She was beautiful, too, slim and tall, with a back as straight as a young tree.

My father was attracted to my mother's clever tongue and her inflexible opinions. The attraction was mutual, and, of course, Khadija encouraged them.

My parents married in 1966. My mother knew that my father was still married to his first wife, Maryan. But Maryan was in New York, and my father did not inform her of his new bride. Maryan learned of it when she returned to Somalia, of course. I don't know precisely when that was.

There was always a strong electricity between my father and mother. They teased each other, challenged each other. In a culture that disapproved of choosing your own partner, they chose each other: their bond was strong.

In October 1968 my brother, Mahad, was born. My parents finished building the house on the land my mother had bought in Mogadishu, and moved in, bringing with them my older stepbrother, Muhammad, who was six. My mother quickly became pregnant again, with me, and my grandmother came to Mogadishu from the desert to help her through the last few months of pregnancy.

My father was bold, learned, popular, born to rule. He ran for Parliament from the northern town of Qardho but lost the election. He spent vast amounts of his own money funding literacy campaigns and invested in a sugar factory. He was involved in a project to build a dam in the north so people could have water all year round, instead of watching the river drain away into cracks in the sand.

On October 21, 1969, the government was overthrown in a coup. Twenty-three days later I was born, on November 13, six weeks too early and weighing a little more than three pounds. Perhaps my parents were happy. My father must have dandled me on his knee from time to time; I don't remember. Mahad says he can remember our father from those days, but they are only glancing recollections: Father was so often out of the house.

My sister, Haweya, was born in May 1971. A few months after that, my father's first wife, Maryan Farah, gave birth to my stepsister, Ijaabo. There was some sort of dispute, and my father and Maryan divorced. And then, in April 1972, when I was two years old, my father was taken away. He was put in the worst place in Mogadishu: the old Italian prison they called *The Hole*.