Meet The Somalis

The illustrated stories of Somalis in seven cities in Europe
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Introduction to Meet the Somalis

Meet the Somalis is a collection of 14 illustrated stories depicting the real life experiences of Somalis* in seven cities in Europe: Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Leicester, London, Malmo, and Oslo. It provides readers a unique look into what everyday life is like as a Somali in Europe. The stories are based on the testimonies of Somalis in Europe interviewed during six months in 2013.

Meet the Somalis accompanies a seven-city research series—Somalis in European Cities—examining the experiences of Somalis in Europe in areas such as education, housing, employment, health, political participation, and identity. The research, launched at the end of 2013, sought to offer a better understanding of the challenges faced by Somalis in Europe and how they can be overcome.

The Somali community in Europe is a vibrant, diverse minority group. Europe’s Somalis can be divided into three broad categories: people of Somali origin born in Europe, Somali refugees and asylum seekers (who came direct from Somalia as a result of the conflicts), and Somalis who have migrated from one country in Europe to another. There are no accurate figures for the number of Somalis in Europe, but on the whole they are among one of the largest minority groups.

The research findings from Somalis in European Cities highlighted successful inclusion practices in cities as well as the barriers to integration facing Somalis. Though at first glance one might expect this to be a fragmented and beleaguered community, the reality in many cities in Europe is very different.

Meet the Somalis depicts experiences many of us will never know, like fleeing a warzone with your children or, worse, leaving your loved ones behind. But more often, these stories portray values shared amongst many of us, like the importance of family, well-being, and identity in an ever-changing world.

*The term Somalis is used here to signify a wide-ranging community: first-, second-, and third-generation Somalis; people of Somali origin who self-identify as Somali-Norwegian or Somali-British, for example; and people of Somali origin who no longer self-identify as Somali but have instead taken on European nationalities.
Background and Approach to *Meet the Somalis*

*Meet the Somalis* includes stories of young and old, happy and troubled, comfortable and poor. Some were born and raised in Europe, are professionals, and have families whose identities unite Somali and European cultures. Others, recently arrived and having left behind violence, fear, and refugee camps, are still trying to make sense of their new lives in an unfamiliar land.

*Meet the Somalis* aims to introduce key issues about the experiences of Somalis in Europe in an accessible way. In each city, researchers from the *Somalis in European Cities* series introduced us to a wide range of Somali families and individuals. The Somali community graciously invited us into their homes, businesses, and lives, sharing their time and their tales.

Each interview lasted one to three hours. The people we spoke to told us about their life (or their parents’ lives) before leaving Somalia, the hardships and fears they encountered on their journey, the memories of what they left behind, their lives now in Europe, and their hopes and expectations for the future.

The illustrated stories focus on challenges faced by Somalis in their respective cities in Europe and issues raised in the *Somalis in European Cities* research, including education, housing, the media, employment, and identity.

We collected hours of recorded interviews, photographs, and stories that were sometimes tragic, shocking, hopeful, inspiring, and funny.

At every stage of the process, the Open Society Foundations’ At Home in Europe team, Somali friends, and researchers commented on ideas and illustrations and provided guidance and insight, making it a truly collaborative process between artists, academics, and Somali participants themselves.

*Meet the Somalis* “introduces” the reader to our Somali neighbours, but we hope it also inspires readers to consider how Europe looks through the eyes of a migrant community, making their home in Europe by choice or, often, necessity.

We would like to thank everyone who has given their time and entrusted us with their life stories. It has been a wonderful experience to meet so many warm and hospitable people within the Somali community and a privilege to hear their tales.

Ben and Lindsay

Benjamin Dix (researcher and author) and Lindsay Pollock (artist)
Baashi and Liibaan in Amsterdam
I come from a poor family in Somalia. Because of the war, I got almost no education. But I’m healthy, and I think I’m pretty smart. But what chance did I have? The war raged around us throughout my childhood. And in 2007, al-Shabaab came to my village to forcibly recruit new fighters...

I left with just a few hundred dollars in my pocket. I was naive. I promised to send money from Europe.

I will not fail you...

By the grace of Allah, we arrived in Addis. I had never been in a big city before. I felt homesick.

The agent found a passport for me first. I was confused.

But... this isn’t me?

I had no intention to fight beside them. They had destroyed our country and made life impossible.

Two in the front, three in the back—hurry up.

5 of us village boys, all in our early 20s, left together that day. Our first leg was to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

We were taken to an apartment and there we waited, unhappy, for weeks. At least we were together.

Don’t worry. He’s your age. Your skin colour, to the Europeans we all look alike.

My uncle’s money afforded me a ticket to Europe and the use of some stranger’s passport.

I would be leaving alone the next morning, without the others.
The plane ride scared me. Where was I going? What was Europe like? Airports, officials—everything was new and confusing.

I wondered how long it would all take; when I would be free to leave. 3 hours? Four?

Were you fighting in Somalia?

No sir! No, never!

That day was five years ago.

By the time I reached Amsterdam airport, I felt like I was dreaming. How strange the place was. And all these white people...

And how did you get to Addis-Ababa? By car, with this guy. An agent. I don't know his name.

I told the immigration man my whole story. He took a hundred notes, endlessly questioned me...

For four years, I was left to fester at this asylum detention centre...

Then that asylum detention centre...

Then here, over and over...

...Then how did you get to Addis?

...They interviewed me here...

...And what kind of vehicle was it...

Jeep. A jeep.

I wasted the best years of my life like this. I reached my mid-20s, never having worked, no chance of a family...

And then last year, they told me that I could not stay. That they did not believe my story. And that it was safe for me to return to Somalia...

Please... Please please... I can't... I can't go back. I can't. They'll kill me. They'll kill me. They'll kill me. Death... They...
They told me I would be returned within 4 weeks. I couldn’t think straight. How could I go back? What would become of me? I slipped out of the centre and started walking.

I had thoughts of suicide. A passing train called to me. One little step and all these problems would vanish.

Somehow I overcame this terrible delirium. But I was left alone with my troubles.

I decided to run. I couldn’t go back to the asylum centre. I couldn’t go anywhere.

I slept rough. I knew I had to avoid the police. One day I met Omar, an Iranian guy in the same situation. He was staying in an abandoned building with other failed asylum seekers.

I joined their group. There are over 100 of us rejects here, all in fear of the authorities. Mostly they seem content to leave us as ghosts. We’re a little community in the shadows, reliant on hand-outs...

I felt so alone. I walked, and walked, looking for an answer. The cold kept my mind from the fear. I froze to the bone.

Immigration are always looking for me. I have to stay in the shadows... I am a dead man if they return me to Iran.

Even in the few months I knew him, I could see he was in decline. I worried for him. But living as a fugitive myself, where could I turn for help?

I can’t go back, baashi. I can’t go back.

Omar had been there five years already. I saw a photo of him as a teenager in Iran. That happy boy was unrecognisable in the gaunt, haunted man I knew.
Then one morning when I woke, Omar was gone.

Have you seen Omar?

Not since last night when you came in.

I searched all day for him. I went to all our places but couldn't find him anywhere.

That night our building was silent. 100 people sat lost in thoughts of cold dark water. After Omar, who next?

Watching Omar's burial, I felt like I was attending my own funeral.

Of course I know Omar.

We are Omar. All of us.

I'm no pirate, thief or rapist like you say in your paper every day!

You've pushed us to the shadows—made us ghosts...

You might as well bury me next to Omar...

As soon as I saw the police on the bridge... I knew what Omar had done.

Omar!

A reporter was there... he approached me afterwards while a photographer snapped pictures. He asked me...

Excuse me sir—did you know this man Omar?

Know Omar?
LIIBAAN & ABSHIR
AMSTERDAM

WE USED TO BE SO TIGHT. DAD WOULD GO AWAY A LOT ON BUSINESS, SO HE WAS MORE THAN JUST A BIG BROTHER FOR ME. HE WAS LIKE A MENTOR.

I SEE NO CHANGES. ALL I SEE IS RACIST FACES... MISPLACED HATE MAKES DISGRACE FOR RACES...

WE USED TO PLAY TUPAC CASSETTE TAPES TOGETHER. I THOUGHT WE WERE PRETTY COOL.

WHEN HE GOT HIS FIRST GIRLFRIEND - EVA - WE MADE A PROMISE NEVER TO TELL EACH-OTHER'S SECRETS TO MUM AND DAD.

WE WEREN'T BAD KIDS, CHEEKY, PERHAPS, WITH NO MONEY AND NOT MUCH TO DO. THE POLICE HAD IT IN FOR US. THEY ALWAYS GAVE US TROUBLE.

4 KIDS SHOP-LIFTING... WE PICKED UP THE RING-LEADERS.

THEY'D CALL HOME TO GET US PICKED UP. DAD WOULD COME IN THE CAR, SOMETIMES LATE AT NIGHT.

I MEAN, WE WEREN'T ANGELS. WE SHOP-LIFTED A BIT... BUT NO MORE THAN ARNE OR KLAAS - AND WHO DID THEY ALWAYS TAKE IN? THE SOMALI BOYS!

WHAT WAS IT THIS TIME, ABSHIR?

BEING OLDER, ABSHIR ALWAYS GOT TOLD OFF WORSE.

O! YOU LADS, GET OFF THAT WALL.
He could get angry but we knew Dad was on our side. He worked so hard. But when he was around he would do anything to help and encourage us...

Come on, son! You can do this one. Why do we need to carry the 3?

Dad wasn’t so religious, enough to keep the family from talking. But his spare time was for books, museums and galleries. He would drag his two ungrateful sons along...

Look at the delicate brush-work!

Now I would give anything to hear him waxing on about his favourite art again...

2009

Mum? What’s happened?

Mum? Mum. Are you okay?

It was a sudden heart-attack... He died instantly. Just like that—gone.

Abshir and I were both devastated. But we dealt with our grief in very different ways.

I so miss my brother Libaan. I wish he too had embraced Islam after Father’s passing. For me, nothing else brought comfort but embracing the virtuous path.

I fear I led Libaan down the wrong path during our youth.

I spoke to our Imam about it. He said it was good to encourage Libaan but that he must make his own decisions in life.

But after fully embracing Islam, I felt part of a community that understood me, my identity and frustrations. I wish Libaan could experience the same thing.

We used to be so close, always having fun. But at a time like when Dad died, a man must get in touch with his soul and God. I knew I had to embrace my responsibilities and best self.

But Libaan behaved as though this were some kind of betrayal. He went the other way.

In the Qur'an and in prayer, I find all the answers that I need.
I removed myself from the crowd I used to move in. That way of living seems so empty to me now. Who was I back then?

Arms down by your sides sir—what are you carrying?

But some things don’t change. I probably get even more suspicion from the police now...

I remember once getting picked up because they thought I had stolen my bike.

Dad had to come to the police station with the receipt to prove that it was mine.

But now I have grown my beard and wear shalwar, it’s all about Jihad and al-Qaeda.

They say they’re “just making enquiries.” But they watch us everywhere. I get so tired of being scrutinized... I often think about how Dad defended me from them when I was young.

You know, I guess I take after Dad...

Hem hem... this is a big tune!

Liibaan, that music is haram!

Oh, come off it, brother!

If you must listen to it in the house please at least use headphones!

Religion just isn’t the heart of who I am. I need to live in this world, here, now.
WHEN WILL YOU GROW UP, BROTHER? THIS IS NOT THE RIGHT PATH YOU ARE FOLLOWING...

AND WHAT IS THE RIGHT PATH, ABHISIR? YOU GROW THAT BEARD, WEAR A SANCTIMONIOUS FACE AND THINK YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME!

STOP IT, STOP IT MY SONS! YOUR FATHER WOULD BE HEART-BROKEN TO HEAR YOU AT ONE-ANOHER'S THROATS LIKE THIS!

YOU BOYS MUST RESPECT ONE ANOTHER. YOUR PATHS ARE DIFFERENT BUT YOU WILL ALWAYS BE BROTHERS, AND YOU ARE BOTH MY SONS. AND...

YOU ARE BOTH YOUR FATHER'S SONS...

LATER...

BROTHER, I'M SORRY. I KNOW YOU'RE SINCERELY WORRIED FOR ME, I DON'T REALLY THINK YOU'RE SANTIMONIOUS. BUT YOU NEED TO RELAX! I'M FINE...

I KNOW, LIIBAAN. AND I AM SORRY FOR GRIEVING YOU. PLEASE JUST- ALWAYS COME TO ME IF THERE IS A REAL PROBLEM.

OK... WELL, I'M GOING TO SEE THE BOYS. AND I'M GOING TO EVENING PRAYERS.

HEY! YOU TWO! MAY I ENQUIRE WHERE YOU ARE GOING? YOU CARRYING ANY ID WITH YOU?

OFFICER, THIS IS RIDICULOUS! MY BROTHER AND I ARE MERELY WALKING THE STREET!

BE COOL BROTHER! THEY'RE ONLY MAKING ENQUIRIES!

CHECK YOU OUT, "O CALM ONE"! THAT MOSQUE REALLY BRINGS OUT YOUR SPIRITUAL SIDE!

I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME!

LIIBAAN, LET US TOMORROW GO FOR TEA AT THE CAFE IN THE ART GALLERY WHERE DAD USED TO BUY US THOSE CAKES...

YOU REMEMBER?
Sagal and Abdi in Copenhagen
I felt like a million dollars! Exams were over and the summer stretched ahead of me.

Mum was so proud of me studying medicine. She only wished Dad was here to see it too.

All of us Med students were going to a party to celebrate end of term. A chance to dress up!

What time do we meet for the party tonight?

Starts at 8.

Perfect! See you later.

He would have been so proud of you...

Was it hard?

For super-sister? No problem!

Ok, so what do you think of this one?

I still preferred the seventh one!

Thanks for dinner Mum! I had better run...

Enjoy yourself Sagal. You deserve it. Don’t be too late!

Hey, Sagal! You look great!

She ought, the time she spent on it!

Tah-daaaaah!

Nonsense! I just threw it together!
GOD IT FEELS GOOD TO LEAVE THE BOOKS BEHIND. A GUILT FREE EVENING!

I'M GOING TO DANCE AWAY EVERY SINGLE COBWEB!

YOU! SORRY BUT YOU CAN'T COME IN WEARING THAT HEAD SCARF

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

I'M SERIOUS. IT'S POLICY. YOU'RE NOT GETTING IN LIKE THAT

DUDE, YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING. THIS IS RIDICULOUS...

EXCUSE ME...

WHAT'S THE HOLD UP GUYS? HANS AND ALEXANDER ARE ALREADY GETTING THE DRINKS IN!

YOU COULD JUST TAKE IT OFF, SAGAL

NO!

HEY - WHAT'S GOING ON?

SAGAL! WAIT!

I'M LEAVING

SHORTLY

I WAS BORN HERE. I SPEAK DANISH. I PAY TAXES. YET SOMEHOW BECAUSE I'M A MUSLIM I'M SECOND CLASS. NO! WORSE! I'M OFFENSIVE!

LET'S GET AN ICE-CREAM

WHAT? IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE FURIOUS ANYWAY, MIGHT AS WELL BE FURIOUS AND HAVE AN ICE-CREAM, NO?

THIS IS SO LAME! WE'RE 21, WE'RE GORGE- AND WE'RE EATING ICE-CREAM ON A FRIDAY NIGHT WHILE OUR FRIENDS DANCE THEIR BUTTS OFF!

WELL - YOU KNOW - WE COULD GO BACK...

...IF YOU TOOK THE SCARF OFF
I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M HEARING THIS AASIYA! THIS IS MY IDENTITY! I AM DANISH, I AM SOMALI AND I AM A MUSLIM...

AS AM I! EVERY BIT AS MUCH AS YOU ARE. BUT SAGAL...

BUT WHAT? YOU DON'T THINK IT MATTERS?

OF COURSE IT MATTERS! BUT MAYBE THAT'S JUST HOW IT IS. WHY SPOIL OUR EVENING?!

OH, SAGAL! I DIDN'T MEAN THAT—WAIT...

I'M SORRY SAGAL. IT MAKES ME FURIOUS TOO—HONESTLY. IT JUST SEEMS TO GET HARDER AND HARDER THOUGH. I GET TIRED OF HAVING TO DEFEND MYSELF EVERYWHERE

YOU KNOW, MY BOSS AT THE SHOP TOLD ME SHE'D "RATHER I NOT WEAR MY SCARF" ANY MORE... WHAT CAN I DO?

IT MAKES ME SO MAD. IT MAKES ME WANT TO WEAR MY SCARF EVEN MORE!

BUT THEN WHAT? UNEMPLOYMENT? AND MORE ICE-CREAM ON FRIDAY NIGHTS?

I SHOULD WEAR THE NIQAB, SEE HOW THEY LIKE THAT—IGNORANT BULLIES...

HERE COMES THE BUS
At least we had a good dance at Mohamed's wedding last month. Yeah...

But if I want to go out and dance, and dress how I feel comfortable - I don't want to have to wait for another of your cousins to get married.

Next day. Sagal, my sweet, I told you those places are not for you. I don't know why you would want to go anyway...

It's not about the party, Mum - it's about me being accepted the way I am. Somali, Danish, Muslim, woman - all of it!

Hi Mrs Khalid! How are you this morning?

Hello Aasiya! What brings you here?

Sagal: You're my oldest friend. You seemed so miserable last night, so I came here to cheer you up. I have just two words for you. "Beyonce"...

...and "tickets"!

Come on Aasiya! Let's show 'em how Somali girls dance...!

You got it, Sagal!
I SPENT THREE YEARS IN A KENYAN REFUGEE CAMP

I WOULD LIE ON MY BACK WHEN A PLANE PASSED OVER, IMAGINING MYSELF ONTO IT...

FLYING—WHICH HAD LOOKED SO PEACEFUL FROM THE GROUND—WAS NOISY AND ALARMING...

THEN ONE DAY I WAS GRANTED MY PAPERS. MY TURN TO FLY HAD COME—TO A COUNTRY CALLED "DENMARK."

LIKE PRISONERS, WE WOULD SIT AND CONTEMPLATE TIME...RUNNING AWAY LIKE SAND THROUGH FINGERS

BUT WHEN THE EARTH FELL AWAY AND THE OCEAN APPEARED, HUGE AND DARK, I FELT FREE AT LAST.

I MANAGED TO GET A JOB AS A TAXI DRIVER. I SURPRISED MYSELF THAT I'M ACTUALLY PRETTY GOOD BEHIND THE WHEEL....

I FELL IN LOVE WITH FOZIA, A WOMAN FROM MY CLAN. IN TIME WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED WITH FOUR CHILDREN.

TUT! ABDI, INTRODUCE THEM PROPERLY—THIS IS FAISAL, ABHISIR, YAHYA AND TALISO!

IN COPENHAGEN I JOINED THE SOMALI COMMUNITY. IT WAS ANOTHER WORLD! JUST WALKING OUT MY FRONT DOOR FELT INVIGORATING, WONDERFUL....

OI! THIS IS THE ROAD AND THAT IS THE BIKE-LANE!

ABDI & FAMILY, COPENHAGEN

...BUT SOME OF THESE CYCLISTS THINK THEY OWN THE ROAD!
Hope had returned to my life. At last I was a whole person again. But in 2001...

"The second tower is collapsing..."

Oh my God

Those poor people

"You hide your wife in that shack—you should be ashamed!

But Madam, I assure you...

Come Abdi—let's go...

The society that had welcomed me, and that I had embraced, seemed suddenly to perceive my family as a threatening aberration.

I remember developing nervous habits, like smiling at everybody on the streets, overcompensating, just to show that—hey! We are no terrorists!

Good afternoon, Sir!

Lovely day for ice-cream!

Dad...

The children were embarrassed—they said I seemed like a crazy man, but I knew they were troubled by the prejudice too...

It appeared overnight—Galad found it this morning.

But it did not pass. It worsened, when terrorism hit London, and Madrid. We felt like pariahs.

People knew nothing about Somalia or Islam—terrorism, violence and fundamentalism were the only associations for most people...

So where are you from?

Somalia, Sir

Oh yeah? Why are your people all pirates? You can't obey the law like the rest of us?

I... can't say, Sir. I am just a taxi driver.

He called me "terrorist" and then the other one called me rac-HEAD... I'm so sorry, Faisa, this will all pass...
MIND YOUR BACK, BROTHER!

WHEN WE ARRIVED HERE THERE WERE LOTS OF WHITE FAMILIES, BUT OVER TIME THEY HAVE MOVED AWAY. MIGRANT FAMILIES TAKE THEIR PLACES, AND THEN EVEN MORE WHITE FAMILIES LEAVE...

HI DAD!

I'M NO FOOL, I CAN SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING - 'WHITE FLIGHT' THEY CALL IT, AND WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT?

I THOUGHT SO! LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER KOSOVAN FAMILY MOVING IN... I HOPE THEY'RE BETTER BEHAVED THAN THE REST...

ABDI!

SHE'S RIGHT, OF COURSE. THE KOSOVANS ARE IN THE SAME BOAT AS US. IT IS SO HARD TO FEEL A VISITOR IN THE VERY PLACE WHICH IS YOUR HOME...

AND OFTEN - AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

DAILY NEWS

MIGRATION FIGURES SPARK CRIME FEAR!

ON THIS I AM JUDGED COMPLICIT?!

EDUCATION IS THE ONLY WAY TO BREAK THIS CYCLE, AND I THINK CHILDREN WILL LEAD THE WAY.

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9PM—"Somali Pirates: Terror on the seas." Hard-hitting investigation into modern piracy perpetuated by Somali gangs.

Sigh... MIGHT AS WELL WATCH IT—SEE WHAT THEY'RE SAYING ABOUT US NOW.

JUST LOOK AT THIS NONSENSE! THEY TALK AS IF THE WHOLE COUNTRY IS WAR-RAVAGED... MY AREA HAS NOT SEEN FIGHTING FOR 10 YEARS...

I DON'T KNOW SWEETHEART—YOUR MOTHER HAS QUITE A TEMPER...

HA HA HA!

AND WHO IS THIS GUY TALKING ABOUT SOMALIA? HE IS NOT EVEN AFRICAN—!

THE KIDS GET SO INDIGNANT, SEEING THEIR FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DENIGRATED AS DROP-OUT, KHAT-CHEWING, WOMAN HATERS AND TERRORISTS!

NEXT DAY

THEN THEY CALLED ME 'PIRATE' AND TOLD ME SOMALIA WAS BACKWARD—I'LL GET THEM TOMORROW!

NO SON! YOU MUST RISE ABOVE IT!

LITTLE FAISA HAD HAD ENOUGH. AND, SHE HAD A PLAN OF HER OWN. NEXT DAY WITH HER TEACHER'S PERMISSION SHE STOOD AT THE FRONT OF HER CLASS

I AM A DANISH SOMALI, AND I AM A MUSLIM.

MY FAMILY ATTEND THE MOSQUE NEAR THE SHOPPING DISTRICT. MY FATHER DRIVES A TAXI. WE ARE VERY NORMAL! IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY RELIGION OR CULTURE—PLEASE ONLY ASK AND I WILL TELL YOU.

THANK-YOU

WHEN I HEARD WHAT FAISA HAD DONE I WAS SO PROUD! THE TEACHER WAS IMPRESSED TOO, AND ENCOURAGED HER TO JOIN THE DEBATING SOCIETY. TODAY SHE IS THEIR BEST DEBATER!

I AM SURE THAT SHE GETS IT FROM ME...

ABSIR FOLLOWED FAISA'S LEAD—THE CHILDREN KNOW THAT MAKING FRIENDS AND FORGIVING IGNORANCE IS THE ONLY WAY TO CHANGE THINGS.

PERHAPS IT MIGHT ALL BE DIFFERENT, BY THE TIME YAHYA AND TALISO ARE GROWN UP...
Anwar and Jamilah in Helsinki
ANWAR
HELSPINKI

I REMEMBER MY CHILDHOOD SO CLEARLY... WHEN I CLOSE MY EYES I CAN HEAR MY FATHER'S CATTLE AND FEEL THE SUN ON MY SKIN AGAIN...

FARMING IN SOMALIA WAS A CONSTANT BATTLE AGAINST THE ELEMENTS. MY FATHER TAUGHT ME HOW TO FIND FERTILE GRAZING LAND.

LIFE WAS A PRECARIOUS DANCE. A DROUGHT COULD WIP OUT YOUR HERD, YOUR WHOLE LIVELIHOOD... WE WERE ALWAYS ANXIETY WATCHING THE SKIES AND SEASONS...

THEN, IN THE LATE 80s, THE FIGHTING BEGAN. FAR FROM US AT FIRST, BUT WE FOLLOWED IT EVERY NIGHT ON THE RADIO ALL THE SAME.

AT NIGHT I WOULD BE KEPT AWAKE BY FEARFUL THOUGHTS OF THE FIGHTING OVERCOMING US... OF GUNMEN LURKING IN THE DARKNESS.

IN 1992 AS THE FIGHTING RAGED ON, THE WORST OF THE DROUGHTS STRUCK. WE LOST EVERYTHING. I WONDERED - WOULD I DIE BY THE BULLET, OR STARVATION?

WE SET OUT FOR THE SAFETY OF KENYA, BUT THE JOURNEY WAS HELL - SO FAR, SO HARD, AND FOR MY FATHER IT WAS A DEATH MARCH.

I HAD TO BURY HIM THERE IN A SHALLOW GRAVE... COVERING HIM WITH ROCKS AND SAND... IT WAS THE WORST MOMENT OF MY LIFE.

MOTHER AND I REACHED A REFUGEE CAMP IN KENYA. WE WERE BROKEN PEOPLE. THERE WAS NO SENSE OF CELEBRATION. WE HAD LOST OUR LIVES, OURSELVES...

AND THERE WE STAYED, STUCK, FOR FIVE YEARS. I PUSHED AND Cajoled MUM TO KEEP BATTLING, TO GO ON, THOUGH FOR WHAT, I WASN'T SURE.

UNTIL ONE DAY FATE INTERVENTED AT LAST. WE WERE REPARTURIATED, TO HELSINKI. NEITHER OF US HAD EVER SEEN SNOW BEFORE...
I had never heard of Finland, never imagined such a place. It was hallucinatory to suddenly be here. I was so grateful to these people—"the Finns"!

There were times, in years that followed, when I wished I could not understand them again.

I immersed myself in African literature and discovered an aptitude for maths... I loved all books!!!

Mother and I struggled and strained to learn the dense, complicated language of our adopted home.

I read economics at university. During that time I met Hawa. She was a nurse. We would walk together, talk together...

We married and soon were blessed with a son, Kaaafi.

I ignored the jibes and focused on improving myself. The opportunities for education were overwhelming to me.

As the seasons turned and endless Finnish days gave way to endless Finnish nights—we fell in love...

Suddenly I had a family to support. I got a job at an accountancy firm and put in long hours.
Mother and I made friends with many other Somali families in Helsinki. So many seemed to have worries and troubles—social or financial...

They interview all six kids separately at the embassy in Addis. Then say there is discrepancy in their testimony. Well of course there is! The littlest is only nine! They just don't want them here Anwar...

I miss them so much.

We Somalis are a small community in Finland. We know everyone by just a few degrees of separation. Having a degree, and understanding some of the official systems, I thought I could help others manage their problems. We have regular community meetings...

I should tell that fat man what he can do with his opinions! Noono, Rooble—let's remain constructive!

I try to keep everything calm and positive but it is not always easy. Naturally people get very upset and tempers flare...

My friend Warfaa had the opposite problem.

Hearing so many problems wore me down. I had to do something constructive, simply to avoid despair!

The shop near us would not serve my wife! She was almost in tears...

Besides housing issues, it is these race tensions that come up time and again.

I'm so upset, Anwar—the application has been rejected yet again. Xoriyo and the kids have been refused asylum three times now. But I thought they had to repatriate families by law?

I joined a fledgling community organisation that helped Somalis making the transition to Finnish society and addressed intercultural friction.
RACIAL INSULTS? Yes, and throwing stones. They really feel unsafe in their area, Sir...

Look, there is not a huge amount I can do but we will step up patrols... if we could actually witness an incident it would help. But leave it with me, Annar, and thanks for letting me know.

Well, I don't know how effective that was but at least I raised the issues. I wish I had something more concrete I could tell to Aamino and Orivo...

The job at the community association is voluntary. Sometimes it makes for very late nights but I don't mind. Being educated and speaking good Finnish, it's easier for me...

But the problems keep coming. So often it's housing... in Somali culture we have big families. But here, there is not the housing provision. Over crowding can cause great stresses...

We have been in the queue for a larger place for I don't know how long!

The housing office say, "Be patient! Be patient!"

What am I supposed to do? Sleep standing up in the cupboard?

It's very hard to study here Annar. There's no peace and quiet. Often I'm late for school simply because we're all trying to get in the bathroom!

I often find myself spending my lunch break at the housing office or city hall...

Please go ahead Madam. You tell me and I'll translate for them...

Look, I can see they've been on the waiting list for a three bedroom apartment or larger but there simply isn't anything available right now. Can you tell them?

Things worked out for us here in Helsinki! But we have a duty to help others less fortunate. This is our culture - to help each other, as a community. I just wish we could work together, with the wider, Finnish community...

...and not always have this divide, between "them" and "us."

Poor Kaffi! He didn't manage to stay awake to see you.
MY MOTHER WAS PREGNANT WITH ME WHEN SHE ESCAPED THE WAR IN SOMALIA...

...SHE GAVE BIRTH IN A RECEPTION CENTRE IN THE NORTH OF FINLAND.

MY MOTHER TOLD ME RECENTLY, HOW ISOLATED SHE FELT BACK THEN... THE ONLY SOMALI MOTHER WAITING AT THE SCHOOL GATE. I NEVER HAD ANY IDEA.

ONE DAY A BOY IN MY CLASS REFUSED TO SIT WITH ME BECAUSE HE SAID I WAS 'DIRTY'. SOMEHOW, EVERYTHING SEEMED TO CHANGE IN THAT MOMENT...

ALL ALONE WITH A NEWBORN BABY IN A STRANGE LAND OF INFINITE FORESTS, WHERE THE SUN NEVER SET...

MY MUM TAUGHT ME ABOUT SOMALIA AND ISLAM FROM AN EARLY AGE. I REMEMBER SHE ALWAYS SEEMED HAPPY AND SAD AT ONCE WHEN TELLING ME ABOUT HER HOME.

NOBODY AT SCHOOL KNEW ABOUT SOMALIA OR ISLAM... BUT I GOT ALONG WELL WITH THE OTHER CHILDREN.

FOR THE FIRST TIME I UNDERSTOOD THAT MY MUM AND I WERE DIFFERENT. I WISHT I COULD SCRUB MY SKIN AND FIND IT WHITE BENEATH. I FELT ASHAMED...

ONE DAY A BOY IN MY CLASS REFUSED TO SIT WITH ME BECAUSE HE SAID I WAS 'DIRTY'. SOMEHOW, EVERYTHING SEEMED TO CHANGE IN THAT MOMENT...

JAMILAH, MY SWEET, WE ARE ALL THE SAME AND WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT. BUT YOU...

...YOU ARE MY MOST PRECIOUS GIFT FROM ALLAH.

NOW CHEER UP AND HAVE A SAMOSA.

WHEN I WAS OLDER I DECIDED THAT MY HAIR DIDN'T HELP ME FIT IN. I PERSUADED MY MUM TO LET ME CUT IT SHORT.

IT DIDN'T HELP. A MEAN GIRL SAID I LOOKED LIKE A MONKEY. THE NAME STUCK WITH THE OTHER KIDS.

I STARTED TO WEAR THE HIJAB WHEN I WAS 16. AT FIRST IT SHOCKED THE OTHER KIDS AT SCHOOL.

I STARTED TO SPEND MORE TIME READING THE QUR'AN WITH MUM, SEARCHING FOR MY OWN IDENTITY.

BUT EVERYTHING, I DID SHOCK THEM. SO WHAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE? I FINALLY FELT LIKE MY OWN PERSON.
From that day on I wore the hijab. It seemed to erect a barrier with many in my class. But I made a few true friends for the first time too...

However, out in the city I often see people giving me sideways looks as if I make them uncomfortable or that they don't trust me.

I've always been into fashion. Shoes are a particular weakness...

Uh! These look like Wellington boots!

I wanted to work in fashion. I began applying for jobs in the city.

But one after another my applications were rejected or ignored entirely...

With regret...

Blah...blah...blah...

My white friends seemed to find jobs with less trouble...

Sorry, J - I have to scoot or my boss will kill me. You mind settling up?

One day I had an interview with a big clothes retailer. It was only a shop-floor position. When I got there, the manager didn't even look at my CV before telling me she didn't think I was 'right' for the job.

Yes...well, thank you for coming in, Jazeera.

It's...Jamilah...

...will you keep my CV on file?
Afterwards, I saw the next candidate arrive—a white girl, same age as me. The manager greeted her with a big smile and they disappeared into her office.

On the bus home, the sense of being watched was worse than ever. The empty seat next to me felt like a pointed message...

My mum gently suggested I try another kind of job. They were hiring at the airport.

"Security operative..."

I was almost disappointed when they accepted me, but I resolved for my mum’s sake to try my best.

The uniform was awful.

You look very smart, Jamilah!

Oh my! I know.

I jazzed it up with my very favourite head-scarf.

But the moment he saw me, my supervisor said—

Get that rag off your head!

I complained to the senior manager. He said the supervisor’s decision on the uniform was final...

You can’t play the race card here!

Things got worse later in the week. I was working the security-line and asked a woman to step aside for a random search—

You’re not searching me! You people are the terrorists!

My supervisor actually apologised to her and directed a white girl to perform the search...

This time the manager told me to “stop causing trouble...”

You need to lighten up and be a team player!

After my shift I just sat in the airport cafe for an hour, watching plane after plane take off and disappear.

At home, a letter was waiting for me...
I hadn't told my mother about applying to a fashion college in London...
I never imagined they would accept me.

I felt terrible. What had I done? How could I contemplate abandoning my mother?

But she looked me in the eye and said—
Go, and be happy. You make me proud.

She came with me to the airport. We were silent all the way, trying to be strong...

London is great. I don't feel like I stick out here. There's even another Somali girl in the year above.

But when we had to part at the passport desk, both of us broke down crying...

I'm doing well on my course. You'll never guess our first assignment... head-scarves!

I sent my scarf to mum for her birthday.

In a year I'll return to Helsinki. You know, I actually felt homesick the other day.

Things aren't perfect in England either.

I guess stupidity is universal.

We speak most days on Skype.
Musta and Shamso in Leicester
My parents had enough money to send only one of their 7 children away from the war. I was the eldest – so I was chosen.

For two years I waited in a refugee camp in Kenya. So many of us in the same cruel predicament... all waiting for our name to come up, sitting in the heat, day in, day out.

I was part of a UN repatriation drive. They brought me to Amsterdam, a place I knew nothing of. A coach met us at the airport.

We had never been separated before. I had no idea where I would go, or what my future held...

War is terrible. We had plenty of time to contemplate the horrors we had witnessed.

I first caught a lift to the nearest town.

I realised as I drove away that I might never see my family again.

Then one day my name came up. In the moment of happiness, I only felt sad for those I was leaving behind.

I sat on the bus looking out at the rain and trees, so green...

...it was beautiful.
Life after that was disjointed for a while. I stayed in an asylum centre. I studied to be an electrician. I got a certificate.

The pressure to send money home grew even greater. The burden kept me awake at night.

I held down a lot of jobs to pay for my studies. Any spare cash I sent home to Somalia.

One day when I called, I learned that my father had died.

I got news from home once a week in a phone call. Every time I hung up I felt further from home and lonelier than ever.

Brother, calm down.

What's happened?

You should come to England!

Within a year I followed him and started over.

And within two years I had married Ayaan and we had a child on the way.

For three long years I did shift work, all the hours Allah sent.

Our finances were terrible. Both of us were supporting big families at home in Somalia. We lived very frugally.

18th October - £7.20 on food...

Oh dear, oh dear...

I saved, and I worked, and I sent money home.

Do you want fries with that?
THINGS WERE SO TOUGH BACK THEN. WHEN I COULDN'T AFFORD MEDICATION FOR MY UNCLE'S EPILEPSY, I TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO MY BROTHER ON THE PHONE:

"YOU'RE THE LUCKY ONE TO HAVE GOT OUT! WE ARE STUCK HERE WITH NOTHING, BROTHER—JUST THE WAR AROUND US EVERY DAY."

I KNOW ABDI. BUT IT'S NOT EASY HERE EITHER. IT'S A STRUGGLE IN A DIFFERENT WAY...

ABDI, ARE YOU THERE?

IT'S SO LATE MUSTA... DID YOU GET SOAKED?

MY ELECTRICAL QUALIFICATION DIDN'T HELP. I RELIED ENTIRELY ON INSECURE, POORLY PAID SHIFT WORK.

ONE DAY OUR LUCK CHANGED. I WAS TALKING TO THE SOMALI OWNER OF OUR LOCAL COMMUNICATIONS SHOP...

ASKOON IS LEAVING HERE MUSTA. I'LL NEED A NEW MANAGER. DO YOU KNOW ANYBODY?

ARE YOU KIDDING?

LAST MONTH FOR EXAMPLE THERE WAS A HUGE FLOOD IN BANGLADESH. ANXIOUS RELATIVES FILLED THE SHOP:

IT'S TERIBLE MUSTA. MY VILLAGE IS UNDER WATER, MANY DEAD.

I'M SO SORRY. WE WILL COLLECT FUNDS TO HELP BROTHER.

IT'S A DROP IN THE OCEAN BUT WE DO WHAT WE CAN. WE'RE LIKE A BIG, EXTENDED FAMILY HERE. COMMUNICATIONS ARE CRUCIAL FOR US.

THAT HURT SO MUCH. I WAS "THE LUCKY ONE." BUT HOW COULD MY FAMILY UNDERSTAND THE STRUGGLE I FACED? IT'S SO EXPENSIVE TO LIVE HERE. MY CHILDREN NEEDED DECENT FOOD AND CLOTHES... AYAHAN AND I OFTEN WENT WITHOUT.

AYAHAN TOOK WORK IN A SCHOOL, BUT EVEN WITH BOTH SALARIES, WE BARELY STRUGGLED THROUGH.

HELLO AKASH—HERE TO CALL YOUR FAMILY?

YES, QUICKLY MUSTA—IT IS AN EMERGENCY.

I LOVE WORKING HERE. PEOPLE COME INTO THE SHOP FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. WHENEVER THERE IS AN EMERGENCY IN THE WORLD WE ARE FIRST TO KNOW, AND TRY TO HELP.

WE ALL STRUGGLE TO KEEP CONNECTED AND SUPPORT OUR FAMILIES BACK HOME. HERE I CAN HELP PEOPLE WITH PROBLEMS JUST LIKE MINE.
My children have never been to Somalia. They have never been held by their grandparents or met their uncles... This saddens me every day.

I am learning French at school, Grandma!

Why on Earth would you be doing that, child?!

The fact is, my family is split between two entirely different worlds...

My dream is that one day the war in Somalia will end and we can return there all together.

And my heart is split as well.

One day, Insha’Allah

The family would be united, and we could help one another along...

For now it remains a dream. But one day.
My first husband in Somalia was a layabout. So in 2006, I divorced him! Alhamdulillah that my 3 children and I moved here to Leicester.

But with Allah’s grace, I am free and independent. Last year I opened a cafe with my friend Hani.

I met my second husband and had two further children...

But he was worse than the first! A drunk and angry good-for-nothing. I divorced a second time.

Now I have a whole family to support all on my own.

I wake before sunrise every day to perform my morning prayers. This is my favourite time of day!

I reflect on the grace of Allah and give thanks for all the people who have helped me...

Shamso & Family
Leicester

The day starts with a whimper...

Kids! Up!

Wakey wakey...

At 06:15 I wake up the children...

Muum! Sagal is in the bathroom and she’s going to make me late again!!!

Bang bang

I’m next

Muum! Dego took my socks!

Muum!

Sort it out, kids! Don’t make me come up there!

From first thing in the morning I am cooking...

...Then a bang!
Every morning, Sarah calls for Sagal, and they walk to school together with my eldest, Nabil...

Sagal, your little sister is so sweet! Not when you have to share a room with her.

Sarah, wait! You can have this spare samosa with your lunch!

I walk them to the primary school. They are forever talking and dawdling...

I remember! It's under the bed!

Hurry up!

The rest are my responsibility! While they finish eating, I prepare 3 lunches - and eat my own breakfast if there is time!

Oftentimes, I also take Mrs. Khan's kids from next door.

Thanks Shamso, see you later.

Got it!

Then I might bump into Mrs. Cooper and her two on the way...

Remember to eat all your lunch!

Yes mum!
I ARRIVE AT THE CAFE AT 08:15, WHERE HANI HAS ALREADY OPENED UP AND THE MORNING RUSH IS IN FULL-FLOW

I SPEND MOST OF THE MORNING PREPARING SAMOSAS... EVERYBODY SAYS I MAKE THE FINEST SAMOSAS AROUND!

AT 14:00 I COLLECT THE LITTLEST ONE FROM NURSERY. I HAVE TO WATCH HER WHILE I WORK IN THE CAFE.

THE RUSH PICKS UP AGAIN AT AROUND TWELVE. FOR TWO HOURS I NEED TEN PAIRS OF HANDS...

I ARRIVE AT THE CAFE AT 08:15, WHERE HANI HAS ALREADY OPENED UP AND THE MORNING RUSH IS IN FULL-FLOW

THERE ARE ALWAYS SOME REGULARS HAVING A STRONG SOMALI COFFEE TO START THE DAY

SHAMSO! DID YOU GET THE MILK?

I MUST SAY, I AM PARTIAL TO A FEW MYSELF!

YOU CAN'T HAVE ENOUGH, THEY ARE POPULAR WITH EVERYBODY—BANGLADESHIS, PAKISTANIS, THE ENGLISH BOYS...

障碍...博...障碍...

I CAN'T BE THERE ALL THE TIME, SOMETIMES I HAVE TO LEAVE FOR A MEETING...

I SPEND MOST OF THE MORNING PREPARING SAMOSAS... EVERYBODY SAYS I MAKE THE FINEST SAMOSAS AROUND!

I AM DRAWING HANI!

AT 15:20 IT'S TIME TO COLLECT THE OTHER TWO AND TAKE THEM TO THE MADRASSA TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR RELIGION AND CULTURE...

DID YOU EAT ALL YOUR LUNCH?

IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THEY LEARN THEIR QUR'AN AND MAINTAIN THEIR SOMALI ROOTS AND—OOPS! I'M RUNNING LATE!
I’M TRYING AND TRYING TO SAVE FOR A BIGGER HOUSE. ALL OF US ARE IN JUST TWO ROOMS AND EVERY MORNING THE FIGHT FOR THE BATHROOM GETS LONGER, AND LOUDER...

I HAVE TO GET BACK TO THE CAFE TO HELP HANI CLEAN UP AND PREPARE FOR TOMORROW. IT’S A LOT OF WORK, BUT ALLAH HAS BLESSED ME WITH THIS BUSINESS!

"DESPAIR NOT OF ALLAH’S MERCY: BEHOLD, ALLAH FORGIVES ALL SINS—FOR, VERILY, HE ALONE IS MUCH-FORGIVING, A DISPENSER OF GRACE!"

THAT’S LOVELY, DEAR. DO THE LADIES AT THE MOSQUE ENJOY MAKING JAM?

ON WEEKENDS I VISIT THE OLD PEOPLE’S HOME TO KEEP THEM COMPANY. I TELL THEM ALL ABOUT ISLAM SO THEY CAN SHARE THE WISDOM AND JOY!

"THIS IS ALMOST READY—SET THE TABLE"

THE DAY FINISHES WITH COOKING ONE MORE MEAL. BUT DINNER ALL TOGETHER IS SPECIAL...

THEN AFTER PRAYERS, TO BED. IT’S SO CRAMPED HERE, BUT WE LOVE EACH OTHER AND PULL TOGETHER AS A FAMILY...

RAAFI STOP KICKING!

WELL, USUALLY.
Saafī and Zein in London
My mother and father ran a small grocery shop in Mogadishu. They had a good business but it was hard to maintain as the war escalated. Just coming to work each day could be perilous.

They so desperately wanted a child to complete their family. My mother told me that she suffered three miscarriages. They tried and tried but it seemed destined never to be.

They simply couldn’t take it any longer. My mum was convinced that she couldn’t carry a baby to term because of the stress and fear.

So father decided to sell everything and start anew somewhere far away. They spent all their savings hiring an agent who helped them to flee...

Farewell Tahlili! We are going to London!

They were nervous of their new lives but there are so many Somalis here in London that they soon made friends and even discovered distant relatives!

Yes!!!

So if you married Ugrass - you must be Nimco’s cousin then?

Father took a job as a bus driver. Often he drove the night bus and then slept through the day. Both my parents worked very hard but at last they were happy.

Mother got work at a cafe in East London, catering mostly to Somali families.

After two years my mum fell pregnant and this time to their delight everything was okay. And one cold December day, I was born!
SWEETHEART, LET DADDY REST-HE IS VERY TIRED!

YAAAWN: IT'S OK MY LOVE, SHE IS BEING GOOD!

HEE HEE HEE!

HE CAREFULLY CULTIVATED FOCUS AND DISCIPLINE IN ME. BOTH MY PARENTS REMAINED IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH THEIR FAMILIES BACK IN SOMALIA. I REMEMBER DAD TELLING ME...

WORK AND STUDY HARD MY LOVE. YOU CAN BE THE CHANGE IN SOMALIA ONE DAY. WE COULD ALL RETURN HOME AND LIVE IN PEACE THERE.

HE MISSED SOMALIA AND HIS FAMILY VERY MUCH.

THIS IS WONDERFUL SWEETHEART!

IT'S UNCLE DAHAX IN MOGGA!

IT'S GOING STRAIGHT ON THE FRIDGE!

DAD DOTTED ON ME FROM DAY ONE. HE WOULD CALL HOME FROM THE BUS TO CHECK UP ON ME AND TRY TO STAY AWAKE TO PLAY WITH ME IN THE DAY...

I FELT PROUD THAT MY FATHER PUT SUCH FAITH IN ME. I WORKED HARD AND TRIED MY BEST TO BE A GOOD DAUGHTER FOR HIM AND MUM.

THEN ONE DAY WHEN I WAS 7 YEARS OLD, FATHER RECEIVED A MESSAGE THAT HIS BROTHER DAHAX WAS TERRIBLY ILL IN SOMALIA.

I REMEMBER, AFTER I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ASLEEP, HEARING MUM PLEADING WITH DAD NOT TO GO... THE FIGHTING WAS VERY INTENSE AT THAT TIME.

PLEASE...Just think. It is so dangerous.

I CANNOT FORGET THE HALF SMILE, AND LITTLE WAVE HE GAVE ME AS HE STEPPED OUT INTO THE COLD ON THE MORNING HE LEFT. LUGGING THE VERY SAME GATTERED CASE HE HAD CARRIED FROM SOMALIA...

THEN ONE DAY NO PHONE CALL CAME. MUM PUT ON A BRAVE FACE AND SAID IT WAS SILLY TO WORRY. BUT I KNEW SHE WAS SCARED WHEN SHE PUT ME TO BED. SHE SEEMED TENSE AND DISTANT.

DAD PROMISED THAT WHEN HE ARRIVED, HE WOULD PHONE US EACH EVENING. AND HE DID - GIVING US UPDATES ON DAHAX'S HEALTH AND ALWAYS PULLING DOWN THE DANGERS, EVEN THOUGH WE COULD SOMETIMES HEAR GUNFIRE IN THE BACKGROUND ON THE LINE.

WHEN THE PHONE RANG AT THREE IN THE MORNING, AND WOKE ME, I SOMEHOW KNEW DAD WAS DEAD. EVEN BEFORE I HEARD MUM, VOICE SHAKING, BREAKING INTO HYSTERICS DOWNSTAIRS.

NO! OH-OH

NO - NO!

PLEASE NO!
AFTER DAD WAS KILLED IN SOMALIA MUM BECAME TERRIBLY DEPRESSED AND ANXIOUS. SHE WAS OVERPROTECTIVE OF ME FOR A LONG, LONG TIME.

SAAFI - NO RIDING OUTSIDE THE GATE

ONLY RACING SARAH TO THE CORNER, MUM! I WON'T CROSS ANY ROADS

SAAFI, I SAID NO

THINGS BECAME PRETTY TOUGH. MUM HAD TO TAKE ON EXTRA WORK AS A CLEANER TO MAKE ENDS MEET. SHE WAS ALWAYS EXHAUSTED. I DESPERATELY MISSED DAD'S CHEERFUL PRESENCE IN THE HOUSE.

MY PARENTS HAD ALWAYS ENCOURAGED ME TO SPEAK TO MY SOMALI RELATIVES ON THE PHONE REGULARLY, TO ESTABLISH A CONNECTION EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE SO FAR AWAY. IT HAD BEEN MY DAD'S FONDEST WISH THAT I MEET THEM ONE DAY.

WITH DAD GONE I FELT RESPONSIBLE FOR KEEPING THE LINK WITH HIS FAMILY. I WOULD SPEAK WITH MY COUSIN MISKI. SHE'S THE SAME AGE. SHE WOULD TELL ME TERRIBLE STORIES OF THE HARDSHIPS THEY ENDURED AND THE VIOLENCE SHE WITNESSED.

THE SCHOOL WAS CLOSED AGAIN BECAUSE THEY SHOT ONE OF THE TEACHERS IN THE HEAD

I USED TO FEEL GUILTY THEN, ABOUT LIVING IN THE SAFETY OF LONDON, WHERE THERE WERE NO BOMBS, NO GUNMEN, NO MURDER OR MAYHEM. AS I GOT OLDER, MY PREOCCUPATION WITH SOMALIA GREW.

FROM MY EARLY TEENS I HAD AN OCCASIONAL, RECURRING NIGHTMARE. I WOULD SEE ALL THE HORROR MISKI HAD DESCRIBED TO ME IN MOGADISHU...

... BUT TRANSPPOSED SOMEHOW TO THE STREETS OF LONDON. THE SAME TERROR VISITED ON ME AND MY FRIENDS AS SUFFERED BY MY INNOCENT FAMILY IN SOMALIA.

AT THE SHOPPING CENTRE OR THE MOVIES WITH FRIENDS, LONDON SEEMED UNREAL - A PRIVILEGED BUBBLE.

- AND HEAR ALWAYS MY FATHER'S VOICE IN THE DARKNESS...

I WOULD BURST AWAKE - SOAKED IN SWEAT—

Work and study hard my love. You can be the change in Somalia one day. We could all return home one day in peace there...
I wanted to help Somalia heal. I smile now, to look back on my teenage earnestness, but I was sincere, and still am. Most of the kids in my school were disruptive and seemed not to want to be there...

I concentrated and tried my hardest every day, knowing how Miski wished for better schooling. I knew what a privilege it was. I felt angry with the other kids - what idiots they seemed!

The area we lived in was never the nicest. There were some really stupid people there who had a problem with how we dressed, especially my mum.

You can imagine, it did not help my mother’s depression. But somehow, with my father’s memory never far from my mind, all the adversities seemed only to fuel my determination.

I grew close to my uncle Dayak, even from 4000 miles away... He never forgave himself that father died when visiting him. He would always say how proud father had been of me.

Ten years after Dad’s death, Dayak finally succumbed to his chronic illness. Still a young man - it felt to me like losing a second father.

Had he lived in England, Dayak would have received better medical care. I have no doubt that he would still be alive now and for many years to come.

Losing him sealed my ambition to become a doctor. Mum supported me all the way. Emotionally, financially!

I keep a photo of Dad here in my locker. Next year I will visit Somalia for the first time - as a medical volunteer.

7 YEARS LATER
I don't remember much from my childhood in Mogadishu. Mum tells me we fled when the fighting came too close for comfort. I sort of remember hearing explosions... but it's all a bit of a blur, really.

My sister Gacal likes to tell me how I would scream and cry at the sounds of the fighting...

But it's home!

We moved to England when I was four. Living in North London is all I've really known.

I started primary school when I got here and soon began to speak more English than Somali.

Me and Mark are Power Rangers, Mum!

I was ten, the first time the feds stopped me. I was coming back from footie practice.

Are you carrying any sharp objects? Can you open your bag for me?

Hey Son, can you stop a minute for me?

I saw Mum hide the chocolate biscuits in the top cupboard!

Chocolate... something... cool!

Gacal and I had a lot of fun being able to speak a language that Mum couldn't understand!

I must admit we sometimes took advantage of her language barrier...

Zein's great on the football pitch but needs to focus much harder on his maths and science...

Welcome Parents, Garbrook Primary. End of evening.

Yellow Class.

Mr. Jervis.

Keep your nose clean, Son.

I'd have quite a collection by now, if I had saved all the stop and search slips they have handed me over the years...
MY MATE GEROME SAYS HIS MUM ALWAYS MAKES A COMPLAINT WHEN HE GETS STOPPED. I CAN'T BE BOTHERED WITH ALL THAT. I DON'T TELL MY MUM MOST TIMES. I DON'T WANT TO UPSET HER.

DON'T YOU WASTE THAT ON COMPUTER GAMES AND NONSENSE, YOU HEAR ME, ZEIN?

ONE YEAR SHE GAVE ME A HUNDRED QUID AS AN EID GIFT. SHE WANTED ME TO GET SOME NEW CLOTHES AND A HAIRCUT FOR THE CELEBRATION.

ME AND GEROME WENT OUT TO THE SHOPS. HE WAS FLUSH TOO, WITH CASH HE EARNED FROM CLEANING AT HIS AUNT'S CAFE...

TRAINERS COUNT AS 'NEW CLOTHES', RIGHT? SHE CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT!

IF YOU COME HOME WITH THOSE NIKES I WOULD LOVE TO SEE THE TROUBLE YOU GET!

A POLICE CAR CRUISED PAST JUST WHEN WE WERE GOING IN THE SHOP. ALL I DID WAS TO CATCH THE OFFICER'S EYE...

ONE OF THE BOYS KNEW ABOUT A ROBBERY ON FORDWYCH ROAD THIS MORNING?

NO! WE'VE BEEN ROUND HERE ALL DAY!

WHERE DID YOU GET ALL THIS MONEY THEN?

THAT'S MY MONEY FOR EID CLOTHES!

NEXT THING IT'S HANDS ON THE WALL, TURN OUT YOUR POCKETS. RIGHT ON THE HIGH STREET IN FRONT OF EVERYBODY... SO HUMILIATING...

WE'RE STILL NOT STOPPED!

GEROME GOT UPSET BUT I TOLD HIM TO BE COOL. I ALMOST DIDN'T QUESTION THE FACT OF BEING SEARCHED.

I WAS HALF WAY HOME WALKING UP BENTLEY ROAD WHEN THE FEDS CAME AND JUMPED ME - NO WARNING - FROM OUT OF NOWHERE...

HANDS ON THE WALL! HANDS RIGHT ON THE WALL!

THEY SCARED THE LIFE OUT OF ME --

I WAS LISTENING TO MY MUSIC. I DIDN'T HEAR THEM COMING. FIRST I KNEW I WAS JUST CLAMMED UP AGAINST A WALL.

I STILL HAD MY HEADPHONES ON SO I COULDN'T EVEN HEAR WHAT THEY WERE SCREAMING IN MY EAR...

TWO YEARS AND ABOUT A MILLION STOP-AND-SEARCHES LATER I WAS IN UPPER SIXTH AT SCHOOL AND PREDICTED A's AND B's IN MY EXAMS. I WANTED TO STUDY BIO-CHEMISTRY AT UNIVERSITY. MY MUM WAS MAKING MONEY STRETCH TO PAY FOR EXTRA TUITION BEFORE THE EXAMS.
WHERE DID YOU JUST COME FROM? WHAT'S IN THE BAG?

PHYSICS BOOKS! I'VE BEEN AT TUITION!

THERE'S BEEN AN ASSAULT HERE 30 MINUTES AGO. BLACK MALE, 5'10'', BLACK JACKET...

THIS HUH BLACK, IT'S GREY——

DON'T GET SMART, IT DOESN'T SUIT YOU

Yeah, copy that—we'll bring him in

Hey, wait, officer, man!

IT'S 21:15 AND I AM ARRESTING YOU ON SUSPICION OF ROBBERY AND AGGRAVATED ASSAULT...

Ow! Wait! Don't leave my books on the pavement!

AT THE STATION I FINALLY GOT MY PHONECALL. I RANG MY MUM. SHE ALREADY KNEW WHERE I WAS.

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

At the station I finally got my phonecall. I rang my mum. She already knew where I was.

Some other police had already come to the house and were searching my room.

They're here right now! Oh sweetheart, are you OK? I'll come to you as soon as they leave—

WHERE WERE YOU PRECISELY ON THE EVENING OF THE 10th?

I was at my house, man!

NO MUM—IT'S LATE. STAY PUT WITH GACAL AND TRY NOT TO WORRY, I'LL COME BACK WHEN IT'S SORTED—IT'S JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING...

But after waiting several hours in a bare cell, things got a whole lot worse.

WE ARE ARRESTING YOU IN CONNECTION WITH A SECOND ROBBERY LAST TUESDAY EVENING....

WHAT?!

And you can prove that, can you?
They took me to Marylebone Crown Court.

I had to wait in a cell with these other sketchy-seeming guys...

In the court I could see my mum in the gallery and she was crying...

You are charged with robbery and aggravated assault... We are going to let you go home so you can continue your schooling but you are not to be out of the home between 4am and 6am...

They put a tag on my ankle to monitor me and sent me on my way. Suddenly my whole world was just school and home. And no chance to visit my tutor in the evenings...

All too soon the exams came and even as I sat them I knew I was screwing it up...

And on Results Day my worst fears were confirmed.

It’s one “B” and two “C”s – this is great. Just great...

Listen to me Zein, I’m proud of you, the grades don’t matter...

Son, we all love you and I’m so proud of you, not in spite of these grades but because of them... You worked so hard against the odds... You're a clever boy, Zein.

They do matter, mum— they DO. I can’t get my first choice Uni with this— DAMN it!

Zein – Zein! Calm down!

Some weeks later the charges were dropped on insufficient evidence. The tag came off and I was able to take a place at my second-choice Uni. I try not to be angry— but I’m always thinking about the next time it could go wrong. For me, who to fight about this stuff - the police? The government? I’m a young black man— I’ve got no voice in this...
Magool and Mustafa in Malmö
I WAS SO HAPPY AS A CHILD IN SOMALIA

COP! JUST PICK UP THE ONION I DROPPED, MAGAOL!

GOT IT, MUM!

MY MOTHER WAS A WONDERFUL COOK. I COPIED HER, I WANTED TO BE AS GOOD AS SHE WAS...

EVEN THINGS HAD TEXTURE IN SOMALIA. EVEN THE WALLS OF OUR HUT WERE ALIVE - MADE OF REEDS AND HOME TO TEN THOUSAND TINY CREATURES...

MAGAOL! HELP FETCH WATER!

I WAS THE ELDEST GIRL. I HELPED MUM WITH CHORES, IT MADE ME PROUD, SHE DOTTED ON ME.

THOSE DAYS WERE LOVELY.

ARE YOU OK, MUM?

LOOKING BACK IT SEEMS LIKE EVERY NIGHT MY PARENTS WOULD TELL ME STORIES UNDER THE STARS. WE HAVE A WONDERFUL ORAL TRADITION IN SOMALIA OF ELDERS SHARING STORIES WITH THE YOUNGSTERS.

SHEEKOY, SHEEKKO, SHEEKO KABIRRA. WAA BAA WAXAA JIRAY NIIN LAA DHAYOOS CAGAAL SHIIDAAD...
I met Amir in 1988. We married a year later. He was a kind man. We were blessed with a daughter, Leyla. She was so sweet.

I lost them both in an explosion. The war... It was... terrible. Terrible.

I returned to my parents. For a few years, we struggled through - not really living... just surviving.

But... they didn't make it either. Another bomb... I couldn't save them - my arms were broken...

I left Somalia. I found my way to the camps in Kenya. Somehow.

I met Inshaar in the camp. At first I didn't want to know him, but he was charming - so benign, like a little boy sometimes...

Would you like water, Magool?

I told you I can fetch my own, Inshaar...

He was always at my side, devoted... After some months, the ice around my heart melted.

We married. And a year later, by the grace of Allah, Saciya was born.

She is a blessing, brother.

For two years we were happy as one can be, in a refugee camp. Our little family was like a bubble that kept out the sadness.
One day the opportunity came for Sacdiya and I to travel to Sweden. But not Inshaar... he would have to stay behind.

I often feel anxious. I get lost in the city if I venture from the small area I know. I don't know how to ask directions.

When I go to the doctor, Sacdiya has to come with me to interpret.

A daughter should not have to hear these things about her mother. It's unfair...

I put on a brave face for Inshaar. We speak on the computer each week. But Sacdiya doesn't really remember him. She is shy of him.

I feel so lonely here.

Sacdiya speaks Swedish well. I struggle with the simplest exchange. I try, I try...

Soon after I arrived here, the headaches began. I feel like my head is splitting.

She asks, are these the very strong pills for pain?

Thank you Sacdiya, leave it on the floor here... can you close the curtains and put the light off...

They keep me awake at night.

I know it is a pressure for Sacdiya, having to help me with chores when all her young schoolfriends are playing.

I put on a brave face for Inshaar. We speak on the computer each week. But Sacdiya doesn't really remember him. She is shy of him.

I can see how much it hurts Inshaar.

One day the opportunity came for Sacdiya and I to travel to Sweden. But not Inshaar... he would have to stay behind.

You must go, Magool. This is no place for Sacdiya. It's OK. It's for the best.

Are you OK sweetheart?

Hmm-hmm...

I don't know. I... I can't tell.

I often feel anxious. I get lost in the city if I venture from the small area I know. I don't know how to ask directions.

She says she can't sleep at night...

Sacdiya, can you ask your mum if she is ever troubled by bad thoughts or memories?

She says yes. Mum says her dreams are very bad.

It's a burden...

I can see how much it hurts Inshaar.
THE LANDLORD DOESN’T LIKE US. HE COMES TO THE HOUSE WITHOUT WARNING SOMETIMES.

THIS WASN’T BROKEN LAST TIME! TELL YOUR MUM SHE HAS TO PAY FOR THIS, RIGHT? TELL HER.

HE SCARES SACDIYA.

I GET THIS RASH WHEN I’M UPSET. I DON’T KNOW WHY

NOW IT HAS SPREAD ALL DOWN TO YOUR HAND, MUM

IS IT HURTING?

SACDIYA, COULD YOU ASK YOUR MUM IF SHE HAS EVER SPOKEN TO A PSYCHIATRIST?

IT TOOK ME A LITTLE TIME TO TRUST THE THERAPIST. BUT SAYING ALOUD ALL THE THOUGHTS THAT WEIGHED ME DOWN SEEMED SOMEHOW TO SOOTHE ME...

AT NIGHT... I SEE LEYLO’S GRAVE... I THINK... I’M SO FAR FROM HER... AS THOUGH SHE STILL NEEDS ME...

LATER THAT DAY I COLLECTED SACDIYA FROM SCHOOL. AS WE WALKED, IT BEGAN TO SNOW AND DID NOT STOP.

CAREFUL... IT IS SLIPPERY

LOOK, MUM—“SNOW-BALL”

YOU RAT-BAG!

HA HA HAA!

HA HA HEE HEE

COME ON THEN, RAT-BAG!
I love meeting people!

Being a ticket inspector is the ideal job for me...

When I was a child, my parents loved to throw parties. We would sing...

I was always right in the middle, showing off to everyone...

My father was killed in the war—just caught in cross-fire. Mother and I were devastated. Over time it became too dangerous to go out. It was so lonely, trapped inside... listening to gunfire...

How can you not feel blessed, escaping that? I'm the luckiest man in Malmö!

When the fighting became intense, my mother and I fled Mogadishu.

I'm sorry sir, this is not a valid ticket for travel.

It says Malmö right there! Learn to read Swedish—

Sir, today is the 19th.

Sure, sometimes you meet ones like this.

But I'm from Mogadishu. You think I'm bothered by an idiot like this?

Not Mustafa!

Mustafa Malmö
Later, back at Mustafa's apartment

Hey, neighbour, hi!

Can you help? I left my keys on the kitchen table!

Uh, sure. What can we do for you?

You fool!

If you give me a boost through this window, I should be able to reach the keys OK!

Yes, I see them there...

That's it neighbour! Hold my legs! Almost...

There...

When I got to Sweden, I was so happy just to be able to meet people again.

It means a lot to me, to be part of a community!

Ooops.

Are you OK?

Ha ha ha!

When I got to Sweden, I was so happy just to be able to meet people again.

I'm so grateful, neighbours! I'm Mustafa and that's my mum, Mrs Osman...

I'm Agnes...

I'm sorry—my son-he... fool...

Sam! It's nice to meet you.

Please! You must come for tea on Saturday so I can thank you properly!

It's so nice to meet new people!

What did you do that for Mustafa? They obviously didn't want to come over...

What on earth will I feed them?

This is so awkward...

Shortly
WHEN I WAS A CHILD, MY MOTHER WAS ALWAYS FULL OF GOSPI Automotive GOOD CHEER...

SHE FOUND THE MOVE TO SWEDEN UTTERLY ISOLATING. EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT. LEARNING THE LANGUAGE WAS AN ORDEAL...

IN SOMALI SHE'S SO ARTICULATE - BUT HERE, THE SIMPLEST INTERACTIONS ARE CONFUSING...

YOU HAVE TO WEIGH THESE AT THE COUNTER - THE COUNTER!

...EVEN HUMILIATING

AT SOME POINT SHE JUST SEEMED TO GIVE UP ON JOINING SWEDISH SOCIETY...

TALKS TO RELATIVES ON SKYPE...

WAIT KAN! THE...

THE CONNECTION IS BAD OVER HERE AGAIN...

SHE WATCHES SOMALI SATELLITE TELEVISION...

I'M HOME MUM! ARE YOU HERE?

IT WORRIES ME THAT SHE'S DOOMED TO FEEL HOMESICK - LIKE A REFUGEE - UNTIL HER LAST DAY...

BUT I SO WISH SHE COULD CONNECT WITH THE WORLD AND PEOPLE OUTSIDE OUR OWN DOOR...

AND I KNOW SHE MISSES FATHER TERRIBLY
THAT SATURDAY...

AM I ALLOWED TO KISS HER ON THE CHEEK?
JUST WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!
WHAT IF THEY DON'T EAT CAKE?

OH, NO! THEY'RE COMING...
OH, MUSTAFA...
WHY DID YOU INVITE THEM?

HELLO MRS. OSMAN-
ERM- WE BROUGHT A CAKE FOR TEA, MRS. OSMAN-

YES, HELLO, HELLO
YES, THANK YOU
THANK YOU

DON'T WORRY! IT'S COMPLETELY HARAM*
OOPS!

HALAL!
I MEANT HALAL!
HE MEANT HALAL!
IT'S HALAL...

...NOT HARAM-- I'M SO SORRY
HE'S SO SORRY

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!
Faaid and Amiir in Oslo
In 2008 Al-Shabab came to my village in Somalia, forcibly recruiting men and boys to fight.

I was lucky. I was away visiting my uncle who lived in the next village.

My father and two brothers refused to join the movement. The men shot them dead.

My mother insisted that I flee. She sold the land to pay for my escape.

I traveled for a year through Somalia, then Ethiopia...

Then from Addis Ababa to Germany...

... with an expensive agent and stranger's passport...

... and finally to Oslo... Oslo...

... limbo...

Asylum centres...

Questioning... testing... waiting... waiting and waiting... one year... two... this centre... then that...

Tell me again how many Al-Shabab came to your village because there is a discrepancy with your mom.

But all the same... blank walls... blank faces... blank stares... same questions over and over...

Some that you meet have been waiting.

Some that you meet have been waiting.

For six years... seven... just rotting...

... compared to them I guess I was lucky...

... for asylum...

This is Germany, man. You made it. Norway will be easy from here.

While you wait... and wait... no work...

No money... just the endless wait...

Go and live with your aunt they said...

Today I was twenty-seven.
FAAIIID! ARE YOU UP? I NEED YOU TO TAKE THE KIDS TO SCHOOL...

YOU HAVE TIME BEFORE YOUR APPOINTMENT?

SURE

45 MINUTES LATER

WHEN WAS IT, EXACTLY, YOU LEFT MOGADISHU?

I DON'T. I LEFT FROM KISMAYO.

YESSS... AND HOW, PRECISELY, DID YOU TRAVEL OUT OF KISMAYO?

MMN

AS I HAVE TOLD YOU SO MANY TIMES—MY BROTHERS AND FATHER WERE SHOT. MY MOTHER SOLD THE LAND AND PAID FOR ME TO LEAVE. I TRAVELED FROM KISMAYO TO ADDIS ABABA OVERLAND.

AND THAT JOURNEY TOOK HOW LONG?

ABOUT... TEN DAYS.

BECUSE PREVIOUSLY YOU TOLD MY COLLEAGUE 2 WEEKS—CAN YOU EXPLAIN THIS DISCREPANCY?

10 DAYS, 2 WEEKS. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? I WAS RUNNING FOR MY LIFE! HOW CAN I REMEMBER DATES? IT WAS 4 YEARS AGO! HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU NEED TO HEAR IT?

LOOK, FAAILD...

NO, YOU LOOK! I CAN'T DO ANYTHING ELSE TO PROVE MY STORY. I JUST WANT TO WORK, TO BE SECURE, SO IF YOU'RE GOING TO SEND ME HOME THEN JUST DO IT BECAUSE I AM SICK OF THIS!

SIGH

LOOK FAAILD. I'M WORKING VERY HARD TO ASSIST YOU AND AN ATTITUDE LIKE THAT WILL NOT HELP YOUR CASE.

IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME OLD STORY

THEY'RE ALL JUST LOOKING FOR A SLIP SO THEY CAN SEND ME BACK...

IF THEY'RE GOING TO DO IT, CAN'T THEY JUST DO IT? THIS IS HELL...

FAAILD! IT'S SO LATE! IS EVERYTHING OK? FAAILD?
ONE YEAR LATER

FAAID! FAAID, ARE YOU UP? YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE...

OH FAAID! DON'T LOOK SO GLUM

I'M COMING, AUNTIE...

YOU HAVE TO BE OPTIMISTIC!

FAAID - GOOD LUCK

SEE YOU LATER

THANKS

OPTIMISTIC! NOT ANY MORE. I WAS SO HAPPY WHEN I GOT ASYLUM SIX MONTHS AGO. I THOUGHT MY LIFE WOULD CHANGE.

I FEEL SUCH A BURDEN. THE KIDS ARE GETTING BIGGER... I CAN'T SHARE THEIR ROOM MUCH LONGER.

I NEED MONEY! I NEED WORK! BUT WHO WILL HIRE A SOMALI VILLAGE BOY LIKE ME?

SO THEY SEND ME ON COURSES. THIS COURSE... THAT COURSE... COURSE AFTER COURSE...

DATA COURSE... HEALTH AND NURSING COURSE... JOB APPLICATION COURSE!

REMEMBER TO EMPHASIZE ANY PRIOR WORK EXPERIENCE IN YOUR APPLICATION.

FAAID! ARE YOU LISTENING?

WHY HAS THE ANSWER TO QUESTION ON WORKSHEET 5-F?

PRESERVATION IS CRUCIAL IN THE COMPETITIVE JOB MARKET SO DO DOUBLE CHECK ALL SPELLINGS...

I'M BEEN LOOKING FOR A CHEAP ROOM TO RENT. BUT EVERY PLACE I TRY IT'S THE SAME STORY...

IT'S A WASTE OF TIME. BUT IF YOU STOP ATTENDING, THEY CUT YOUR RENT AND SUSTENANCE PAYMENTS.

I THINK ABOUT MY FATHER AND MY BROTHERS A LOT.

I FEEL SUCH A BURDEN. I SWEAR LAST WEEK, THE TEACHER OF THE NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE COURSE FELL ASLEEP...

IT'S A WASTE OF TIME. BUT IF YOU STOP ATTENDING, THEY CUT YOUR RENT AND SUSTENANCE PAYMENTS.

I'I BEEN LOOKING OR A CHEAP ROOM TO RENT. BUT EVERY PLACE I TRY IT'S THE SAME STORY...

STUCK.

FAAID? FAAID, ARE YOU OKAY?

SURE

FAAID, WILL YOU COME DOWN FOR DINNER...

FAT CHANCE. STILL NO JOB. STILL NO MONEY. STILL STUCK LIVING AT MY AUNT'S.
FAAID?  
HMM
ARE YOU OK?
SURE, JUST TIRED.

HEEY—DID YOU SEE THE NEWS? COME QUICKLY—

"...THE HUGE BLAST IN MOGADISHU WAS FOLLOWED WITH AN ATTACK BY AL-SHABAB GUNMEN WHO UNLEASHED CARNAGE IN THE WEST OF THE CITY..."

POOR PEOPLE....
WE SHOULD CALL AUNT WILLO

HEEY, FAAID! WHAT'S HAPPENING, BROTHER?  
HEEY, DIRIE. JUST TAKING A WALK, MAN.
YOU SEE ABOUT THE BLAST IN MOGGA?
OF COURSE  
TERIBLE, NO? WHEN WILL IT END?

MAMES YOU THINK—HOW LUCKY WE ARE, HERE IN SAFETY
HUU. SOMETIMES I THINK I'D TAKE THE BOMBS...

YOU CAN'T MEAN IT FAAID! YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN WHAT IT WAS LIKE THERE...
I FORGOT NOTHING!

HOW I WISH THE VIOLENCE WOULD END. HOW I WISH I COULD GO BACK. THIS IS NO LIFE HERE. NO JOB, NO WIFE, NO MONEY, NO HOUSE, NO RESPECT... IT IS NO HOME WHERE YOU ARE NOT WANTED, DIRIE

AH, FAAID, YOU SHOULDN'T SPEAK THAT WAY—YOU'RE GIVING YOURSELF GREY HAIRS...
Amiir & Family - Oslo, Norway

I graduated from Mogadishu University with a degree in literature. First in my family!

I grew up in a small village. Learning was my passion.

A bright future lay ahead of us.

Suddenly we were in snowy Norway. It could have been another planet.

Life got better as time went on. We had 3 more children. We all live in the Somali neighbourhood in Greenland.

But we didn't want our kids forever trapped in this small world of just a few blocks.

And so much for our degrees. Here, we couldn't even speak to our neighbours.

Cano and I wanted the kids to have all the opportunities that had been snatched from us. We encouraged them to participate, to embrace Norwegian culture.

Still, Cano and I missed Somalia with all our hearts. We spoke to our families often.

Happy Birthday Mahad...

And our dream has always been to one day retire home.

Cano had to swap teaching for cleaning.

I found work in a cafe which catered mostly to other Somalis living in Oslo.

Work was ok. But it hardly stretched my mind.

Cano and I needed the kids to have all the opportunities that had been snatched from us. We encouraged them to participate, to embrace Norwegian culture.

...to identify as Norwegian as much as Somali.
I wanted my children to share my Somali culture... Last year, with security improving, the time seemed right to show them their mother country... But were the kids prepared for Somalia?

Yeah man, we go tomorrow... of course it's dangerous!

I'll have to carry an A-K 47...

When we arrived in Somalia, my brother was there to collect us.

Because of Al-Shabaab?!

No! Potholes! You idiot! How many times? Al-Shabaab are hundreds of miles from here!

We arrived at the village just before dark. The kids spilled out, stretching their legs. Then suddenly, Mahad spotted...

Grandma!

You're so much smaller than you look on Skype!

We had a joyous reunion dinner and at last I felt like everything might be O.K. Before it was time to sleep, I called all the children outside to see the stars...
I always said it—The stars in Somalia are like nowhere else on Earth...

Next morning, we were going to the market to buy food for the week ahead...

Right kids! We're leaving in ten minutes—who needs the toilet?

Dad, I'm sorry! I can't go in that toilet...

Me either.

It's... just a hole in the ground!

You're... missing me?

But they weren't. The day began with a 15-mile detour so they could use the facilities at a cafe in the nearest town...

Uh... just a tea, please.

Ridiculous!

My mother was perplexed by my crazy seeming children.

All yours.

At the market, things got worse...

Ugh! It looks nasty!

What's wrong with that banana?

It's all speckly!

Finally, my mother snapped—

You should all be ashamed of yourselves! I have never seen children so spoilt! What do they teach you in Norway?

I suppose you all live in great palaces in Norway! With air-conditioning and servants!

Mum, be fair! They have never seen anything like this!

...you are not true Somali!

Later that day, Cawo took me aside...

Amir, we have to accept that the children are miserable... perhaps they are too young?

Cawo offered to take them back to Norway while I stayed on to finish the visit with my family.

On that long drive back to the airport, there was a miserable, guilty silence...

But then at the airport, suddenly Cadby said to me—

Dad—if you want, I'll stay.

I was thrilled. It meant so much to me that she would brave all her fears to reconnect with our culture.
For two weeks I showed my daughter the haunts of my youth, telling tales...

Sharing food...

It was wonderful...

Some things were still hard for her. Like the incident with the beetle in her hair...

Stop jumping round! You're making it go further in!

And sometimes, when she didn't know I was watching, I saw she felt pretty lost around her relatives in the village.

However, by the end of the trip, Cadey had won my mother round entirely! And their farewell was tearful...

After that trip, when I looked at my children, I saw for the first time that Somali or not— their true home is here in Norway...

For a while, I felt as though I had made a great mistake, raising them this way. As though I had somehow lost them, or given them up to another parent...

But three weeks later, Cadey graduated from Oslo University...

Just as I had, thirty years before in Mogadishu.

We all attended the ceremony. I felt so proud, and at that moment, I saw that it doesn't matter—

Norwegian or Somali...

...they'll always be my children.