

Don't Come Back No More

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I have only the vaguest memories of my childhood, but I vividly remember the day that my parents had decided to arrange a marriage and give my hand to a man who was almost 20 years older.

My father and mother were ecstatic about this arrangement, yet it was my life that they were giving away. Though my parents thought they were doing what was best for me, they hadn't asked for my input.

My mother and father were mainly motivated by the money they received from the groom's family, though it was only a pittance. Surprisingly, they cared nothing about the man's character. He had a horrible reputation as a moron and an idiot with a bad temper who bullied, harassed, and intimidated everyone that he met; especially the vulnerable people and minority clans in the neighborhood. He disliked school and dropped out when he had just entered grade nine. He was a good-looking man, tall, slim, but extremely lazy. He much preferred long hours of sleep, alternating with eating and gross self-indulgence. His parents were well-to-do and raised him lavishly and carelessly. Anything and everything he wanted he got. Not only did they provide gourmet cuisine at home, but also took him frequently to the high end restaurants in Muqdisho, our city, the Somali capital.

He stopped his car and stared at me once while I was crossing Labor Street. That was his first encounter with me. He then got out of his car suddenly and said, "Yo — you girl."

As soon as I heard him, I turned around. I didn't recognize him, so I ignored him and walked on. He followed me, yelling, "You girl, you, I am talking to you."

"What do you want?"

"My name is Egal and what's yours?"

“Why do you want to know my name? What do you want?”

“You are an arrogant girl,” he said. I was too frightened to run. Then he punched me on the face, knocking me to the ground. The next thing I recollect is seeing the faces of strangers surrounding me. They were strangers, but they were kind enough to offer me help. Indeed, they were very compassionate. When I regained consciousness, I saw my mother looking at me in relief. My mom and I went home, but not a word was said about police, or prosecution or retaliation for what had been done to me.

About six months later, my parents approached me with a marriage proposal. My mother and my father and the groom’s parents had sorted out the details of my marriage before letting me know anything about it. Negotiations were easy because my mother and the groom’s parents belonged to the same clan family lineage. As soon as I heard their scheme, I rejected it. “I don’t wish to marry a man that I don’t know.” I said.

My mother told me, “Daughter, don’t shame us; remember, we are poor and they are rich.”

“Mom think about it, why are you doing this to me? Why now? I’m only 18. I’m still in school. How about a little more time to think about this? Why can’t I have a life?”

“Daughter, daughter, my parents arranged my marriage as well. It was a good thing for me. Parents know better —it is the way of our culture and community. Don’t you trust your Mom and Dad? Your husband comes from a most honored family. Consider your family’s name. What would happen if we cancelled the marriage now?”

While I thought hard about my limited options, my father said, “My daughter, choose a blessing or a curse!”

Of course, I said to my dad, “What I want is a blessing.”

“*Alhamdulillah!*” exclaimed my dad, grinning from ear to ear. “Then your wedding is one month from today.” Everything was planned. My Dad and my Mom had already concluded the arrangements without me. I didn’t really have a choice. I only said yes because I wanted the blessing of my parents. They are

very important to me here and in the hereafter. Without their blessing my life would have been disastrous in the next world.

So I said to myself, "I don't want a curse. So even though I am about to marry some unknown guy — I don't know what makes him happy and what makes him sad; I don't know his interests, hobbies, and dreams, even though I don't have a clue what he looks like — all I want is the blessing of my parents. So, on with the wedding. "

When the night of my wedding came, all the guests arrived on time, at least by Somali standards. They were received at the gate of Hotel Guled by the parking attendants, and seated by the ushers in a ballroom with place settings for 400. From the French maitre d' to the British and Italian waiters, to the gorgeous Swedish barmaids, all could see that Gurguurte, the owner, ran his hotel like a sultan's palace. Many of the guests knew the groom's father, and were related either by blood or by business. Everybody knew Gacanweyne. He was the Minister of Finance, the man with the money in Muqdisho. It was plain to everyone that Gacanweyne knew very well how to manage the government's money — it would have taken half the city's tax receipts for a year to pay for the shindig he threw for his son and me. I shouldn't complain — my father-in-law organized my wedding exceptionally well. He (or the taxpayers) took care of every dime that went into it.

My dad and the elders of the groom's family sat face to face. They did what the culture expected them to do. A representative of the groom's family stood up and said, "My name is Cabdoow Caalimoow. What brought us here is love. It is the love our son has for your daughter. We want to establish a new family. We want your daughter, Qalanjo, for our son, Egal. We want the hand of your daughter. And we want the wedding ceremony to be conducted now. Join them in matrimony; give your daughter in marriage for our son, Egal." He quickly sat down.

My uncle spoke on behalf of our family. "I am not a good orator. I feel inadequate to talk at events like this, but let me simply say, we are honored to join our family to yours. We'll give our daughter Qalanjo's hand in marriage to your son Egal."

Cabdoow Caalimoow jumped up and waved a new sarong, which he handed to my uncle. Folded within the sarong was \$4,000 for the men of my family. They shook hands, embraced each other tightly and everyone clapped and congratulated Egal. That was how I was given away to my husband. That afternoon the mullah performed the wedding ceremony, with my father representing me, and pronounced us husband and wife. Later that night I was taken to my new home and met my husband. My new husband was none other than the man who had knocked me down on Labor Street. He was sitting on the couch in the living room.

“Qalanjo, wife, come here. Sit by my side,” said Egal.

I couldn't reply. Egal walked towards me. He grabbed my hand roughly, then tried to give me a hug. I tried to pull away.

“I love you, my wife. The first day I saw you, I decided to marry you. Here we are, husband and wife. God is great, my dream came true.” As he was saying this, he began to kiss me.

I thought to myself, “Love at first sight — then why did you punch me and knock me down?” I felt nothing but disgust, and tried to push him away.

He grabbed my hand, threw me on the bed and, bringing his nose within an inch of mine, he said, “You are my wife. I am your husband. I have my rights. “

I couldn't reply. I tried to move away but he insisted all the more. When he was finished, I got out of bed, sat on the chair, and cried. I cried the rest of the night. My eyes became as red as my face was black and blue from the squeezing he had given me.

The next morning Egal called my mom to complain about me. My mother came over stayed with me, and convinced me with her blessing and soft words that I needed to stay with him.

By Egal, I had four children, two boys and two girls. As was customary, they took their father's lineage. We lived together in Muqdisho until the civil war broke. We used some of his father's resources to escape and came to Canada, though my father remained behind. When we arrived here in Toronto, we rented a three bedroom apartment in Dixon Road, not far from Pearson International

Airport. We felt right at home. Somalis were everywhere. Egal could go to the Country Style doughnut shop and talk with his clansmen, and solve the world's problems. I had many friends who spoke my language and knew my family. We had our own little Somalia in Dixon.

Twelve years later, I'd had enough. Egal spent his days buying coffee at the Country Style, and wasting his nights and our money chewing *qat* and talking to losers like him. I finally locked him out and said "Don't ever come back no more." He protested at first, but none of the elders of the community backed him. A few days later when he uttered the words, "I divorce you" three times, I knew my days with him were over. That was happiest moment of my life.

I found my divorce liberating. I was now able to marry whomever I fell in love with. I took responsibility for my life and destiny. I still respected both my parents, but now I was able to begin to make decisions for myself. I say "begin" because as much as I left Egal and his domination behind, I could not leave my mother — or rather, she could not leave me.

My mother had lived with me ever since she arrived at Dixon Road 17 years ago. Although she left a nomadic *existence* when she married my father and moved to Muqdisho, she is still a nomad at heart, reveling in the seasons of rain and prosperity, enduring the seasons of drought and hardship. In many ways she is an example of toughness I can only begin to emulate.

In other ways, however, my Mother is a trial to my soul. Her ingratitude is hard to bear. I am her first born child. I am the only daughter she has. Her boys are living not far away from us, but none of them cares about her. I am the only child who gives her the attention, care, and help she needs, yet my mother, doesn't appreciate or like me because I am now in love with a Midgan man. Jama is a great guy. He works hard. Jama is a certified high school teacher, with a master's degree. He teaches mathematics in Toronto public schools, and encourages his students to pursue higher education and find a profession. My kids love Jama. He helps them with their school assignments. He's very protective of them. And now I know what love is.

But, all Mom thinks about is, "He's Midgan". In her twisted nomadic thinking, Midgan means "manure." Midgan means the peon class, the guy who does the

dirty work. When she looks at Jama, you can see she wants to spit but doesn't quite dare.

Mom doesn't respect me the way she used to before I was married to Egal. My mother and Egal, my ex-husband, belonged to the same clan and they share a family tree, a name, and a lineage. Egal's father lived in the same house that my mother's brother lived in and they attended the same school. But now that Egal is no longer my husband she has changed her feelings towards me.

My mother does nothing now but curse me. She curses Jama. She curses his friends. She curses his family. She hates the Midgan and they reciprocate. Although my mother's friends are all gone to the hereafter, and there's no one left of her clan, although her neighbours and my friends respect her age and treat her as a grandmother, she has alienated everybody

Her hatred intensified when Jama and I got married last October. I wanted to marry him more than anything I've ever wanted before. My love for Jama makes me sing. It gives me life. He respects me like no one ever did. Every night I sing this song to him:

*"My dear companion let me speak to you sincerely and truly.
Our love is greater than fighting and sharing harm and damage.
There are crazy people, and when they see romantic couples.
They want to destroy them and force them to leave each other.
But our love is greater. Only death and fate can make us part.
My dear companion let me speak to you sincerely and truly.
Time goes on, but our love grows stronger with each coming week.
Usually hearts that join are attacked by others' suspicion.
Nothing that happens to us will weaken our pledge.
Our love is greater! Only death and fate will ever force us apart!"*

It loses a bit in the translation, and being read rather than sung. But, in Somali it says I love Jama. He loves to hear me sing it.

"Thank you, my sweet, I enjoyed your lovely voice," he said.

"You're most welcome, sweetheart."

"My day was fantastic, and how was yours?"

“It was wonderful. But I am worried about my mother, she doesn’t like you,”

“Don’t worry, she’s my mother-in-law regardless.”

“You’re so good to her but she doesn’t acknowledge your existence.”

“Don’t worry about her,” he replied, dismissing the matter.

“Her kind of unreasoning hatred has torn apart Somalia, and now it’s threatening us. ”

It’s nothing Jama’s done. He’s not responsible for his birth-clan family. Jama didn’t choose his parents. His character, his integrity, his ethics, his personality, and his kindness have nothing to do with his ancestry. Jama is Jama. He is who he is. The day I married him my mother started cursing me, and anyone who speaks to her about us, she curses them, too. All she is now capable of is to curse everyone who’s sympathetic to us.

Jama and I finally left Dixon Road, our residence for years and my favorite neighborhood in Toronto, because of my mother.

Dixon Road was where I started life in Canada. But now we’ve moved downtown. My home is in the heart of Toronto. Shopping malls and entertainment centers are nearby. Mostly we don’t need to use our car, because everything is within walking distance. Jama likes our neighborhood. He is satisfied that we moved. He’s proud of me and compliments me about my looks, my patience, my character and my respect for human beings. Life would be perfect — except for my mom. Mom left the camels, but they really didn’t leave her; we moved away from her but her curses linger. After all, we have a phone, and Mom uses it prodigiously.

Jama was rather shocked a few days back when I slammed down the phone.

"This old hag is bothering me," I murmured.

"Who are you insulting?" said Jama.

"I'm not insulting anyone," I growled at him.

"So your mother called again? Just be patient with her, she's your mother."

"Doesn't her hatred and cursing get to you?"

"My sweet, no, it doesn't. It is not justifiable, but nor does it justify your anger. She's your mother, be patient."

"I don't understand. You are a wonderful human being. You're as Somali as she is. Why is my mother refusing to accept you as my husband?"

"Your mother is an old person. She sees things different than we do,"

"She's an old hag and doesn't care about my happiness. You know my uncle Mire's daughter was living with a man from the Caribbean. My mother accepted that man because she attended their wedding the other day. Why is she not blessing me?" I yelled.

"Sweetheart, she's stuck with the old culture, just be patient with her."

"I've been patient for 40 years already."

"I know, sweetheart. Your patience, kindness, and knowledge was what attracted me to you." said Jama.

"My mother knows nothing. My sweet, you are the only man that I feel very comfortable with. How can my Mom think that I would ever leave you?"

"Thank you, my sweetheart. That's why I am in love with you."

I still pray for my mom. I pity her. I find it hard to love her. Mom's mouth runs to some very annoying places with a very annoying degree of regularity. She's still my mom. I have no desire to take on her prejudices and hatreds. With the help of God and Jama, I have learned to move on. Some times and some places, some thoughts, and some ways —you just can't go back.

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