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NEWS FROM AFAR!

PRIDE & PREJUDICE: A LIFE STORY OF A SOMALI IN EXILE A TRANSLATION OF A. F. SAEED JUHA'S *QAB IYO QUURSI*

By Bodhari Warsame

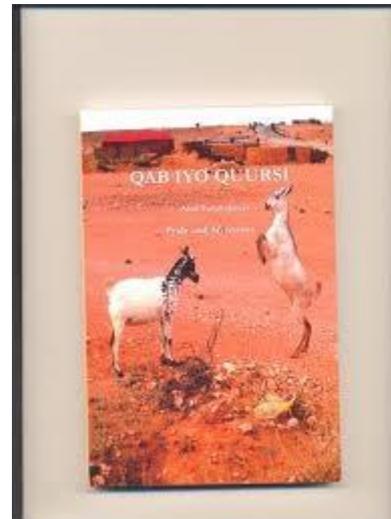
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Offering my Life Away

August 25, 2017

It is a hot sunny day and sandstorms are blowing. I woke up in the rebel camp for the first time in my life. It is a wide dusty field surrounded by thorny bush. At the front gate stand an armed sentry. Two young boys whose faces manifest fatigue and tough times stand guard at the entrance. Each of them has a machine gun strapped across shoulders. One might think they could buckle under the gun's weight anytime. Somehow, the boys are drooping awkwardly, but perform their job adequately. No one can ingress or egress the camp without permission. The landscape is semi desert, dry and unpleasant sight for the eyes. I am very tired and seem that I will need some days to recover from my long walk from Somalia.

Although I was glad for reaching a peaceful place, leaving behind the seven bush traversing days between the Somali-Ethiopia border, yet fatigue and hangover from the Qaat drug caught up with me. It is true that taking the drug first hastened my night-trekking steps. I endured the feeling of fatigue and sleepiness, the scratching of trees and trampling over rocks. But, all the bodily hurt that I was hiding at the time for fear caught up with me at once. Munching the green too much of the moist leafs developed a painful abscess in the mouth which made me writhe with pain. Cracks formed on my gums, molars ached and lips chafed dry. I developed nauseating headache, my wind pipe dried and even swallowing saliva became difficult and painful.



Feeling severely dehydrated and pale, I was in dire need of instant continuous rehydration. But who cares about that? My turn was called to the office for enrolling new rebels. It is not an office in the sense, but a simple wooden shed with a desk and a chair thrown in the middle for want of furniture. Standing at the two corners of the shed are armed youth who seem to be ready for firing anytime. Seated in and waiting for me is Dhogor. As I was told, Dhogor was for a long time an officer in the Somali Armed Forces. Here, he is the commander of the drill camp for the new rebel recruits. In description, Dhogor is a short chubby man with big fuzzy hair and a retracted neck. His nose is a large Somali defamer resembling a closed fist just slapped on the face. His eyes are unblinking red with scary gaze.

He is wearing knee-high boots and undersized khaki trousers. Dangling on his right hip is a long pistol, a water canteen and a dagger similarly hanging on the left one. He is biting on his nails while tuned out, like a motherless young girl scolded by her step mother and thinking about the death of her mother and her unlucky lonely life. He is looking at me directly as though he is astonished by my presence. I stood in front of him somehow shaken.

“What is your name?” He asked.

Koombo. I replied, slightly smiling in the hope of introducing some humanity in to his angry face.

“K-o-o-m-b-o?” He inquired, spelling out the name. “You must be humorous, isn’t so?” He said, relating me with the famous Somali comedian whom only the name we share.

“No, I am not a comedian, but I like humor.” I replied.

“It is not that important, just sign here.” He gave me my first order, extending a hand with a pen toward me while, at the same time, pointing a finger to a green paper lying on the desk. He put a cigarette in his mouth and searched for a lighter with both hands without looking in his oversized pockets sewn over on his khaki trousers. I took the pen from him and looked down, staring on the paper. On it was written in bold letters, “I SWEAR TO SACRIFICE BOTH MY LIFE AND WEALTH TO LIBERATE MY COUNTRY.” I looked at him and hoped he would order me to do something else instead, pretending not to understand, but got scared of staring at him and thus quickly lowered my eyes. I looked around like I needed emergency help, but my eyes could not see beyond his two bodyguards. I looked down again, like a young country girl expecting stranger’s blind date.

He surprised me with a question while I absent minded in my own thoughts, “man, can’t you read?”

“I do read.”

“Are you deaf then?”

“No, I am not deaf either.”

“Then sign the letter, why are you absentminded?”

He parked angrily, checking me up and down. He then cracked a matchstick and lit a cigarette buffing it in twice successively and held it in his left hand while with his right hand used the woody part of the matchstick as toothpick.

“Commander, I did not come with any wealth to offer. I replied, blinking rapidly and tried to look at him directly.

“You will offer when you get it, just sign this paper.” He suggested, with a kinder but seemingly superficial welcoming countenance.

“Then, let me sign when I get it. I tried a superficial laughter too.”

“No, sign it right now.” He looked at the clock making himself look like a busy man in hurry.

“What should I sign then? I stooped down on the paper still lying on the desk and gave one more thoroughly eye scan.”

“You just sign it, just sign it. You have something which is better than material wealth...”

“And what is that?”

“Your life, of course”.

“My life?!”

“Yes your life. Don’t you realize that you are a true *slayer of a hundred men?*” He laughed with himself.

“Commander, commander I do not want to die now.”

“Do not be afraid. You will not die, actually you will kill”. He smiled for himself again.

“I do not want to kill either. I made my protest clear as I scratched my head.”

“I do not want to die; I do not want to kill! Then what the hell are you here for? To dance?”

He heightened his voice mocking me. He then pulled his seat back away from the desk and crossed his legs, like a girl wearing a short skirt does to cover between her legs for modesty.

“I did not come to dance either.”

“Then what did you come for, just tell us?” ‘

“I do not now, perhaps I just came.” My thoughts gleaned little back into the past.

“I just came! If you just came, then just sign it and we will tell you what you just came for. You, just sign the papers. We do not need a comedian around here. Sign it!”

He raised his voice couple notches up once more as he was talking to a total deaf person. Actually, he stood up from the seat, threatened me with his scary eyes and pushed towards me the paper with a pen. I now became really afraid for my life, once more toggling glances between him and the paper. I signed under the statement; “*I swear to sacrifice both my life and wealth to the liberation of my country.*” He then called one of his guards at the gate and said, “*fariid, fariid.* Take him away and shave his head clean right now! He is indeed kind of an arrogant boy...”

That was the first sign of losing my own freedom, let alone ‘liberating my country’. It threw doubts and unexpected fear into the rebel life I am about to begin. Of course I did not expect that the rebels were just an artistic orchestra to be attended for a performance or leisure dancing, but I never expected the notion of “sign to sacrifice your life away”. That simultaneously tested and sounded to me like a bitter medicine to swallow. It sounded every word of “sign you death.” Perhaps I was a coward or loved life too much, but I suddenly started worrying about the war and next deadly battlefield. I wondered what is next after this!

Onboard the Disoriented Ship

We were given a clean shave first followed with a distribution of boots and green khaki trousers. Then started the real military training and the merciless drills, after we all became look-a-likes in fatigue uniform. We were given intensive course on long distance running, crawling, trench digging, walking on knees, and disassembling and assembling of light arms used by the rebels to fight. When we finished that, we were warned and advised on what to expect next.

“Gentlemen, beginning from today, we are on the same boat. We are planning a long journey to Xamar and our fate and interests are all interdependent. All of you should forget what you used to be before. All of you are now nothing but soldiers under the full military *law of the ship*.”

The next early morning, Dhogor gathered us in the barracks field and inaugurated his speech with; “amongst you are some who just came for the sake of coming here and I am sure that they will truly be entertained during the journey...” He paced back and forth surveying us with his scary eyes as he was looking for someone specific. Several laughed and all looked one another in disbelief. Linking his speech in the morning and yesterday’s meeting between us, it was clear that the metaphor was on me, although he did not mention anyone specifically. My thinking was that he was provoking a metaphor and a veiled threat upon me. I hid myself behind the back of the soldier in front of me to avoid meeting his gaze. My dislike for the man was immediate and cemented.

The time neared when the ship lifted anchor. The time for the journey to Xamar should begin in earnest. But, an emergency order came little while after supper. We were told to tighten shoe laces, fold up our groundsheets and get ready for a long journey, a real long and treacherous one. Where and why we are journeying to is not revealed to us. Everything is a “military secret” that should not be discussed and everybody interprets that as wished. Some thought about a looming battle, some provoked a training mission and other individuals a move to a new barracks to change the war theatre. The reality was that nobody knew for sure what was awaiting us, and that was a very worrying development on its merit.

When we got ready, everybody was given a Kalashnikov and ammunition for which he was given a quick training on how to use. Ammunition pouch and a water canteen were fastened on the hips. Then, we were divided into twos and threes and sprinkled among other regular troops around the barracks. I applied for the unit my teacher belonged to; because he was the only person I could trust my life with in case an emergency situation occurs to me. He was the only person I could complain to and tell my secrets, but my request was denied by Dhogor.

“Are you suckling the teacher?” he scolded, looking at me with despise.

“No, I just want keep his company.” I replied.

“To keep his company? Ha ha.” He laughed with himself. “Gentleman, here is every man for himself. No man depends on another. Have you heard the saying *everybody for own self, o prophet mind your own people?*”

“Well, commander...” I kept in company of a strong stomach as I tried to suppress my feelings. “Whatever happens, you share a fate with others. I reassured myself.

“Teacher, where are we moving to?” I asked my teacher who was in the process of climbing up on to a departing military vehicle.

“The ship is departing, so, hold fast on to it and take care. Good bye Koombo.” He waved at me with a cheerful face.

“Good bye teacher.” I waved back at him and hoped to meet again in peace. I wondered if even he knew anything about our journey.

I was added to a new troop, already alert and strong, both in quantity and quality. Around one hundred armored and supply vehicles were parked in rows for them. Early in the evening, when the night darkened, we started moving towards Somalia. The vehicles traveled in one long line, lights all off.

I boarded a vehicle with a group of youth cracking jokes, sat on my rifle, leaned on ammunition boxes, supported chin bone on the knees, like a starving mullah, and said in private *happy journey!*

“You! Aflow, give me a cigarette.” One of them sitting on the hood over the driver’s compartment shouted for another sitting in the middle of the flat bed who has just lighted a cigarette.

“I do not have a cigarette. Would you wait for the butt instead?”

“You are a dead man smoking; do not bother to save it. I say just give me one cigarette!”

“If I am a dead man smoking, then you are a dead man craving for one. So just take this butt.” Everybody laughed.

“You! Fanax, you know every battle has a witness of last will. If this is your day to die, whom would you like to leave a message with me for? One of them dipping his hard bread in a can of beans asked another absentminded man sitting in front of him.

“Buddy, if you live after me, this is what I want you to tell my clueless young brother back home. Say to him; even if our dear mother joins the rebels and calls for support to save her sorry skin, be the last of her children to come to her aid. It is even better if you ignore her.” All laughed out loud once more.

I thought the laughter meant that nobody was happy to give support to the clan mission. Something else I noticed from these hilarious jokes was that the long journey we embarked was towards a battlefield and these men were leaving their last wills with secret sarcasm. Early in the morning, when a man could be discerned from a tree and the sun rays appeared, we were ordered to alight from the vehicles and disperse in tactical formations.

Before even the first order was executed, another shouted behind, “fire! Fire! Forward! Forward!” I asked myself; in what direction do we fire? Who is the target? Why are we firing in the first place? Immediately, a counter offensive fire came from the opposite side as we continued firing in front of us. I indiscriminately fired in front of me provoking *the Holly Name* and prayed; *may you slay a murderer.*”

The crisscross whizzing sound of the bullets, both big and small in caliper, created some sort of a distorted sound resembling a badly arranged piece of music. The rebels died or got wounded around me like fumigated locust. Blood followed, marrows melted and the land and its vegetation got scourged. The biggest problem was that both the killer bullets and their firers were nowhere to be seen, and that was the basis for the worst fear of the moment. I hid behind a tree holding my hand hands on the head, supported my emptied gun against its trunk and lamented; *my heavenly savior save me*. I now know that the well-kept military secret has its cover blown. I know that the aim of the journey was not to visit the training fire range or tourism, the case being kill or be killed.

The only thing that was hard to understand was the reason behind keeping secret the unavoidable truth that awaited a man who is in battle between life and death. Perhaps I am just dumb enough waiting to see the writing already on the wall while others knew the whole story all along. On the other side of the tree, a youngster broken both thighs by bullets screamed, “Water! Water!” I ignored him first, pretending not to hear his pleas. I did not want to leave under the safety of the tree only to become a target for the killer bullets. But, the damned could not cease screaming for help and it became hard on me to ignore his pleas. I crawled low, grabbed one of his broken legs and pulled him towards the shade of the tree where I wrapped his shirt over the thighs to stop the bleeding. I held him on over my knees, put my water canteen right to his mouth and stayed with him.

“Do you have cigarette?” He said.

No, I don’t.

“What about tobacco?”

No tobacco either, what do you want to do with it?

“I am kind of dizzy, like I drunk fresh ghee.”

“Who is firing the killer bullets?” I asked, listening to his hapless writhing.

“The enemy, the enemy army.” He reiterated.

“Where is the enemy?”

“They are in the trench, trench.”

“Trench! Do you mean the hiding hole?”

“Yes, the hole where bullets are sought refuge from.” He looked at me surprisingly and continued moaning with pain.

“And why are we not in one such hole if the bullets should be avoided?”

“We are on the offensive side; the trenches are for the defensive side, the defense.”

The d-e-f-e-n-c-e? I pretended not to understand, spelling out the word.

“Are you a new recruit?”

“Yes I am new.”

“What is your name?” He asked, looking at me up a little.

“Koombo is my name. what is yours?”

“Ali, Ali Dhurwaa (Hyena) is my nickname. By the way, why did you hide in the tree if you were not wounded?”

“So, what should I do? Expose myself to the bullets?!”

“Why don’t you fight?”

“Who should I fight? Obscure genies?”

“Coward! “You were scared, isn’t it so?” He tried to manage a smile.

Buddy, *mother of a coward is never rendered sonless*. I tried to strengthen my argument with a wise proverb.

“But, you should also now that she also never claims victory.” He pointed finger at my direction.

“So, is it bad to get afraid?” I asked him back.

“It is not bad; it is not bad at all to be afraid, provided you are not noticed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean cowardice is the worst crime accused of a soldier in a battlefield. Besides that, if you get court-martialed you may end up being discriminated, thus living with shame and dishonor, and that is not easy to live with.”

“Ali, that is madness. Don’t you think so? The biggest responsibility a soldier has in battlefield is to safe his own life first.” I tried to reason my fear.

“No, it is to harm the enemy’s life.”

“No it is not. It is to save his own.”

I got frustrated with a man whom I pulled to a shade, stopped his bleeding and at the same time accusing me of cowardice! Should I had ignored him when he was screaming for a drink of water, would have I been answerable to anyone? I remembered the Somali proverb which says; *do not commit good deed for you may reap an evil reward*, but tried to suppress my anger.

“It is nothing, it is nothing Koombo.” He closed his eyes and leaned back on to the tree trunk. He remembered that he is in dire need of my help and should better mind other business than accusing me of cowardice.

“Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!” shouted aloud unknown voice nearby.

Perhaps is the same one which was previously shouting “charge!” and “fire!”, if he is even still alive.

“We are defeated, we are defeated...” shouted the wounded man in my care.

I emerged from the tree dragging my gun with me and run back on retreat avoiding to get noticed.

“Don’t leave me for the enemy! Don’t you leave me for the enemy!” The wounded man shouted behind me.

What can I do for you if I can’t carry you? I hesitated little and continued running.

“Don’t leave me for the enemy. Don’t leave for the enemy, you coward!” He shouted after me again.

I felt conflicted as I stood, looking back and forth between the battlefield and retreat directions. I picked my mind out about what to do with the wounded man shouting after me. I do not want to be called a coward and discriminated against in a place where I have neither kin nor a friend and I don’t want to risk my life for a man I can do without. It is fine if I run away and the wounded man falls into the enemy hands, because no one finds out about my cowardice. But, if he is retracted to safety by others, he will tell that I hid in a tree during the pitch of the battle and that I left him behind wounded. That will be a never ending nightmare of shame. That can cause me to become *a white crow* amongst soldiers. The only problem is; will the wounded man fall into the enemy hands or will he get saved? That is the only thing I want to know.

As I argued with myself for some time, comparing between the risk of exposing myself to bullets and the shame of cowardice, I decided to face the danger instead. I run back to the wounded man and pulled him out of the tree. As I trumped up and down with him struggling, a group of soldiers mounted on a Toyota vehicle retreating from the battlefield encountered us. I felt like saying “*O coward; if only you knew how close you came to a victory*” and jumped on the vehicle thinking of myself a hero. I hoped that Ali Dhurwaa will report my deeds to the command that I saved his life. That I am not a coward and did not leave him behind.

When the battle ended, we did not return back to the zone of the fight. Instead, those of us who survived were camped a field not far from the war zone. We dug a large trench and in it stacked dead corpses, like sandbags intended for flood dike construction. We poured sand on them and moved on. Nobody cried for anyone and no condolences were offered. It was my first, but not the last, to see people dying *like flies into a boiling broth*.

I realized for the first time that death is not a big issue among the rebels. I lost a great deal of life’s direction and purpose. I wondered if even I ever had one. All the people I live with are strangers to me. There is no one I could trust or share my feelings with. I thought about deserting and going back to Somalia, to sing for the father of the nation and turn away from my fighting kin. But, what could result from that cannot be imagined. It could not be imagined, because my name was broadcasted aloud from “Radio Kulmis” the day I arrived. It is part of the rebels’ policy to mark the rebel stamp on any new recruit. Joining the rebel warfare has an entry but no exit.

My first special task assigned to was the rebel kitchen. I was made responsible to kook for a group of 50 men during the peace time and bear my gun like any other fighter during hostilities. I, thus, started a merry-go-round life. I made my house under the shade of a tree between the Ethiopian-Somali border. The day and the night passed without any noticeable change. I came with my own feet to a hell I did not anticipate. Here, the only way open for me is kill or be killed for nothing. The rebels armed us, brainwashed us and fought us tooth and nail to have any emotional feelings. “Fire the bullets”, they ordered us, without giving us direction, purpose and when to cease fire. We are burning Somalia, but will we put it out? Will we in the future accept to lay down the easily acquired arms? Only time will tell.

When I evaluated my situation at the time, I realized that I was onboard a disoriented ship inching towards Xamar. What I doubted was; whether we will call on port or sink in depth of seas. The ship is anchored in the middle of ocean and riddled with technical mishaps. The ships compass is broken and which direction is to Xamar is not known. None of the break, the clutch and the wheel is functioning properly. The break is old and the engine is spurting. The captain, the commander and the passengers all are not versed with what is wrong with the ship. The communication is severed and finding help is not expected. The ocean is unruly and heavy winds are beating. Imminent sinking is feared, provisions are scarce and drinkable water is depleted like other survival supplies.

Thirst and hot sun dominate the day and the night belongs to wind-chill and pitch-black darkness. Dry land is far away and anyone who tries to swim to safety risks severe shark attack. The law of the ship dictates that the weak, the sick and the dead should be thrown overboard in to the sea. A man's extra weight is not needed if not deemed useful. The captain and the commander entertain passengers by telling them that the ship's technical problem will be solved tomorrow and will reach Xamar soon. The passengers do not believe that and their expectation to live is slim. I just minded my own stirring pots of messy food for the rebels and tried not to think of anything.

The region hosting the rebel base is called *Ogaadeen* and is located on western Somalia or Eastern Ethiopia. Both countries claim it and many wars were fought over it historically. The last one, which the Somalis were defeated, took place in 1977/78 and this new civil war waged by my clan is a direct result of the previous Ogaadeen defeat. But, according to me, the region does not deserve a place blood of two sister nations to be spilled for, for it is a dry semi desert isolated from the rest of the world and lacking the most basics of life. It is an environment that is good for nothing, except animal grazing, depending on the mercy of the heavens and the grass it produces.

The Clubhouse

This is *Gallaadi*. It is so called a city, but it is actually a big rural village. It is very hot and dusty. The houses are huts made of sticks and a mixture of adobe and cow dung plaster. Its residents are Somalis and Ethiopian prostitutes. The town's economy depends on the salaries of the Ethiopian army which maintains barracks on the town corners and defends the country on the Eastern border (Somalia).

I got out of trench for the first time in three years, armed with three days of recreational allowance that I have been waiting for a long time and small sum of money. I was ordered, "Go to the town and get change of air." That was very important for me. Three days of rest and peace is very dear here. Now I can afford to buy something, get a haircut and, somehow, look like other people.

I do not know anyone from the town, but that does not bother as long as I have money. I have to try to utilize my vacation the best possible way, although the choices are limited. When it comes to recreation, only options available are alcohol, qaat and prostitutes. The decision to choose is not difficult either. I have never drank alcohol and disgusted with qaat when Kamas gave it to me the night I escaped from Somalia. I have now visited a brothel for the first time in my life. And absurdly, although marriage commitment is forbidden among rebels, prostitution is allowed. Actually, it is even encouraged. I entered an Ethiopian bar- restaurant.

It is called “Buna Beyt”, but is actually a brothel. Sitting in there are uniformed soldiers drinking beer and prostitute servers who own separate rooms inside. I knew I wanted to visit a prostitute, but the problem with me was where to begin approaching one. I became little bit shy and afraid, but got bold again, since nobody recognizes me around here. I planted myself upright on a single corner chair and ordered a Fanta drink. My eyes surveyed the prostitutes thinking about my choice while slowly sipping my fanta. Red light shone in the bar and the prostitutes wore extra make-up to sell themselves up for the night. It is very difficult to distinguish the prime from others. Another problem for me was the language barrier. I do not speak a word of Amharic, except some insult words I learned. But, I was confident that we will understand each other, since our goal is the same and our interests are interlinked for the night. A short busty one called Almaz winked for me in which case I winked back in response. She cat-walked towards me, slew herself haphazardly on chair next to me and rubbed her left breast against my shoulder. *Fugi-fugi alle?* I asked, sipping my fanta. “*Gazam-ka-alle fugi-fugi alle*”, she replied. She rubbed her breast against my shoulder again, seductively slapped my thigh and sipped my fanta without asking my permission.

Sintonow? I asked her, trying to gauge the price.

“Hamsaa Birr (50)”, she replied.

“Hamsaa! Hayaa Birr (20).” I bargained.

“Hamsaa Birr.” She insisted, caressing me on the nape of the neck.

“Hayaa Birr.” I bargained back, insistently.

“Hamsaa”

“Hayaa”

“Hamsaa”

“Hayaa.” Thus went the haggling, back and forth for some time.

She has drunk several quick beers on me before we even agreed on anything. She was a clever woman who knew her work well as she was hell-bent on satisfying me, deal or no deal.

“Don’t you see me, instead of pampering money on the Ethiopian prostitute?”, said a tall lady, speaking in Somali from my back.

“Oh, sister, I didn’t think you were a prostitute!” I said with inner reservation, glancing her direction.

“Will you serve me cheaply if I chase away the Ethiopian?” I looked at her head to toe, thinking that the better of two prostitutes and the more exciting is the one whom her language you speak.

“May be”, she replied, pertaining a bargain and jokingly shrugging her shoulders. She was telling the truth. She allowed me to sleep with her for the night half the price of what the other was demanding. We entered into quickly arranged unwritten agreement.

I am not sure if this resulted from the business competition between the prostitutes or I was granted a special treatment, but that was not even important. She led me to her small room located at the back of the bar, lit a candle and demanded me to advance the money first. She then faced away and hid the sum in a safe place, making sure it was far away both from my reach and sight. She dusted off her hard mattress bed and spread white linen on it. She then lifted her *dirac* and *googarad* while lying on her back after pulling a chewing gum from under her cushion which she immediately started chewing disgustingly, “dhashaq, dhashaq, dhashaq!” She then grabbed a *qaraami* cassette lying on the desk and slipped it into a record player tucked under the bed sounding off one of Hassan Aadan Samatar songs which I could not remember now.

“Yallah! What are you waiting for?” she said, looking up at me still standing. She then blew off the candlelight and started singing in sync with the cassette. I followed her direction and hoped on one side of the bed.

“Then, what are you waiting for?” she repeated, changing the cassette with another.

Sleep well sister. I said, turning my back to her. I changed my mind suddenly as my desire vanished in thin air.

“Did you come to sleep, or what?” She inquired, as she was surprised by the man who made an agreement with her and then turning his back to her even after he paid in advance.

“Is there any problem if you take the twenty Birr and I just sleep in for the night?”

I was afraid she would order me to leave her room for she will invite another man if I have no desire to fulfill.

“I have no problem with it. Do you think I enjoy prostituting myself?”

“Then, why are you bargaining in the night bars?”

“You cannot understand.” She said, inhaling heavily and covered her *googarad* back on her naked thighs.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you, you cannot understand.” She reiterated her previous argument.

“That you prostitute yourself and hate your job?”

“Yes.” She answered after a brief silence.

“Who cares about a prostitute and her destiny?” I thought replying but my mouth shied away from delivering such words.

So you feel like the saying, “*I shoulder all the blame though not humped*”.

“You can describe it like that.” She answered and gulped a bottle of fanta on the desk.

“So, why don’t you leave it if it is that bad?” I continued my troublesomeness.

“I told you, you cannot comprehend.”

“Ok, if you say so.” I completely turned my back to her and started getting ready to sleep.

“What is your name?” She asked, turning the record volume down while raising her head from the cushion. I then planted an elbow on the cushion and placed one of my legs between hers.

“What is your name first?” she asked, lighting the candle back and looking at me.

Diiriye it is. Diiriye *Shimbir* (bird) I am nicknamed.

“You Shimbir, how old are you?”

“I am twenty years old. Why?”

“Twenty years old, aah... I don’t know if you could understand me, but I want to tell you that I did not get into prostitution because of liking it. I do not open my legs wide to enjoy and sleeping with strangers is not easy for me. That is all I want to remind you.” She turned off the record, lighted a cigarette and gave it several quick buffs, as she was being timed for.

“You told me that, but what I did not understand is; what compels you on a job that bothers you?”

“I am doing it for the money. Life compelled me, life.”

“So, did you earn enough money so far?” I tempted my hands to grasp her floppy breasts but retracted them back, remembering the several Birrs I was charged early in the evening.

“No, I did not make enough money. Furthermore, a prostitute never earns enough money selling her body, but I never fail to earn what to eat. What else can I do if they had killed my husbands and threw me out to the streets? Perhaps nothing!” She replied to herself and sipped the fanta bottle once more.

Truthfully, I did not want to hear emotional and critically painful story. Remembering anything about death and dying bothered me. I just wanted to consider fulfilling my animalistic desire during my short vacation, thought and emotion being the most important things I wanted to suppress. But, I could not ignore a prostitute who begun discussing her personal affairs with me in such short acquaintance.

“Who killed your husband and chased you out into the streets, the Ethiopians? I asked her, raising my head up from the cushion with interest in her story.

“No, the rebels, the Somali rebels.” She relieved her runny nose on a corner of her *dirac* and wiped her streaming tears of painful reminiscence using her forearm.

“For what reason did they kill your husband?”

“I do not know. They said he broke the law, may their laws get damned.”

“Which law?”

“The rebel’s law of chastity, what do I know!” She analyzed for some time that the rebels are not allowed to get married, as long as they remain in the war front. It is feared that they may abandon the war effort and get busy on building their family.

“My husband, may Allah bless his soul, was a good man.” She closes her eyes and places her hands over her cheeks. The woman’s story sparked an unwanted scary reminiscence in me. May be she doesn’t know. Should I tell that I am on the same scary ship which her husband went overboard? Should I change my attitude of prostituting and fondling this pale body, like a thirsty flower, with humanity? Should I cry and show mutual emotion? Since both of us need talking and companionship, should we talk about each other’s dark life and the disoriented ship I am aboard? I argued with self and couldn’t know what to say and where to start. My goal for the night and the new development in front of me contradicted.

No, don’t tell her anything. Acknowledging each other’s feelings does not contribute anything positive to the situation. Don’t make her hate her work, since you have no alternative to offer to her. I reached a compromise with my soul.

“Why don’t you return to your family when this tragedy happened to you?”

I looked her sad face with compassion, caressing her shoulders like a younger sister of mine.

“I can’t return. Better die in prostitution dishonor.” She replied, shaking her head.

“Why are you saying so?”

“My parents and I separated in hostility after I married a rebel man who is enemy of his country and government.”

“How did you separate in hostility? Did your parents have especial connection with the government of the country?”

“My father had no specific relations with anyone. He was a commonly humane laborer, but was arrested and accused with having connection with the rebels when I married one of them and joined the rebels in Ethiopia. He was given a fifteen years prison sentence. Where should I go back to or with what now? And these killed my husband, because he only married a woman, while those arrested my father for his son in law is a rebel.”

“I am sorry.” I said, trying once more to offer my sincere condolences to her.

“Look, my husband was unlucky. He dedicated his whole life to the rebellion and had confidence in their struggle. He thought they were better than the regime in Xamar, but he was wrong in his assumption. The rebels and the regime they are fighting share same evil spirit. They are all the same. They are like a father and his sons. The rebels commit every crime they accuse of the regime in Xamar. They kill people, loot their properties, rape women... and, with all that, they want to create change!”

Weris swam deep into a political analysis, comparing between the rebels who killed her husband and the Somalia administration from which she run away and incarcerated her innocent father. Discussing her private life during prostitution is a testament to how much she needs a compassionate person to listen to her story and share emotions with, in addition to how less she understands rules of her new occupation.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Ask me whatever you want.” She lay back on the cushion using her hand as extra support.

“Do you discuss your personal feelings and private life with anyone you sleep with?”

“No, I do not. I do not tell anything to the Amharas, because I can’t even speak their language. But sometimes emotions overtake me and I find myself talking profusely. Forgive me if I talked about something that does not concern you.” She tried to limit her emotions a bit.

“No, no, it is nothing. I am glad to listen to you.” I reassured her, for I could not manage any other thing to say.

“Sweet dreams sister.” I said, turning my back to her and got ready for sleep.

“Sweet dreams.” She replied, turning on to the other side, back to back.

The morning broke and I decided to go before they see me at the daylight. I put on shoes and opened the door after I placed twenty Birr on the desk for Waris.

“Why are you giving me the money?” She managed to ask in a confident voice, showing her strong human will.

“It is nothing; even the Ethiopian prostitute would have charged me more. Goodbye sister.” I waved smiling for her.

“You can have a ‘revisit’ if you wish. You paid me, and all the men do request such when they are leaving.” She tried a shy smile.

“No, there is no problem, another time. Another time Waris.”

“Ok, another time.” She waved back at me as I left.

Chapter 4 will follow soon

Bodhari Warsame

WardheerNews Contributor

Email: bodhari.warsame@gmail.com

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