

**From Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* (Home Is Where I Am),
Milan: Rizzoli, 2010**

Translated by Jon R. Snyder and Megan Williamson

Chapter 1: The drawing, or the land that is not

Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir...
("Story, story, o story like silk...")

So begin all Somali fairy tales. All the ones my mother would tell me when I was little. Splatter tales, for the most part. Over-the-top tales of a nomad world that didn't care about niceties. Tales harder than a cedar chest. Hyenas with sticky slaver, children dismembered and reassembled, tricks for surviving. In my mother's fairy tales, there were no princesses, castles, balls and slippers. Her stories reflected the world in which she was born, the scrublands of Eastern Somalia, where men and women traveled constantly in search of water. "We carried our homes on our backs," she would always tell me. And if it wasn't exactly on their own backs, it was just about the case. Man's best friend, the noble Arabian camel, would often carry those homes for them.

Momma Kadija lived a hard life up until she turned nine. Already as a little girl she was a good shepherdess. She milked goats and cows, looked after the young camels, cooked rice with meat and never complained about the calluses that she got on her feet with every migration of her extended family. Stories were the best way not to think about the difficulties of real life. Those dangerous and randy *jinn*s, those fierce and bloodthirsty beasts, and those magnificently gifted heroes: they all served to make one forget that life was not a gift and that it had to be held onto every day by an act of will. "Because the only thing that truly makes us free is our will," my grandfather Jama Hussein—my mother's father, whom I never met—used to say.

My family's life is a long act of will.

When my mom told me her stories, I, who was born and raised in Rome, shook like—or even more than—a leaf. But I didn't run away, because I always wanted to hear how the story ended. To see the wicked punished and the good rewarded. A Manichaean world that I found reassuring. A world that was cruel but clear. And, like any self-respecting child, I was a bit of a sadist.

No, don't think ill of me now. I am a sweet and sensible woman, I am honey and ginger, cinnamon and cardamom. I am brown sugar. I know that what I just said seems to make me out to be a *dhiigmiirad* who drinks human blood. But the fairy tales establish a system of life and death. They connect us to the ancestral world of our forebearers.

When in a middle school anthology I read the tale of Snow White, I understood that Europe and Africa have a lot in common. In the original version collected by the Brothers Grimm, the ending is very different from the one that everyone now knows. The wicked stepmother gets invited to the wedding. But it is precisely at the wedding that the evil queen pays for all her misdeeds. "Two iron slippers already were ready on the embers: when these were white-hot they brought them to her, and she was forced to put on the

scorching shoes and dance in them until her feet were excruciatingly burned and she dropped dead.” Justice was served! Death to the evil queen Grimhilde!

The evil queen is like the determined man-eater Aarawelo; and Wil Wal¹ seems to come straight from the world of Hans Christian Andersen. Our respective fairy tales are closer than we think. And maybe we are too. Rome and Mogadishu, my two cities, are like Siamese twins separated at birth. One includes the other and vice versa. At least that’s how it is in my universe of meaning.

I understood this one afternoon four years ago, in a messy kitchen on Barack Street in Manchester. The Barack for whom the street was named had nothing to do with Obama. Four years ago, Obama still wasn’t anybody, just a small-time senator who dreamed of the impossible. Four years ago, the Barack of my street made me think of other things, especially about the root of the Arab word “to bless.” *Ba*ﺏ*Ra*ﺭ*Kaf* كﺏ, three lucky letters that form the word “blessed.” In that messy kitchen on Barack Street—that is to say, on the Street of Blessings—I felt that something would happen. In fact something did happen. Looking back on it now, it seems like a trivial daily occurrence. But, in hindsight, it was the beginning of a collective journey the likes of which had never occurred in my family’s history.

Nura, my sister-in-law, had cooked a magnificent chicken dish. Here the story begins. An ordinary squawking fowl—a dead one, moreover—stuffed with delicacies and rubbed all over with oil and spices. I hate chicken. I eat it by force of habit, but for me it has always been an overrated meal. It doesn’t taste like anything, it reminds me of hospital corridors and long lines of frustrated employees at workplace cafeterias. It’s nourishment, not pleasure. So, when Nura cheerfully announced *Maanta dooro macaan*, “today we’re gonna eat a good chicken,” I said to myself: “great, today I’m not eating.” Instead I was wrong. I don’t know what miracle Nura pulled off with this chicken, but not only was it good, it was downright divine. It melted in your mouth, and for a nanosecond every one of us at the table had a heavenly vision of our own personal Garden of Eden. For just a moment the earth vanished from beneath our feet. It was after sharing that chicken dish that our stories met and embraced. With full stomachs we let ourselves go, summoning memories of our old land, by now far away, by now lost to us. And from there an inexplicable feeling filled our souls. It wasn’t melancholy, it wasn’t sadness, it wasn’t joy, and it wasn’t sorrow. It was somewhere at the intersection of all these feelings. Chico Buarque, the Brazilian poet and singer, would have definitely defined it as *saudade*. What a beautiful word! An untranslatable word, yet so clear, as only our own name could be on the evening of a full moon. The sort of melancholy felt when one is, or has been, very happy; there’s a subtle taste of bitterness in this cheerfulness. And it is in the *saudade* experienced by those exiled from their motherland that this story has one of its beginnings. I say “one of its beginnings” because no one begins only once in life. And never from one single place.

Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir...

(“Story, story, o story like silk...”)

*Waxaa la yiri, waxaa isla socday laba nin, wiil yar iyo naag dhallinyaro ah,
kooxdii waxay bilaaben in ay sawiraan khariidada magaaladooda.*

¹ Aarawelo and Wil Wal are characters found in Somalian fairy tales.

("They say that once two men, a little boy, and a young woman found themselves together. The group began to draw their own city.")

That group was made up of my brother Abdulkadir, his young son Mohammed Deq, Cousin O, and me. We were gathered around a wooden table. In front of us there were steaming cups of spiced tea. Around us were the threads of our travels and the new places to which we now belonged. We were all part of the same family, but no one had had a similar journey. In our pockets each one of us had a different European passport. However, in our hearts we felt the pain of the same loss. We wept for our Somalia, lost to a war we could hardly understand. A war that began in 1991, and for which there was no foreseeable end. We were a bit like one of those old jokes: once there were three men—an Englishman, an Italian, and a Finn—and...

My brother is the Brit. After traveling the world, Abdul settled in Great Britain, where he got married and his son was born. He's one of Her Majesty's subjects, and for the past few years he has been a Labour supporter. The only thing he can't stand about his beloved Albion is the smell of deep-frying that emanates from the fast food joints. Every time he goes to Piccadilly on the number 36 bus he plugs his nose with his fingers as tightly as he can. But the stench of frying oil overcomes him anyway. To make ends meet, he does as all other Somalis do, and works a ton of jobs. His favorite is being a taxi driver. He prefers it because he loves the unknown, namely driving complete strangers around the city without first knowing the destination: deep down inside of him is buried a nomadic soul. Driving makes him as docile as a little lamb. Plus, as a business it isn't half bad, he says. Every weekend the white and Anglican (or atheist) English get drunk, but then they take taxis in which many teetotaling Sunni Muslims like Abdul perform their driving duty with skill.

On the other hand, Cousin O has an incredible story. He has Finnish citizenship; therefore, so do his wife and their seven children. He arrived in Great Britain almost by accident. Maybe only out of desperation. The cover of his passport has a harsh color, and if you put it to your ear you can hear the whistling of the north wind. Cousin O was never able to embrace either Helsinki or his Finnish citizenship. He didn't like the cold weather or, especially, the language of his adopted country. As soon as they arrived, his wife and kids learned quickly that language, full of guttural sounds, but it just made him break out in hives. Finland was, and is, a land of opportunity. Cousin O realized this, but he continued to dislike that country strongly. For many months, Cousin O thought of Finland as nothing other than the land of skinheads. In the streets of the Helsinki suburb where he lived, he felt ferocious, mean eyes gazing at him: a sensation he had felt only in Mogadishu in 1991, on the eve of the outbreak of civil war.

The first sign that something was up came from a pair of studded black boots that appeared in a cobbler's shop-window in his neighborhood. Then he saw a swastika appear on a wall. An hour later the swastika was gone. The diligent and well-equipped municipality had striven to erase all traces of that shame. Swastikas appeared and disappeared at the speed of light. You barely had time to see one before somebody had promptly erased it. They didn't only appear on walls, however; they were found on people, on clothing, on arms, on chests, on school folders, even shaved onto heads with close-cropped hair. One night someone called Cousin O at home: it was the wife of an old friend. Cousin O didn't understand a lot of what the agitated caller said, only that

someone had hurt his friend. Once he got to the hospital he understood everything. A group of skinheads had decided to use his friend as a punching bag, and they'd beaten him until he lost consciousness. A two-month prognosis for full recovery. The worst part was the swastika incised on the skin of his forehead, where no hair would grow. No amount of diligence by the municipality could have scraped away that wickedness, Cousin O thought. In the last analysis, however, his friend had been lucky. At that moment his wife could have been crying over a dead man, not a wounded one.

That very same night Cousin O decided deep down inside that he would move to nearby Great Britain. There were plenty of family members over there, ideal for restarting (for the third time) his life. His heart had escaped from a war, and had no intention of facing another one on European soil.

I, on the other hand, was the Italian in the joke. Somalis living in Great Britain didn't understand why I stubbornly stayed in the land of our ex-colonizers. Everybody would ask me: "what are you doing there?" Some maliciously added: "you don't even have a husband." To the Somalis in Great Britain, Italy was the worst possible option. A country where Somali refugees have no help from the state: no housing, no public assistance. A country where racism sneaks up on you when you least expect it. And where invariably you end up married to a white man. For many Somalis, this was absolutely shameful. "But don't you want a Somali man, handsome and tall? Do you want to be a native mistress like those poor women during colonialism who were abandoned as soon as their lover's mission was over, left with children and problems? Do you want to end up like them?"

Of course not! But it was hard to explain my reasoning. Italy was my country. Full of flaws, of course, but my country nonetheless. I've always felt it as deeply mine. Just like Somalia, which has plenty of flaws too. Just saying "I love Italy" wouldn't hold any weight. It wouldn't be considered a plausible defense. It was yet another huge ordeal to try to explain that I work with the Italian language. And it was better not to mention my extremely messy love life. So I'd learned to speak about Italy only with those who could understand my country. The rest of the time I limited myself to mumbling instead of replying. But on one point they were all very right: Italy had forgotten its colonial past. It had forgotten about having rained hell upon Somalis, Eritreans, Libyans, and Ethiopians. The Italians had simply wiped that slate clean.

This doesn't mean that Italians were worse than any other colonizers. But they were just like the others. Italians raped, killed, derided, polluted, plundered, and humiliated the peoples with which they came into contact. They did just as the English, French, Belgians, Germans, Americans, Spanish, and Portuguese did. But after the end of the second World War in many of these countries there was public debate over the past, people fought with one another, there were harsh and vehement exchanges of views; imperialism and its crimes were subjected to questioning; studies were published; the debate influenced literature, non-fiction, cinema, and music. In Italy there was silence instead. As if nothing had ever happened.

Back to Barack Street. All three of us were there, with Nura's chicken dish now in our stomachs and our different passports in our pockets. Digestion was in progress. Next to us my nephew was making paper airplanes. Maybe it was a moment of pure happiness. I don't know which one of us got up and broke the spell. Most likely it was me: I don't

know how to sit still for very long. I had the sudden desire for something sweet to eat. I grabbed a box of cookies, opened it and placed them in the middle of the table. Cousin O and Abdul started to grab them by the handful, while I took only one. The little boy didn't even glance at the box. He was too busy with his paper airplanes.

Everything started with a question of mine. I was the only one whose mouth wasn't full, without cookies to munch on and without paper airplanes to keep me busy. Even today I don't know why I asked that question. I don't know if it was due to simple curiosity or if I had inadvertently become the driving force of destiny. The question wasn't aimed at anyone in particular; maybe I was only talking aloud to myself.

"What's the name of the cemetery where Grandma Auralla is buried?"

The two men and child looked at me in confusion. An oblique look, a bit perplexed, suspended in mid-air.

"Well?" I insisted. "Where is she buried?"

Cousin O was the first to attempt an answer: "At the Sheikh Sufi cemetery, the one with the light blue tombs... I remember... I remember... she's buried there. I'm positive."

"What are you talking about?" my brother Abdul almost yelled. "Dada was buried next to Grandpa, at the General Daud cemetery."

"Not true, liar!" Cousin O shouted. "I'm older than you and I remember Mogadishu better. Grandma was buried at Sheikh Sufi."

"Nonsense! You don't remember anything about Mogadishu... you were always closeted with your books and your studies. You didn't see the world. I myself went all over Mogadishu. I was rather a rascal. It wasn't for nothing that people called me 'the barbarian.' I used to ditch school. Those streets were my classroom. That city and I became one. I remember it better than you. I could even draw it for you. Here, yes, I can do a great drawing of Mogadishu, right now."

"Great idea, Dad!" said the child, throwing us off balance. "Shall we draw?"

The two men looked at Mohammed Deq as if he were crazy.

Then they remembered that he was only a young boy, and a rather odd one at that.

"No, Deq..." said his father.

"No, Deq..." said his uncle.

"Yes, Deq..." I said.

My brother Abdul threw me an uncertain glance. Maybe he felt badly about seeing me outnumbered. He decided to follow me and his young son in this strange act of folly.

"You're right, my dear boy, we're going to draw it now."

In that moment I could have smacked a fat kiss on my big brother's face.

"You'll find everything in my office," my brother softly whispered, with just a hint of shame. To love to draw was almost a defect. If he'd studied he could have equaled Picasso in skill, if only he had wanted. But over the years just about everyone had told him that drawing was something only for children, something stupid. And he believed them. "You're a grown man, and you need to find a job," they told him. And he did just that. He had done a thousand jobs. Taxi driver in London, cashier at the 7-Eleven in Bristol, shoe vendor at the local market stalls, and finally cultural mediator for the municipality in a shabby office in Manchester, driving his taxi on the weekends. "It's good work, sister, you know?" But, to this day, he draws after returning home from work in the evenings. He draws his memories from his youth. The pigeons he used to have,

camels making love, silly baboons clowning around, the sandy beach of Jazeera, the lobsters that you would walk home on a leash. He draws his son Mohammed, his wife Nura, himself, our mother, our father, and me with my long neck. And even the twin cities, Mogadishu and Rome.

In the meantime, Mohammed had found the color pencils. He cleared the table of everything that wasn't needed. He rolled out the paper and asked: "Ok...where do we start?"

Cousin O had a different look in his eyes. He seemed younger. He was the one to start: "Naturally we need to begin at Maka al Mukarama."

"Yes," Abdul replied. "Maka al Mukarama." He too had a different look in his eyes.

My brother started to trace a blue line on the blank paper. The street, the column, Maka al Mukarama. We drew Maka al Mukarama because our memories were fading. Our city was dead after the civil war; the monuments destroyed, the streets blown apart, lots of dirty consciences. We needed that drawing, that city of paper, for our survival.

Maka al Mukarama was an event. It was the beating heart of Mogadishu, the city's backbone. It was a long street that traversed the entire city. Willing or unwillingly, the residents of Mogadishu always ended up at Maka al Mukarama. The name was an Arab one, naturally, like the names of so many things in Somalia: *Maka* means Mecca; *Mukurama* means "the favorite." That is what Muslims call the holiest city of them all. Mecca was God's favorite, as Medina—which had welcomed the prophet Mohammed (may God keep him in glory)—was the city enlightened by God. Before it was called Maka al Mukarama the street had an Italian name, a name—given by the fascists—that nobody liked; it's hard even to remember now what it was. Maybe What's-His-Name Avenue? For the fascists, everything in Mogadishu was an avenue.

The city was laid out around this pulsing artery. The sense (or lack of sense) of each neighborhood depended on how far it was from this source of life.

Maka al Mukarama still exists. There's a Maka al Mukarama even in the Somalia of the civil war, but by now it's only a ghost. It doesn't seem like the street it once was. It doesn't beat anymore. It's not animated by the honking of horns, the camels making a racket, the soft cries of young women in love. Now the only sounds are deafening and booming: orders and bullets; silence and death. Not even the muezzin calls the faithful to pray like before. His call torments those who hear it. It seems hesitant, shorn of conviction. The *ajuza*—the old wives, who know it all—say that "Iblis in person murmurs wrong words in the right ear of the muezzin." I think they're right: the war is an Iblis, a Satan who always murmurs the wrong words in men's ears. Allah, lenient and merciful in the Koran, reveals that the devil—Iblis, *waswasa*—whispers into the hearts of men and makes them mad, blind, and useless. The muezzin's voice is lost amid the swarm of incoherent words. And those of us from Mogadishu, even those from the diaspora like me, become poor, divided beings.

So as not to forget Maka al Mukarama, that night my Cousin O, my big brother Abdul (who seems like a cartoon character for how he laughs and knows how to be good with everyone), and I tried to draw it. We drew a long blue line. Then Cousin O started to list bunches of names. Names, names, names. He pointed at the blank spaces on the sheet of drawing paper and merged them with his memories, like mixing eggs together with flour to make dough.

“The statue of Xaawo Taako, the theater, uhhhhhh look there’s the former parliament building, look there... yes there, there’s my favorite movie house, the Xamar Theater... never seen a cinema like it. During colonialism the Italians wouldn’t let us Somalis in. Ah, they were mad at us because we refused to perform the fascist salute. We were the only ones to do so in East Africa. Useless people, the fascists. But that cinema was beautiful, with its two levels and blood-red velvet seats. It was all soft, like a woman’s body. Afterward, when the Italians had left, my father, who lived through fascism, would go there with his friends. I too had friends in Somalia before this accursed war that’s devouring our memories. My friends, oh!, my friends Osman, Nur, and Abdi: I still remember all of them. We too would go to the Xamar. But at that point we were already an independent country, we had freed ourselves from colonialism. At the Xamar there was no more apartheid. They showed American films dubbed in Italian, cowboys versus Indians, love stories. Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, beautiful women, so many dreams. At the Xamar, right there.”

Cousin O was enthusiastic. “Mark it on our map,” I said peremptorily. “Grab a red pencil and mark it.”

It was strange for me to hear Cousin O talk so much. He never speaks; usually he limits himself to nods and often he doesn’t even do that.

Like everybody else, he’s a traveler. His feet have many stories to tell. But he has always had Mogadishu on his mind.

A dead city...

A lot of cities die. Just like us. They die just like any other organism. They die like wildebeests, zebras, sloths, sheep, and human beings. But no one ever holds a funeral for a city. Nobody held a funeral for Carthage, much less for New Orleans. No funeral was held for Kabul, Baghdad, or Port-au-Prince. And no one ever thought to commemorate Mogadishu. The city is dead. And something different has arisen from the rubble. We haven’t even had the time to mourn.

When a city dies, you don’t even have time to think about it. But that grief is a corpse, decomposing within you and haunting you with ghosts.

My brother kept on coloring, coloring, and coloring. A knot was starting to form in my stomach. It wasn’t Nura’s chicken dish, it was Chico Buarque’s *saudade*.

Then my brother froze, stopping at a precise point on the paper. “What are you looking at?” I asked with a strangely deferential tone.

“It’s the Guglielmo Marconi elementary school,” my cousin interjected.

“Yes, cousin, how did you guess?”

Cousin O smiled. I wondered if this unexpected cheerfulness had brought on partial facial paralysis. For a moment I worried about his happiness. Then I understood that it was the happiness of the exile, which does not bring on any partial facial paralysis.

“The Guglielmo Marconi was my elementary school, but then when Siad Barre became dictator it was renamed the Yaasin Cusman elementary school instead. I was thinking about my teacher. She was an Italian nun, you know? Her name was Maria, like all the nuns, and she liked Pascoli.”

I too had studied Pascoli at school. We had grown up in two different countries—the two of them in Mogadishu, I instead on the outskirts of Rome—and we had both studied Pascoli. The same sad poems. The same ugly episodes in history. Maybe the three of us

should have studied other things: our African history, for example. Instead, Africans always study the history of others. And thus we were convinced that we were descendants of the Romans or the Gauls, instead of the Yoruba and the ancient Egyptians. Colonial education planted seeds of doubt and self-torment in us.

The Guglielmo Marconi... what a swindle!

Then we came back to what concerned us now. We went back to the drawing.

“We need a method, guys!” I started to jabber like an old retired general. “We need to assign a color to each thing. And then to start making lists.”

They nodded docilely. I always think that it’s a good idea to put order to chaos.

We stayed there for an hour with no one showing any signs of tiring.

We laid out a list for schools, one for the cinemas, one for the hospitals, one for the cemeteries, one for the monuments, one for the embassies, one for the prisons, one for the airports, one for everything. We categorized the city. And to everything we assigned a color. Then we divided the lists. Each one of us was assigned to mark the names from their list onto the sheet of drawing paper.

Deq stayed, watching us in amazement. Adults bent over sheets of paper, just like him and his classmates at school. Mohammed Deq helped us to color that unusual city of paper.

Everything was so odd, but also so familiar. Many Italian names for Somali monuments made me laugh, as they were so antiquated.

I got the restaurants and the hospitals. I could barely remember the restaurants, but I tried to strain my memory so that I wouldn’t have to ask Abdul or Cousin O, or even Nura and my mom in the other room, for information every two seconds. Of course I was more familiar with Rome. Garbatella, Testaccio, Trastevere, Esquilino, Primavalle, Torpignattara, and Quadraro were the neighborhoods with which I was most familiar. But on that sheet of drawing paper was a part of my roots. I needed to push myself to remember those streets, seen through the eyes of a child. I needed to push myself for the son that one day I dreamed of having. I made lists. I was flooded with strange sensations. I suddenly remembered the light breeze in Mogadishu. I liked Via Roma with its shops, I liked the livestock market in Wardhigleey, and I liked that sort of Dantesque circle of hell that was Buur-Karoole at Xamar Ja-jab, a place where it was easy to come across alcoholics drunk on cheap spirits. My aunt Faduma, who has since passed, lived in Buur Karoole. She was a midwife, and was very well respected. She was the one who told me that the *buur*, the mountain, was named Karoole from an Italian name. Italy was everywhere in the names of streets and in the light-skinned faces of the people. And Italy had no idea: it had no idea about our streets with its names, or about our kids with its DNA. In Italy there are some streets with African names. Rome even has an African district. In Viale Libia, some Romans will tell you, there are some good clothing stores and you can do some good business. But otherwise? Nothing. The Romans go to Viale Libia and buy themselves a sweater. They live on Via Migiurtinia or they kiss in Via Somalia. But they ignore their colonial history. It’s not their fault: it’s not like you learn these things in school. We were good, they tell you, we created bridges and fountains. The rest is ignored because it is not taught.

My lists: the restaurants and the hospitals.

I'd never been to the restaurants, but as a child I dreamed about those places as glamorous.

There was the *Pergola* near the U.S. Embassy, the *Cappuccetto Nero* where you could always find Italians, even after losing the colonies, the Fiat bar, the *Croce del Sud*, the *Caffè Nazionale*, the *Lucciola*, the Juba Hotel and the *Azan* near the Casa d'Italia building. On the other hand, I'd been to the hospitals frequently: sooner or later somebody always ends up in the hospital. There was the Rava, an old hospital for rich Italians; the Forlanini hospital where they treated tuberculosis; the Banaadir hospital for women, built by the Chinese and a group of Italian nuns; and the Digfeer, where they operated on my foot. Yes, I definitely knew the hospitals better than the restaurants.

After two hours of drawing we were exhausted.

"This map is beautiful," I thought.

I was proud, but I didn't show it.

"Mom, does this city exist?" Deq asked Nura.

What to answer?

I would have wanted to hug my nephew and to explain to him that for nineteen years now this city has no longer existed. Neither those schools, nor the homes, nor the neighborhoods, nor anything else.

The war had destroyed everything. Only rubble remained. Now there are different things there. Not those that can be seen on this sheet of drawing paper. Those things on the paper exist only in memories, in old photos, in stories, in black-and-white images on websites. No, nothing exists there anymore. But nobody had the courage to tell him that. You're a child. You're good. Nobody in this room knew how to say something so terrible to a child this good.

"Does this city exist?"

My mother entered from the other room and looked at me. Then she looked at Deq. She looked at my brother, and then at his wife. Then she smiled as only she knows how. She has the whitest teeth.

"It exists," she replied simply. "It's called Mogadishu."

Smiles everywhere.

"Is it your city, Aunt Igiaba?"

I didn't know what to reply. The question was sudden. Unexpected. A counterattack. I couldn't get back to my end of the field. Embarrassment.

My mother shook her head.

She was reflecting.

"It's not enough," she told me, almost grumbling.

"What?"

"This," and she indicated a point somewhere between her and the horizon.

"This what?" I asked, a bit miffed.

"*Maabka*, the map." Her words mixed her mother tongue and Italian. "It's not enough to make your city."

"No? Really?" I wasn't sure if I asking a question or making an affirmation.

"Definitely not. What you did on this map is not your city. You can't lie to a child."

"I don't want to lie to a child. I could never. But..."

"But...?"

"..."

“Let’s say that it is in a certain sense. But at the same time it is not. Do you understand, daughter?” And she sweetly caressed my head.

Even today I’m not sure I truly understood her words. My face had become a question mark suspended in the void.

Is it my city?

Is it not?

I was at a crossroads.

My mom said some other words. I didn’t catch them all. I was distracted. But the last statement was a punch in the gut. A knockout blow from which I didn’t know if I could get back up. Actually, in that moment, I didn’t want to get back up. My mother, however, with her usual sweetness spurred me on. She knew that she’d hit me hard. But her intent was not to destroy or to humiliate me. She had delivered me that blow because she knew that she couldn’t do anything else. She wanted me to wake up, so that I would truly start to live.

“You need to complete the map. You’re missing inside it.” I was unable to react.

Inside me there was the inexcusable wish to give up. I would have liked to linger in my knocked-out state. Not get up. Beat around the bush. Better to stay down, finished, defeated. Just vegetate.

Better?

Something in the depths of my conscience cried out.

“My daughter, you need to complete it,” my mom repeated.

“From where do I start?” is what I would have wanted to ask, but didn’t. I knew that I needed to find the answer for myself. I was stuck.

Why was this happening to me?

What am I? Who am I?

I am black and Italian.

But I am also Somali and black.

So am I Afroitalian? Italoafrican? Second-generation? Or of some indefinable generation? *Meel kale*? An annoyance? A black Saracen? A filthy Negress?

It’s not politically correct to call her that, somebody murmured from the control room. Well then, what would you call me?

Ok, I got it, you would say colored. Politically correct, you say. I find it insignificant, humanly speaking. What color are we talking about? Black? Or rather brownish? Cinnamon or chocolate? Coffee? Orzo served in an espresso cup?

It appears I’m a crossroads. A bridge, a tightrope-walker, always balancing but never actually doing so. In the end I am only my own story. I am myself and my feet.

Yes, my feet...

I remembered my feet on a not particularly interesting Roman afternoon, months after the meal on Barack Street. Maybe I was bored or pensive. My distracted gaze settled on my lower extremities, and I was struck by a revelation. Only then did I understand clearly what to do with the map. I hadn’t forgotten what Momma Kadija had said to me. In my heart I knew that it needed to be completed. Otherwise I would have ruined everything. I would have betrayed myself first and foremost, as well as the ones I love.

It wasn't easy to understand what to do. It took me awhile. However, once I understood I rushed over to Mrs. Cho's: originally from Wenzhou, she sells everything for 1 euro at the back of her house. I was almost gasping as I hurried there, and arrived slightly out of breath. I bought three packs of Post-its and got started. There was a gentle breeze that day. The sunshine provided an illusion of spring. The birds chirped happily, like in some Disney animated film. The world seemed bucolic and serene. Only my heart, which was beating hard, was out of synch. It felt as if I had just finished running a marathon, like [the great Ethiopian Olympic champion] Abebe Bikila. And maybe my heart was right: in fact I too was a marathon runner. It was just that my course was twelve times the circumnavigation of the Earth. Twelve times the voyage of Magellan.

Once I got home, I placed the Post-its on the table. Then I frantically began to search for the map that my brother Abdul, Cousin O, and I had laid out together on Barack Street. I didn't remember exactly where I had stuck it, the work of that odd afternoon, but I had faith that I would find it within an hour. And in fact, after rummaging around for a while, so I did.

The map had seen better days, it was full of folds and wrinkles, or *ciancicata*, as the Romans would say in their dialect. I smoothed it out with my hands as best I could. Then I grabbed a clothesline and I strung it up in a corner of my studio apartment. Using three ladybug-shaped clothespins, I hung up the map like a freshly washed skirt.

Once it was nicely spread out, I gave that damn map a good look. I felt almost defiant. There was the Mogadishu that we didn't remember anymore. There were Abdul and Cousin O with their loves, their passions, their quarrels, the classes they cut, their acts of rebellion. If I brought my nostrils close to the sheet of drawing paper I could smell the aroma of coffee with ginger and the scent rising from plates filled with *beer iyo muufo*. What happiness in all that fragrant food! But if I drew near the map, an unpleasant odor would surface as well. There were septic pits overflowing with human excrement, and the carcass of some camel who had died of disease and been abandoned on the side of the road. This vile odor of death was compensated for by the perfumes that Somali women used, and that radiated from the sheet of paper in a blaze of infinite joy. I was somewhere on this map too, hidden in some nook or cranny. I was small and pimply, a little bit fat, with a hesitant air that I always had in those days long past in beautiful Mogadishu. I was underground. Hidden. Sometimes I acted like an out-of-towner, and sometimes like a local. I played a number of roles: I was fullback and striker; an African and a European.

I was not born in those streets. I didn't grow up there. I wasn't given my first kiss there. The place never deeply disappointed me. But even so, I still felt as if those streets were mine. I too had traversed them and I too claimed them for my own. I claimed the alleyways, the statues, the few streetlamps. I too had something in common with Cousin O and Abdul. Of course their experiences and my own weren't comparable. But I claimed that map forcefully, like I will claim my last day of life. It was mine just as it was theirs, that lost Mogadishu. It was mine, mine, mine.

And it was here that the Post-its I'd bought from Mrs. Cho—who sells everything for 1 euro—came into play. I didn't want a sheet of drawing paper: I wanted something temporary and modular. The Post-its seemed perfect for this purpose. I grabbed an orange one. A warm and cozy color, a color that brings good luck. Ideal for starting an adventure. I wrote in big block letters: ROME.

On others I wrote names of neighborhoods, *piazze*, and monuments: the Olympic stadium, Trastevere, Termini train station and so on. I stuck them all around my paper Mogadishu. Then I, who don't know how to draw, attempted to draw my memories. I worked for hours. I traced lines, shapes, shadows. I cut out newspapers. I jotted down inscriptions. The final result looked like a drawing made by a little girl, and was funny to see. It was, frankly, rather a mess. But the map was finally complete. Now my mom would have nothing to criticize.