

A PROCLIVITY FOR SUING*

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He was frail, emaciated and gaunt from years of harsh life that had made him trek the breadth and length of the Somali *deex*. It was a Friday morning when he came to visit us in our suburban village, in one of the corners of the capitol. We used to call our corner a dark alley because all the surrounding, more affluent areas were lit, while our village, in the heart of the town, was thirsty for electricity. An older friend of mine used to call it Harlem. I didn't understand the meaning at the time, but nevertheless it sounded exotically appropriate. Harlem. My friend had learned about Harlem from an old Mennonite teacher. Sometimes I pronounced it as Harram, the Arabic word for "sinful or forbidden". Harram, excuse me Harlem, was in America and it sure sounded like a sinful place, a forbidden corner in the midst of the Big Apple. The Apple, according to my knowledgeable friend, was another name for New York. Anyway, it intrigued me that our corner had similar characteristics with other corners of the world. After all, we weren't alone living in the midst of darkness, squalor and filth. There was something international about squalor and filth-dwelling, I reasoned.

Each Friday, well let me put it this way, every other Friday, my parents used to invite all, or almost all the elders of the village to a *bun* session. Coffee beans were cooked in seething hot sesame oil or butter ghee. The eldest man was to eat first. Most of the time it was Grandfather Hussein. Well to be sure he wasn't my grandfather, but we were told to call him that out of respect. Grandfather Hussein was in his early

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80's and childless. Actually, he never got married which is what made most of the community, I mean those who were old enough to gossip and talk about certain stuff, fear him. It was also reported that he never lost his first baby teeth. Some kind of mystery was associated with that, but it was always beyond our youthful understanding. I personally liked Grandfather Hussein a lot and that, I think, was why my mother always invited him to our house.

This particular Friday, though, Grandfather Hussein wasn't anywhere to be seen. Perhaps, I thought, someone else had invited him to another house. He was such a good-natured person that you couldn't dislike him. This Friday, my mother told me to spread out the praying mat for a new visitor. When he sat down, he told me to come close to him and he started patting my hair. At first it didn't feel strange or funny, but after some time, I thought something wasn't right. His hand would fall on two different parts of my head at the same time, or that was what I thought was happening. I wasn't courageous enough to look up as I didn't want him to notice my uneasy feelings. Then a cup of tea was brought to him, but for some strange reason my mother put the cup on the floor. That was very unlike my mother. At least, she never put the cup on the floor for Grandfather Hussein. Well, I thought, what's in the grass will have to come to the open. Why don't I wait and see. It was rude, at least that was what we were told, to make a visitor uncomfortable with either our words or our actions. The cup lay just where my mother had put it for a long time, which, too was unusual. Grandfather Hussein and, even the other visitors, and believe me there were so many of them, didn't; let their tea cool off for so long. Grandfather Hussein would grasp his cup with both hands taking it directly from my mother's hands and then hold it up to his temples. I thought our guest this Friday must either have had a cup of tea earlier or wasn't an avid tea drinker. Again this was a strange thing to understand because most people in my community, especially the elderly, drink many cups of tea each day with lots of sugar. *Rag waa shaah, dumarna waa sheeko*. To satisfy my curiosity, I was tempted a couple of times to remind him of the cup of tea, but I thought perhaps my mother or even my father, that is if he comes home from the house of his junior wife this early, will remind the visitor of his cup of tea. And then, I thought, perhaps Mother forgot

to put the necessary spices in the tea. You know how old people are sometimes meticulous about what they drink. Perhaps, not able to smell the cardamon, ginger, etc. from his tea, he let it sit on the floor untasted lest he "disturb" his host, who should have the sense to understand that this was the reason he didn't drink it in the first place.

About half an hour later, my mother brought the *bun* in a wooden dish with a wooden spoon. No sooner did she put it on the floor than our visitor held the wooden spoon in his right hand. So I was right. Aw liya Allah! He couldn't hold on to the spoon. Each time that he tried to dip it in the bowl, he made a mess. I was really terrified to watch him struggle with the spoon. I didn't keep my gaze on him, as that would invite my mother's disapproval. And you wouldn't want my mother to be mad at you! She might even throw whatever is in her hands at you. Allah, how good she was at feinting with the left hand. Fear, however, didn't make me stop looking at him with some stealing glances from the corner of my eyes. I couldn't understand why my mother didn't help him eat his food, or even let me help him eat. I thought my mother didn't like our visitor this Friday. But then why invite him in the first place?

When he ate what he could, my mother gave him some money and he left showering our house with blessings. He was sweating profusely, which was reasonable, I thought, after what he had gone through to feed himself.

Later in the day, in the shade of our verandah, my mother, sensing my curiosity, explained to me certain things about the visitor. As a young man, Aw Maalin (that was his name) had been a very energetic person. His father Mahadalle had a lot of children, both male and female. My mother's mother was one of his many daughters. Aw Maalin, like the rest of his brothers, looked after the camels and cattle of his father. But this visitor was different from the rest of his peers. As a young man he would always sneak off to the nearest town and visit the colonial courts in session. He, of course, didn't understand the language in use, but he was greatly fascinated with the procedures he witnessed. Soon after that, he developed a proclivity for suing other people. The practice got out of hand after the death of his father. Rumor has it, that one evening his mother tried to stop him from taking to court one of her relatives. Aw Maalin was so

involved with the case that he forgot who he was talking to. With one blow, he hurled his own mother on to the ground and proceeded with his case, which he won. It was said that on the third morning after that incident, he woke up with both his hands shaking. It was a form of paralysis that never left him ever since.

Desperate for money to live on, he became an even more compulsive suer. It was reported that one day his oldest son fell from a tree and broke his arm. The poor boy came crying in excruciating pain, to his father. When he told him of his injury, Aw Maalin asked the kid:

Who threw you from the tree?

No one.

Who was with you on the top of the tree?

No one.

Who was playing on the ground below?

No one.

Was there any one in the vicinity?

No.

Could you see anyone looking in your direction , even from afar?

No.

Impatient with his son's answer, Aw Maalin shouted at him, "Couldn't you even name one of the people in this large community as the culprit. May you die for death is what you deserve."

After that incident, no one in the community wanted to have anything to do with him or his household. The neighborhood kids were warned by their parents to keep away from Aw Maalin's children. I guess his house became

another Harlem, where kids from other neighborhoods weren't allowed by their parents to venture or stray in to.

Many people thought that Aw Maalin would refrain from practicing this alien tradition once its propagators left this country for good. But it wasn't to be. In fact, on the night of independence, it was rumored that he was scheming to renew a case which the outgoing Italian Magistrate had ruled against him. As one of his neighbors once commented. *Ayaxteg, eelna reeb*. "Don't be fooled by the migration of the locust. They leave their larva behind."

Five years ago, in our corner, while on vacation from my boarding school, I heard older men at a tea shop talking about what had become of Aw Maalin. He died peacefully in his bed in the same dark corner of the city. But what intrigued them was his last words, addressed to his children. "You remember the brown calf that was run over by Geedi's lorry...(hiccup)..I was to appear in court the day after tomorrow...(hiccup)..all the legal documents are in my white jacket...(hiccup)...if you are my legitimate sons, don't let him off the hook, fight to the last."