

# NOMAD

A Personal Journey Through the  
Clash of Civilizations

'This woman is a major  
hero of our times'

RICHARD DAWKINS

**AYAAN HIRSI ALI**

*Author of* INFIDEL

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# NOMAD

AYAAN HIRSI ALI

*A Personal Journey  
Through the Clash  
of Civilizations*

FOURTH ESTATE

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## **Dedication**

To Chris DeMuth, my surrogate abeh — a friend, a mentor, a guide to American life — with respect  
and love

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## **Epigraph**

*Narrated 'Imran bin Husain:*

*The Prophet said, "I looked at Paradise and found poor people forming the majority of its inhabitants and I looked at Hell and saw that the majority of its inhabitants were women."*

Hadith — Sahih Bukhari 4:464

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## Introduction

All my life I have been a nomad. I have wandered, rootless. Every place I have settled in, I have been forced to flee; every certainty I have been taught, I have cast aside.

I was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1969. When I was very small my father was jailed for his role in the political opposition to the brutal dictatorship. Then he escaped from prison and fled into exile. When I was eight my mother took my siblings and me to Saudi Arabia to live with him. A year later we were expelled from Saudi Arabia and moved to Ethiopia, where my father's opposition group was headquartered. After about eighteen months there, we moved again, to Kenya.

Every change of country threw me unprepared into whole new languages and sharply different habits of mind. Each time, I made a child's forlorn, often vain attempts to adapt. The one constant in my life was my mother's unbending attachment to Islam.

My father left Kenya, and us, when I was eleven. I didn't see him again until I was twenty-one. During his absence I had become a fervent and pious Muslim, under the influence of a schoolteacher. When he also returned, for eight months, to Somalia, where I experienced the birth of the civil war and the chaos and brutality of the great exodus of 1991, when half the country was displaced and 350,000 people died.

When I was twenty-two my father ordered me to marry a relative, a stranger to me, who lived in Toronto, Canada. On my way from Kenya to Canada I was supposed to stop off in Germany, where he would pick up my visa to Canada and then continue my journey. Instead a kind of instinctive desperation prompted me to bolt. I took a train to Holland. This voyage was even more wrenching than the other journeys I had made, and my heart pounded with the implications of what I was doing and what my father and my clan would do when they discovered that I had run away.

In Holland I discovered the kindness of strangers. I was nothing to these people, and yet they fed and housed me, taught me their language, and allowed me to learn whatever I wanted to. Holland worked in a way that was different from any other country in which I had lived. It was peaceful, stable, prosperous, tolerant, generous, deeply good. As I learned Dutch I began to formulate an almost impossibly ambitious goal: I would study political science to find out why *this* society, although it appeared to me to be godless, *worked* when every society I had lived in, no matter how Muslim it claimed to be, was rotten with corruption, violence, and self-centered guile.

For a long time I teetered between the clear ideals of the Enlightenment that I learned about at university and my submission to the equally clear dictates of Allah that I feared to disobey. Working my way through university as a Dutch-Somali translator for the Dutch social services, I met many Muslims in difficult circumstances, in homes for battered women, prisons, special education classes, but never connected the dots — in fact I sought to avoid connecting the dots — so I could not see the connection between their belief in Islam and their poverty, between their religion and the oppression of women and the lack of free, individual choice.

It was, ironically, Osama bin Laden who freed me of those blinkers. After 9/11 I found it impossible to ignore his claims that the murderous destruction of innocent (if infidel) lives was consistent with the Quran. I looked in the Quran, and I found it to be so. To me this meant that I could no longer be a Muslim. In fact I realized then that I had not been a Muslim for a long time.

Speaking out about such matters, I began to receive death threats. I was also asked to run for the Dutch Parliament as a member of the free-market Liberal Party. When I became a member of

Parliament, being young and black and female — and often accompanied by a bodyguard — I was very visible. But I was protected; my friends and colleagues were not. After the film director Theo van Gogh and I made a movie depicting how Islam crushes women, Theo was assassinated by a Muslim fanatic, a twenty-six-year-old man who had been born in Morocco and brought to Amsterdam by his parents.

I wrote a memoir, *Infidel*, about my experiences. I described how lucky I felt to have escaped places where people live in tribes and where the affairs of men are conducted according to the dictates and traditions of faith, how glad I was to live in a place where people of both sexes live equally as citizens. I related the random events that made my childhood so erratic; my mother's volatile temper; my father's absence; the caprices of dictators; how we coped with diseases, natural disasters, and wars. I described my arrival in Holland and my first impressions of life in a place where people are not the subjects of tyrants or governed by the dictates of the clan's bloodline but are citizens of governments they elect.

I touched on — but only touched on — my parallel and equally important mental journey. I described some of the questions that formed in my mind, the baby steps I took to make sense of this new world that I had entered, and the experiences that made me question my faith in Islam and the mores of my parents.

When I was writing *Infidel* I imagined that my travels were over. I thought that I was in Holland to stay, that I had taken root in its rich soil and would never have to uproot myself again. But I was wrong. I did have to leave. I came to America — like many before me — in search of an opportunity to build a life and a livelihood in freedom and in safety, a life that would be an ocean away from all the strife I had witnessed and the inner conflict I had suffered. This book, *Nomad*, explains why I chose America.

Readers of *Infidel* all over the world have offered me a great deal of support and encouragement. But they have also asked me a number of questions that I did not address in that book. They asked about the rest of my family. They asked about the experiences of other Muslim women. Time and again I heard the question: How typical was your experience? Are you in any way representative? *Nomad* answers that question. It is not only about my own life as a wanderer in the West; it is also about the lives of many immigrants to the West, the philosophical and very real difficulties of people, especially women, who live in a tightly closed traditional Muslim culture within a broadly open Western culture. It is about how Islamic ideals clash with Western ideals. It is about the clash of civilizations that I and millions of others have *lived* and continue to live.

When I moved to the United States and began again the process of anchoring myself in a new country, I was assailed by a new and intense homesickness that followed the death of my father in London. Reconnecting with my extended family — cousins and my own half sister — who live in the United States, the UK, and elsewhere, I found them tragically unsteady on their feet. One has AIDS, another has been indicted for attempting to murder her husband, and a third sends all the money he makes back home to Somalia to feed the clan. They all claim to be loyal to the values of our tribe and of Allah. They are permanent residents and citizens of the Western countries where they live, but their hearts and minds lie elsewhere. They dream of a time in Somalia that never existed: a time of peace, love, and harmony. Will they ever take root where they are? It seems unlikely. My discovery of these troubles is one of the subjects of *Nomad*.

So what, you may be thinking. Doesn't every culture have its dysfunctional families? Indeed, filmakers in Hollywood, dysfunctional Jewish and Christian families make for great entertainment. But I believe that the dysfunctional Muslim family constitutes a real threat to the very fabric of Western life.



The family is the crucible of human values. It is in the family that children are groomed practice and promote the norms of their parents' culture. It is in the family that a cycle of loyalties established and passed on to future generations. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we understand the dynamics of the Muslim family, for they hold the key to (among other things) the susceptibility of so many young Muslim men to Islamic radicalism. It is above all through families that conspiracy theories travel from the mosques and madrassas of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to the living rooms of homes in Holland, France, and America.

Many people in Europe and the United States dispute the thesis that we are living through a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. But a radical minority of Muslims firmly believes that Islam is under siege. This minority is committed to winning the holy war it has declared against the West. It wants ultimately to restore a theocratic caliphate in Muslim countries and impose it on the rest of the world. A larger group of Muslims, most of them in Europe and America, believes that acts of terror committed by fellow Muslims will unleash a Western backlash against all Muslims indiscriminately. (There is in fact little evidence to suggest that such a backlash is happening, but despite this lack of evidence, the perception among Muslim immigrants persists and is fanned by radicals.) With this collective feeling of being persecuted, many Muslim families living in the West insulate themselves in ghettos of their own making. Within those ghettos the agents of radical Islam cultivate their message of hatred and seek foot soldiers to fight as martyrs for their distorted worldview. Unhappy, disoriented youths in dysfunctional immigrant families make perfect recruits to such a cause. With continuing immigration from the Muslim world and a significantly higher birth rate in Muslim families, this a phenomenon we ignore at our peril.

As an insider, I can illuminate the problem simply by relating the stories of my formative years which include stories of my siblings and other relatives. In *Nomad* I try to describe how, in the most intimate sphere of family, my father and mother related or failed to relate to one another; the expectations they had of their children; their philosophy of parenting; the identity crisis they bequeathed to their children; their conflicted views toward sexuality, money, and violence; and above all, the role of religion in misshaping our family life.

There are times when I wonder what I would have done if my father had not left us in Kenya. If he had stayed, I would have been married off at a much earlier age and would never have had the courage or opportunity to flee in search of a better life. If my family had never left Somalia or if my mother had gotten her way and kept me at home instead of sending me to school, the seeds of my rebellion might not have taken root, seeds that inspired me to imagine a life for myself that was different from the one that I was accustomed to and different from the life my parents had in store for me. So many circumstances and decisions in my life were not in my control, and only in hindsight do I see the opportunities that allowed me to take control of my life.

I found out the hard way that lingering between the two value systems, straddling the gap between the West and Islam, living a life of ambiguity — with an outward presentation of modernity and self-reliance and an inward clinging to tradition and dependence on the clan — stunts the process of becoming one's own person. I felt great mental anguish at the prospect of leaving my father to face the wrath of our clan after I escaped; I was in a state of mental torture as I contemplated the consequences of my leaving Islam, consequences that would not fall on me but on my parents and other relatives. I suffered many moments of weakness when I too entertained the idea of giving up my needs and sacrificing my personal happiness for the peace of mind of my parents, siblings, and clan.

My nomadic journey, in other words, has above all been mental — even the last stage of the journey, from Holland to the United States. It was a journey not just over thousands of miles, but a journey through time, through hundreds of years. It was a journey from Africa, a place where people

are members of a tribe, to Europe and America, where people are citizens (though they think of citizenship in quite distinct ways from country to country). There were many misunderstandings, expectations, and disappointments along the way, and I learned many lessons. I learned that it is one thing to say farewell to tribal life; it is quite another to practice the life of a citizen, which so many members of my family have failed to do. And they are by no means alone.

Today close to a quarter of all people in the world identify themselves as Muslim, and the top ten refugee-producing nations in the world are also Muslim. Most of those displaced peoples are heading toward Europe and the United States. The scale of migration from Muslim countries is almost certain to increase in the coming years because the birth rate in those countries is so much higher than in the West. The “problem family” — people like my relatives — will become more and more common unless Western democracies understand better how to integrate the newcomers into our societies: how to turn them into citizens.

I see three main barriers to this process of integration, none of them peculiar to my family. The first is Islam’s treatment of women. The will of little girls is stifled by Islam. By the time they menstruate they are rendered voiceless. They are reared to become submissive robots who serve in the house as cleaners and cooks. They are required to comply with their father’s choice of a mate, and after the wedding their lives are devoted to the sexual pleasures of their husband and to a life of childbearing. Their education is often cut short when they are still young girls, and thus as women they are wholly unable to prepare their own children to become successful citizens in modern Western societies. Their daughters repeat the same pattern.

Some girls comply. Others lead a double life. Some run away and fall victim to prostitution and drugs. A few make their way on their own, as I did, and may even reconcile with their families. Each story is different, but the common factor is that Muslim women have to contend with much greater family control of their sexuality than women from other religious communities. This, in my view, is the biggest obstacle to the path of successful citizenship — not just for women, but also for the sons they rear and the men those sons become.

The second obstacle, which may seem trivial to some Western readers, is the difficulty many immigrants from Muslim countries have in dealing with money. Islamic attitudes toward credit and debt and the lack of education of Muslim women about financial matters means that most new immigrants arrive in the West wholly unprepared for the bewildering range of opportunities and obligations presented by a modern consumer society.

The third obstacle is the socialization of the Muslim mind. All Muslims are reared to believe that Muhammad, the founder of their religion, was perfectly virtuous and that the moral strictures he left behind should never be questioned. The Quran, as “revealed” to Muhammad, is considered infallible; it is the true word of Allah, and all its commands must be obeyed without question. This makes Muslims vulnerable to indoctrination in a way that followers of other faiths are not. Moreover, the violence that is endemic in so many Muslim societies, ranging from domestic violence to the incessant celebration of holy war, adds to the difficulty of turning people from that world into Western citizens.

I can sum up the three obstacles to the integration of people like my own family in three words: sex, money, and violence.

In the last part of *Nomad* I suggest some remedies. The West tends to respond to the social failures of Muslim immigrants with what can be called the racism of low expectations. This Western attitude is based on the idea that people of color must be exempted from “normal” standards of behavior. A well-meaning class of people holds that minorities should not share all of the obligations that the majority must meet. In liberal, democratic countries the majorities are white and most minorities are people

color. But most Muslims, like all other immigrants, migrate to the West not to be locked up in minority, but to search for a better life, one that is safe and predictable and that holds the prospect of better income and the opportunity of a good quality education for their children. To achieve this, believe, they must learn to give up some of their habits, dogmas, and practices and acquire new ones.

There are many good men and women in the West who try to resettle refugees, scold their fellow citizens for not doing more, donate money to philanthropic organizations, and strive to eliminate discrimination. They lobby governments to exempt minorities from the standards of behavior of Western societies; they fight to help minorities preserve their cultures, and they excuse their religious practices from critical scrutiny. These people mean well, I have no doubt. But I believe that their well-intentioned activism is now a part of the very problem they seek to solve. To be blunt, their efforts to assist Muslims and other minorities are futile because, by postponing or at best prolonging the process of their transition to modernity — by creating the illusion that one can hold on to tribal norms and at the same time become a successful citizen — the proponents of multiculturalism lock subsequent generations born in the West into a no-man's-land of moral values. What comes packaged in the compassionate language of acceptance is really a cruel form of racism. And it is all the more cruel because it is expressed in sugary words of virtue.

I believe there are three institutions in Western society that could ease the transition into Western citizenship of these millions of nomads from the tribal cultures they are leaving. They are institutions that can compete with the agents of jihad for the hearts and minds of Muslims.

The first is public education. The European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century gave birth to schools and universities run on the principles of critical thinking. Education was aimed at helping the masses emancipate themselves from poverty, superstition, and tyranny through the development of their cognitive abilities. With the spread of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, access to such reason-based institutions steadily expanded. Children from all social backgrounds were taught not only math, geography, science, and the arts, but also the social skills and the disciplines required to achieve success in the world beyond the classroom. Literature expanded and challenged their imaginations so that they could empathize with characters from other times and places. The public education was geared toward grooming citizens, not preserving the separateness of tribe, the sanctity of the faith, or whatever happened to be the prejudice of the day.

Today, however, many schools and campuses in the West have opted to be more “considerate” of the faith, customs, and habits of the immigrant students they find in their classrooms. Out of misguided politeness they refrain from openly challenging the beliefs of Muslim children and their parents. Textbooks gloss over the fundamentally unjust rules of Islam and present it as a peaceful religion. Institutions of reason must cast off these self-imposed blinkers and reinvest in developing the ability to think critically, no matter how impolite some people may find the results.

The second institution that can and must do more is the feminist movement. Western feminists should take on the plight of the Muslim woman and make it their own cause. Their aim should be to help the Muslim woman find her voice. Western feminists have a wealth of experience and resources at their disposal. There are three goals they must aspire to in helping their Muslim sisters. The first is to ensure that Muslim girls are free to complete their education; the second is to help them gain ownership of their own bodies and therefore their sexuality; and the third is to make sure that Muslim women have the opportunity not only to enter the workforce but also to stay in it. Unlike Muslim women in Muslim countries and Western women in the past, Muslim women in the West face specific constraints imposed on them by their families and communities. It is not enough to classify these problems as “domestic violence”; they are domestic in practice but legal and cultural in nature. There should be campaigns dedicated to exposing the special circumstances and restrictions of Muslim women and the dangers they face in the West; to educate Muslim men on the importance of women

emancipation and education and to punish them when they use violence; to protect Muslim women from physical harm.

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The third and final institution I call on to rise to this challenge is the community of Christian churches. I myself have become an atheist, but I have encountered many Muslims who say they need a spiritual anchor in their lives. I have had the pleasure of meeting Christians whose concept of God is far cry from Allah. Theirs is a reformed and partly secularized Christianity that could be a very useful ally in the battle against Islamic fanaticism. This modern Christian God is synonymous with love. His agents do not preach hatred, intolerance, and discord; this God is merciful, does not seek state power, and sees no competition with science. His followers view the Bible as a book full of parables, not direct commands to be obeyed. Right now, there are two extremes in Christianity, both of which are a liability to Western civilization. The first consists of those who damn the existence of other groups. They take the Bible literally and reject scientific explanations for the existence of man and nature in the name of “intelligent design.” Such fundamentalist Christian groups invest a lot of time and energy in converting people. But much of what they preach is at odds with the core principles of the Enlightenment. At the other extreme are those who would appease Islam — like the spiritual head of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who holds that the implementation of Shari’a in the UK is inevitable. Those who adhere to a moderate, peaceful, reformed Christianity are not as active as the first group nor as vocal as the second. They should be. The Christianity of love and tolerance remains one of the West’s most powerful antidotes to the Islam of hate and intolerance. Even Muslims find Jesus Christ to be a more attractive and humane figure than Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

My time as a nomad is coming to an end. My final destination has turned out to be the United States, as it has been for so many millions of wanderers for over two hundred years. America is now my home. For better or worse, I share in the destiny of other Americans, and I would like to repay the generosity in welcoming me to their unique free society by sharing with them the insights I have gained through my years as a tribal Muslim nomad.

The message of *Nomad* is clear and can be stated at the outset: The West urgently needs to compete with the jihadis, the proponents of a holy war, for the hearts and minds of its own Muslim immigrant populations. It needs to provide education directed at breaking the spell of the infallible Prophet, to protect women from the oppressive dictates of the Quran, and to promote alternative sources of spirituality.

The contents of *Nomad*, like those of *Infidel*, are largely subjective. I make no claims to an exclusive possession of the one and only solution to becoming a successful citizen. Human nature, being what it is, does not lend itself to neat categories of “assimilable” and “unassimilable.” There is no ready-made manual containing a recipe for an easy and hurdle-free reconciliation with modernity. Each individual is different and must contend with his or her unique set of opportunities and constraints. The same applies to families and communities faced with the twin challenges of adopting a new way of life while at the same time remaining true to the traditions of their forefathers and faiths.

In the end, then, this remains a very personal book, a kind of reckoning with my own roots. You might say the book is addressed to Sahra, the little sister I left behind in the world that I escaped. But it is also the conversation I would like to have had with my family, especially my father, who once understood and even propagated the modern life I now lead, before he fell back into a trance of submission to Allah. It is the conversation I would like to have had with my grandmother, who taught me to honor our bloodline, come what may.

While writing this book I constantly had in mind my brother’s son, Jacob, growing up in Nairobi

and Sahra's baby daughter, Sagal, who was born in a bubble of Somalia in England. I hope that she will grow straight and strong and healthy — but also, above all, free.

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**PART I**

**A PROBLEM FAMILY**

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## CHAPTER 1

### **My Father**

When I walked into the Intensive Care Unit of the Royal London Hospital to see my father, I feared I might have come too late. He was sprawled across the hospital bed, his mouth eerily agape, and the machines that were attached to him were many and menacing. They beeped and ticked, and the lines that rapidly rose and fell on their monitors all seemed to be indicating a rapid countdown to his death.

“Abeh,” I yelled at the top of my voice. “Abeh, it’s me, Ayaan.”

I squeezed his hand and anxiously kissed his forehead, and my father’s eyes flew open. He smiled and the warmth of his gaze and his smile radiated through the whole room. I put my palms over his right hand and he squeezed them and tried to speak, to force out at least a word or two. But he could only wheeze and gasp for breath. He strained to sit up, but he couldn’t lift his body.

He was covered with white sheets, and it looked as if he were tied to the bed. Bald, he looked much smaller than I remembered. There was a terrible tube in his throat that was giving him oxygen through a ventilator; another led from his kidney to a dialysis machine, and yet another mess of tubes went into his wrist. I sat beside him and stroked his face and told him, “Abeh, Abeh, it’s all right. Abeh, my poor Abeh, you’re so sick.”

He couldn’t answer. Trying to speak, he would fall back, his chest pumping, and the machine that gave him oxygen would hiss and gasp for more air. Then, after resting for a moment or two, he would try again. He indicated with his right hand that he wanted a pen to write with, but he could hardly hold it; his muscles were too weak and he made only scratches on the paper. He was struggling so hard to hold the pen that he began sliding off the bed.

The ward was large, and nurses were bustling about changing sheets and giving medication. I noticed that the doctor had an accent and for a moment thought that he was from Mexico. When I asked where he came from he told me that he was from Spain. The ward was run almost entirely by immigrants. I could not tell the nurses from the doctors, and as I looked around I tried to guess the origins of the members of the medical team, technicians, and cleaners: the Indian Peninsula, black people who I thought were from East or West Africa, people who looked North African, a few women with headscarves over their medical uniforms. If there were any Somali employees in the ward I did not see them, and fortunately they did not see me.

One of the nurses unrolled a plastic smock, tied it around her waist, and asked me to step aside, but my father would not let go of me and I had to pry his fingers from around my hand. The nurse propped him up higher with pillows, staring at me oddly. One of the nurses told me that she had read an article about me in a magazine, so some of them knew who I was. I glanced away and noticed the chart on his bed; it listed my father as Hirsi Magan Abdirahman, although his name is Hirsi Magan Isse.

A young doctor told me that my father had leukemia. He could have lived another year had he not caught an infection, which had become septic. Now, although he was out of the coma that he had fallen into a few days earlier, only the machines were keeping him alive. I asked again and again if my father was in pain, but the doctor said no, he was uncomfortable, but there was no pain.

I asked the doctor if I could take a picture with my father. He refused. He said we needed to ask for the permission of the patient, and the patient was not in any state to make that decision.

In 1992, when I left him in Nairobi, my father was a strong, vital man. He could be fierce, even frightening — a lion, a leader of men. When I was growing up he was my lord, my hero, someone whose absence was mysterious, whose presence I longed for, whose approval meant everything and whose wrath I feared.

Now so many disputes lay between us. I had offended him deeply in 1992 by running away from a Somali man he had chosen for me to marry. He had forgiven me for that; we had spoken together stiffly, on the phone. A decade later I offended him again, when I declared myself an unbeliever and openly criticized Islam's treatment of women. Our last, and worst, conflict was after I made a film about the abuse and oppression of Muslim women, *Submission*, with Theo van Gogh in 2004. After that my father simply would not answer the phone; he would not talk to me. Sometime after Theo was killed, when I had to go into hiding and my phone was taken away from me, I stopped trying to call him. When people asked, I could say only that we were estranged.

I learned he was sick in June 2008, only a few weeks before his death. I had received a message from Marco, my ex-boyfriend in Holland, saying that my cousin Magool in England was looking for me urgently. Magool is not close to my father's family, but she is resourceful. When my half sister Sahra, realized how sick my father was, she asked Magool to try to track me down, and Magool called Marco, the only person she knew to whom I had been close when she and I had last spoken, five years earlier.

I phoned my father at his apartment in a housing development in the East End of London. It was late in the evening where he was, a bright sunny afternoon on the East Coast of America where I was. He was shaking. When he came to the phone he sounded just like himself, strong and excited. At the sound of his voice I felt tears welling in my eyes and I said the only thing I wanted to convey, that I loved him, and I heard his smile, so powerful it seemed to come through the telephone.

"Of course you love me!" he burst out loudly. "And of course I love you! Haven't you seen how parents cuddle and connect with their children? Haven't you been out in nature where you see how animals pet and lick their young? Of course I love you. You are my child."

I told my father how much I wanted to see him, but I explained that it might be difficult to arrange security for a visit to his apartment, which is a mostly immigrant area and overwhelmingly Muslim. To visit such a place without protection would be like a very small insect risking a flight through a roomful of huge spiders' webs; the little bug might get through unnoticed, but if it gets caught the consequences are clear. On the other hand, if I went there *with* police, that would be bound to cause a bad feeling, as if I could not trust my own family.

"Security!" my father cried. "What do you need security for? Allah will protect you against anyone who wants to harm you! No one in our community will lay a finger on you. And besides, our family has never had a reputation for being cowardly! In fact the other day one of our most prominent clan members said that he wanted to debate with you. If you want, I can ask them to put together a delegation and take you to Jeddah, so you can debate him in Saudi Arabia! Why don't you arrange a press conference and say that you are no longer an unbeliever? Tell them that you have returned to Islam and from now on you're a businesswoman!"

I laughed quietly at my father, and for a while I just enjoyed listening to him talk. Then I asked after his health. He said, "You must remember, Ayaan, that our health and our lives are in the hands of Allah. I am on my way to the hereafter. My dear child, what I want you to do is read just one chapter of the Quran. *Laa-uqsim Bi-yawmi-il-qiyaama*."

He recited — in Arabic, of course, though we were speaking Somali — a chapter called "The Resurrection": "I do call to witness the resurrection day; and I do call to witness the self-reproaching spirit; Does man think that we cannot assemble his bones? Nay, we are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers. But man wishes to do wrong in the time in front of him; I



questions, when is the day of resurrection?"

I told my father that I would not lie to him, and that I no longer believed in the example of the Prophet. He cut me off, and his tone became passionate, impatient, then retributive. He read me more verses of the Quran, translating them into Somali, and he listed many examples of people like me who had left Islam but had come back to the faith. He talked about hordes of non-Muslims converting to Islam across the globe, and he told me about the one true god; he warned me not to risk my soul hereafter.

As I listened to him I told myself that this magisterial lecture was from a father expressing his love in the only way he knew. I wanted to believe that the very fact that he was lecturing me meant that, in some deeper sense, he had begun to forgive me for the person I had become. Possibly, however, it was not that. Possibly he was only doing his duty. Living as a Western woman meant I had shed my honor; I wore Western clothes, which to him was no better than if I walked around wearing no clothes at all. Worst of all, I had abjured Islam and written a book with the brazen, triumphant title *Infidel* to proclaim my apostasy. But my father knew that his life was coming to an end, and he wanted to make sure that all his children, despite their errors, were safe on a path to heaven.

I let him talk. I didn't make false promises to convert. If I had, that might have helped him leave in peace, but I couldn't do it, I couldn't lie to him about that. I managed to tell him gently that although I no longer agreed with Islam, I would read the Quran. I did not add that, every time I reread it, I became more critical of its messages.

He broke into a series of supplications: "May Allah protect you, may He bring you back to the straight path, may He take you to Heaven in the hereafter, may Allah bless you and keep you healthy." And at the end of every supplication I responded with the required formula: "*Amin*," May it be so.

After a little while I told my father I had a flight to catch. He didn't ask where to, or why; I couldn't tell that the details of terrestrial matters had little bearing for him now. Then I hung up, with so many more things left unsaid between us, and I almost missed the plane that was taking me to a conference in Brazil on multiculturalism.

At the end of June, after the conference in Brazil, I was scheduled to go to Australia for a colloquium on the Enlightenment. I planned to visit my father in London at the end of the summer. But in mid-August, on my way back from Australia, during a stopover in Los Angeles, I received another phone call from Marco. My father was in a coma.

I called my cousin Magool again, and she gave me the cell phone number of my half sister, Sahra. The last time I'd seen my father's youngest child, in 1992, Sahra was eight or nine years old, a wiry, energetic little kid. I had met her when stopping off in Ethiopia en route from my home in Kenya to Germany. From there, on my father's orders, I was supposed to go on to Canada, to join a man I barely knew, who was a distant cousin and who had become my husband. In those days Sahra lived in Addis Ababa with her mother, who, like my own mother, was still married to my father in spite of his absence. I had played with this little half sister of mine all afternoon, struggling to remember my childhood Amharic, which was the only language Sahra spoke back then and which I too had spoken when I was her age and still lived with my father.

Now, in the summer of 2008, Sahra was twenty-four. She was married and had her own four-month-old daughter. She lived with her mother, my father's third wife.

I didn't tell Sahra that I planned to visit our father in the hospital. It's a hideous thing to write, but I didn't really know if I could trust her with that information. I assume the closest members of my family don't actually want to kill me, but the truth is that I have shamed and hurt them; they have to deal with the outrage that my public statements cause, and undoubtedly some members of my clan do want to kill me for that.

Sahra volunteered the suggestion that if I did go to see Abeh, I should avoid visiting hours, where floods of Somalis would be going to the Royal London Hospital to seek a blessing from my father in order to improve their own chances of getting into heaven. For many, Abeh was a symbol of the battle against President Siad Barre's military regime, a man who had dedicated most of his adult life to overthrowing that regime. It would be the same in the East End of London as it was in Somalia: thousands of many wives, the many children and grandchildren, the elders of the clan and the subclan and the brother subclans, scores and scores of relatives would come to my father to pay their respects. For many of those people I would not be welcome at my father's bedside because I was an unbeliever, an infidel, an avowed atheist, a filthy runaway, and worst of all, a traitor to the clan and to the faith. Some of them would certainly feel that I deserve to die, and to many more my presence would defile my father's deathbed and perhaps even cost him his place in the hereafter.

I felt no such rejection from Sahra, however. She was sweet and hushed, a little conspiratorial, and if by talking with her on the phone I had enrolled her in something clandestine and dangerous.

I needed to fly to London right away. Because this was an urgent, unplanned, purely personal trip, arranging security was going to be complicated, unlike attending a conference, for which everything is officially coordinated with the police weeks ahead of time. I knew it wouldn't be wise just to go accompanied by the gentlemen who usually protect me in America. In Britain these men would not know their way around and would not be allowed to carry weapons. If I were rash in my planning, I might put others as well as myself in danger.

I phoned a number of friends in Europe who I thought might be influential and asked them to try to help me arrange the protection I needed to make the trip. They spent many hours trying to help me, seemingly without success. One friend was told by a British official that as I was born in Somalia, I should ask the Somali Embassy for help; they could approach the Foreign Office to seek security assistance for me. This absurd bureaucratic logic might have been comical in some circumstances, but not in the face of my need to get to London to see my dying father.

When my plane took off for London I still had no idea whether I would have any security protection when it landed. But that no longer mattered; after days of waiting I feared only that I might be too late. I knew that, if my father were to die, I would not be allowed to see his body. He would be whisked away by male relatives to be washed and prepared and buried within twenty-four hours. Women are not allowed to be present at the graveside during a Muslim burial ceremony. It is believed that their presence is disruptive; they might become hysterical, perhaps even hurl themselves into the grave to be with the corpse. It would be unseemly to try to attend.

My father had a contradictory attitude to women. He embraced some modern ideas on literacy and urged his first wife to attend university, and insisted that my sister Haweya and I go to school when my mother resisted the idea. He believed in women's strength and he repeatedly insisted that a woman's role was valuable and important. But as he aged he became more orthodox in his Islamic convictions that we must cover ourselves, marry, and submit to our husbands. Despite his often eccentric views, even my father would not have tolerated seeing a woman at a funeral.

When I arrived at Heathrow Airport in London a large black car from the Dutch Embassy was there to greet me; another, smaller but even safer, held men from Scotland Yard. We drove straight to the hospital. Now, to my relief, my father lay alive before me. Poor Abeh. He was tied to a hospital bed, old, vulnerable, sick. He smiled deeply at me, and dozed, and then he would wake and gasp for air, trying again and again to speak, but nothing came out, only "Ash hah," gasping for breath. Then he would make kissing gestures to me with his lips and hold on to my hand as tightly as he could.

I felt heavy with the burden of everything I had never said to my father and the sheer waste of all the years we had been apart. The only words I could find were trite messages of love, and I said them over and over again. It was too late for anything else.

I hadn't gone to the hospital seeking absolution. I had ceased to believe in the idea that if I did the right thing, such as fulfill my duty to seek forgiveness from my parents and acquire their blessing, my sins would be washed away. Perhaps my presence did not even give him that much pleasure, since he could see that his daughter wore trousers and no headscarf. I went there just for the light in his eyes, for his acknowledgment of me, his love for me and mine for him — a mutual recognition that we had always been precious to each other.

He was using up his last reserves of strength in the effort to tell me something. I will never know what that was. For my father, God was the creator and the sustainer, but God was also ferocious and wrathful. Deep down I understood that on his deathbed my father was terrified that I risked the rage of Allah because I had rejected his faith. Father always taught us that those not forgiven by God will lead a miserable life on earth and eternal fire in the hereafter. But although our beliefs are not reconcilable — and never will be, for they are worlds apart — my father did, I think, forgive me. He ultimately allowed his feelings of fatherly love to transcend his adherence to the demands of his unforgiving God.

Visiting hours were approaching. Soon the streams of Somalis that Sahra had warned me about would begin arriving to see my father, and I couldn't bear the idea of any kind of confrontation. So, painfully, I said good-bye to Abeh.

When the men from Scotland Yard escorted me out of the hospital I found myself standing on Whitechapel Road, the center of the largest Muslim population in Great Britain. A noisy, tarpaulin-covered street market was across the road, crowded with stalls selling lengths of saris, international phone cards, and spicy lamb sandwiches. On the pavement beside me, standing at the bus stop outside the hospital steps, was a collection of women wearing every variety of Muslim covering imaginable, from a pastel headscarf to the complete, thick black *niquaab* that covers you completely, with a veil of black cloth that blanks out your face, even your eyes. These were young, strong women, not doddering old ladies; some of them were pregnant, most of them had several small children, and they were out shopping for their families in the sunlight. Several wore a variation that was new to me: in addition to a long robe and headscarf they had an extra face veil fixed on with Velcro, with two thick black strips of cloth strapped so as to leave barely an inch or so uncovered, just skirting the eyelashes.

The phone booths and the signs for the London Underground were British, but I would not have thought I was in England. I smelled the lunchboxes of my schoolmates at the Muslim Girls' Secondary School in Nairobi, a heady clash of spices and food, and perfumed hair oils. Here again was the noisy bustle of the street and the mixture of people — Somalis and, I guess, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis — crowded at the market.

At the smells alone I felt a tug of longing for the innocence of youth. I don't know if in other cultures that sense of community is as strong, but for someone who has grown up within a clan, that feeling — the smell — of family is very powerful. Yet my longing was mixed with a dread of confrontation. What if somebody in this crowd recognized me, as people sometimes do, and decided to pick a fight? In the eyes of many of them, I am an infidel and a traitor, who goes about unpunished.

My bodyguards and I got back in the car and drove down Whitechapel Road, slowly, in heavy traffic. Seated outside a *halal* fast-food shop was a small woman in a long black robe with a black embroidered beak of cloth tied over her nose and mouth, in the style of Algerian women. Two small children were crying in the buggy beside her, and she was trying to jiggle and comfort them while she lifted her cloth beak to try to eat her pastry modestly underneath it. Her older toddler was wearing

veil too. It was not a face veil, but it covered her hair and shoulders; it was white and lacy and elasticized so it fit snugly over her head. ~~The child couldn't have been older than three.~~

Two shop fronts farther down was a huge mosque, the biggest mosque in London, my escorts told me. A small crowd of men stood outside it, all wearing loose clothing, long beards, and white skullcaps. All these people had left their countries of origin only to band together here, unwilling or unable to let go, where they enforce their culture more strongly even than in Nairobi. Here was the mosque, like a symbolic magnetic north, the force that moved their women to cover themselves so ferociously, the better to separate themselves from the dreadful influence of the culture and values of the country where they have chosen to live.

It was just a glimpse, and yet I felt an instant sense of panic and suffocation. I was right back at the heart of it all: inside the world of veils and blinkers, the world where women must hide their hair and their bodies, must cower to eat in public, and must follow a few steps behind their men on the street. A web of values — of honor and shame and religion — still entangled me together with all those women at the bus stop and almost every other woman along Whitechapel Road that morning. We were all very far from where we had been born, but only I had left behind that culture. They had brought their web of values with them, halfway across the world.

I felt as though I was the only true nomad.

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## CHAPTER 2

### **My Half Sister**

Driving back to Heathrow Airport, I thought back to my first meeting with my half sister, Sahra, in Ethiopia in 1992, when she was eight years old and I was twenty-two and newly married, en route to Europe.

We had ended up speaking in sign language, smiling, holding hands, and misunderstanding one another. Sahra had been a charming little girl, with a bright child's curiosity and my father's way of being physically affectionate. She had sprinted about with the same kind of energy, enthusiasm, and playfulness as my sister Haweya. She was dressed that day in a sleeveless frock, torn and patched up in so many places that I could not help feeling a strong sense of shame that I did not bring her a new dress.

I was not sure whether the state of her frock was the result of poverty or simply acceptance of the Ethiopian approach to children. When we lived in Addis Ababa, most children were dressed in tattered clothes and often seemed neglected by their parents. As a child I considered this Ethiopian neglect to be the epitome of freedom. I wanted to be left alone, to play as many hours of the day and night as I wanted to, rather than be put to work. Sahra's mother seemed as indulgent as mine had been rigid and forbidding.

But it was not only Sahra's frock that was tattered. The apartment was too. We were in a hallway room, separated from the other spaces by a thin cotton sheet that had once been white but now was stained by smoke and dust. The cement compound of the apartment building had once been smooth and even, but now, like many other shared compounds, it had cracks and large and small holes that were filled with little puddles of water. None of the tenants could afford to make repairs, and they did not work together to raise the money to maintain and clean the communal areas. By late afternoon the mosquitoes zoomed and whined by my ears. I decided to marshal my best Arabic and Amharic in a campaign for us to dry the puddles of water.

My stepmother had shrugged her shoulders in charming helplessness. "It is as Allah wills," she said. "The puddles will dry when it stops raining. Allah brings the rains and Allah makes the sun shine."

My father's third wife accepted her life as it came to her. Like my mother, she was passive, but her passiveness was different from my mother's. Both women were steeped in self-pity; both resigned themselves to their circumstances. But my mother cursed, scolded, screamed, demanded, and insulted those she blamed. Sahra's mom smiled and chided; she cast her eyes down and seemed to be content. Whatever the next day brought was Allah's choice, and she saw no point in defying events, her husband, or her God. Every sentence ended with *Inshallah*, "God willing." That was her method of survival.

I did not have the energy or the linguistic skill to suggest that although we could leave to Allah such things as making rain and making the sun shine, perhaps we could dry the puddles ourselves. I had had malaria twice as a child and learned in health education and science classes both in Juja Road and the Muslim Girls' Secondary School that the parasite that causes malaria lays its eggs in standing water. To avoid getting sick we sprayed the mosquitoes and slept under nets, but we also had to dry out all the little puddles and pools of water that collected around our compound and even in the

potholes in the streets around our house. We never succeeded in drying out the water in the neighborhood, of course, but as I grew up I dried our compound in Nairobi with a survivor's zeal and preached to Somali relatives about invisible animals that bred in the water.

Little Sahra and her mother lived a very communal life. Throughout the day people walked in and out of the building and its compound. There was a large stone water pitcher in a corner of the courtyard, and men would come in, scoop some water out in the large aluminum ladle, and drink straight from the ladle. Women used the same pitcher to make tea and fill their cooking pots. At one point that afternoon someone said something about hygiene: "Wash your hands before you use the pitcher. We all drink from it."

"What?" a young man responded with an awkward grin. "Wash hands with what? There is no water left." Indeed, the metal ladle hit the bottom of the stone pitcher with a clank, indicating that it was empty, and the older ladies began pleading and crying out for the younger women to fetch more water. Concern about hygiene was lost in the hubbub.

Everyone was talking, a friendly clamor of gossip and criticism of the *habash*, the Somali word for Ethiopians. Every sentence that everyone spoke was punctuated with "Allah willing" or "For the sake of Allah."

Sitting in the car that was driving me away from what was certainly the last time I would see my father, I thought about what had kept me away from my family, and from him, for so long: the rule that dictates that a man must command obedience from his women, from his wives and daughters - and they must submit to him. If a man's women stray from submission, they damage *him*: his good name, his authority, the sense that he is loyal and strong and true to his word. This belief is part of a larger one that individuals don't matter, that their choices and desires are meaningless, particularly if the individuals are women.

This sense of honor and male entitlement drastically restricts women's choices. A whole culture and its religion weigh down every Muslim, but the heaviest weight falls disproportionately on women's shoulders. We are bound to obey and bound to chastity and shame by Allah and the Prophet and by the fathers and husbands who are our guardians. The women along Whitechapel Road carry the burdens of all the obligations and religious rules that in Islam focus so obsessively on women, more surely as their counterparts in East Africa.

I still felt pained by the shame that I had cast on my father's good name. Because I was an apostate, an unbeliever, because I now lived as a Western woman, I had hurt him and harmed him and even defiled him by my rebellion. But I also knew that my rebellion was necessary, was vital.

Sahra had taken the contrary path. She did not rebel. Magool had told me that Sahra was deeply religious and that she wore the *jilbab*, a long black robe that covers your hair and all your body past your ankles and wrists, but not your face. Sahra's black shroud extended beyond the tips of her fingers and trailed on the ground; she sought with every word and gesture to express her submission to Allah's will and to the authority of men.

The Muslim veil, the different sorts of masks and beaks and *burkas*, are all gradations of mental slavery. You must ask permission to leave the house, and when you do go out you must always hide yourself behind thick drapery. Ashamed of your body, suppressing your desires — what small space in your life can you call your own?

The veil deliberately marks women as private and restricted property, nonpersons. The veil separates women apart from men and apart from the world; it restrains them, confines them, grooms them for docility. A mind can be cramped just as a body may be, and a Muslim veil blinkers both your vision and your destiny. It is the mark of a kind of apartheid, not the domination of a race but of a sex.

As we drove down Whitechapel Road I felt anger that this subjugation is silently tolerated, if not

endorsed, not just by the British but by so many Western societies where the equality of the sexes legally enshrined.

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At the airport I phoned Sahra to tell her that I had come to see our father and was leaving again to go back to the United States. “You are indeed the lucky one!” she said in Somali, laughing at her play on the meaning of my name, Ayaan, “fortunate.” “Ever since you spoke to him on the phone weeks ago, he has not stopped talking about you.”

We spoke a little about the family. I was careful not to say anything she might find offensive. I asked my sister why the hospital had registered my father under a false name, and she answered, “Oh, that’s the name he used when he asked for asylum in Britain.”

We talked about the hospital, and Sahra told me a funny story. When they took my father to the hospital, her mother told the nurses that she was his wife; then his first wife, Maryan Farah, had come for she too now lived in England, and she told them that *she* was his wife. The whole staff seemed amused by the impossible number of people claiming to be his brothers and cousins. I chuckled. “They must think we’re all crazy,” Sahra said. I told her it was probably not the first time the hospital had seen such a thing.

Like her mother, every phrase Sahra spoke seemed to end with *Inshallah*, “If Allah wills it.” At first she sounded well-behaved and highly civilized, but after so many sighs of acceptance and Allah willing, and Sahra’s showering me with Allah’s blessings, I am ashamed to admit that it began to annoy me. I started to distrust her: she was no longer the skipping, happy child I met in 1992.

Now, before our first real conversation was over, Sahra too began trying to bring me back to Islam to persuade me to give up my adopted way of life and join her in tradition and the dictates of Allah. As I listened, I pictured her, this little sister whom I had met only once, sixteen years ago, who was now sitting with her mother and her baby daughter in a flat in a housing project, dressed in layer upon layer of dark cloth.

Sahra has lived in England for years, but she did not take the road that I took, the one that released me from obedience and tradition and took me to Holland and the freedoms of the West. Though geographically she lives in a modern society, she has held on to the old, grim childhood values that place piety and submission to authority above all others. In doing so she has locked herself in poverty, squandering the opportunities that freedom offers her. If I had not bolted from my family, if I had married the man my father had contracted me to, I would probably now be living in the Canadian equivalent of Sahra’s immigrant neighborhood. I might be living just like Sahra: conditioned to live in a prison within a society that is free.

“All you need to do is pray,” Sahra was saying, warming to her task. “You’ll see that Allah will open your heart, and your mind will follow.”

I forced back the urge to share with my young half sister the merits of Enlightenment philosophy, the basis for Western freedom that for her was just a short walk away. I felt emotionally drained and physically tired from the long succession of planes, and I wasn’t in London for a battle of ideas.

“Darling,” I answered, “I’ll think about it.”

During the next few days I spoke with Sahra often. She came to seem like a strange kind of mirror, dressed in her *jilbab*, just as I had once worn a *jilbab* in Nairobi years ago. I could so easily have shared her life. The ideas that had shaped her had shaped me too, and sometimes I wondered whether one can ever truly escape such all-encompassing mental programming.

Of all his many children, Sahra was the child with whom my father spent the most time, to whom

he paid the most attention. She still lives the *baarri* way, the way I was meant to live, as every good Somali girl must. She is obedient and submissive, but she is also conflicted; on the one hand, she wants the approval of our father, her mother, and the community, but on the other hand, she also surely, wants to lead the life that is led by other girls her age who live in England.

This sense of being conflicted must leave her in limbo. She starts a vocational course but doesn't see it through; she begins English lessons but doesn't complete them. She does this because if she were to finish those studies and get a diploma, she could then find a job. But that would surely mean working outside the home; she would be gone for hours and might have to mix with men. She might even find herself tempted to put on makeup and participate in the social life of an office. Such a life is too dangerous: it would attack her basic sense of who she is. Yet by not getting a diploma Sahra has to live with her own dependence. In this renunciation of her mind and skills, however, she derives a bizarre reward of approval for being submissive.

I have shaken off my dependence on that sort of approval. No longer a Muslim, I am relieved of the fear of hell and can choose to indulge in the sins of the world. Sahra has the beautiful certainties of belonging and the terrible submission of self. I suffer the loneliness of gratifying my individualism. Sahra, that of self-denial and submission to the group.

The weight of Sahra's self-denial must be immense. These days in Britain, as all over Europe, Muslim women are demanding that they be allowed to wear the *hijab* at work. More and more wear the full *niqaab*, which covers even your face and eyes. These women believe that their own bodies are so powerfully toxic that even making eye contact with other people is a sin. The extent of self-loathing that this expresses is impossible to exaggerate, and it must be reawakened every time it meets the conflicting urge to work, to go out of the home, to encounter the outside world.

Sahra told me that she wanted to become a lawyer. How on earth did she think that would be possible? In England women lawyers are chic and powerfully feminine, unafraid to confront men. The British legal system in itself is blasphemy to a convinced Muslim, for it seeks to replace Allah's law with man-made ones. She also mentioned an interest in psychology. I wondered how she would fare with Freud while remaining loyal to Muhammad.

Learning the infidel language was surely sinful enough. I remembered a scene in a mosque in 1990, when my sister Haweya and I were briefly living in Mogadishu. It was during Ramadan, and we had joined the Taraweh prayers, a very long series of prayer followed by supplications. In the Mogadishu heat, sitting on hard sisal mats in the women's section, Haweya and I were speaking to each other in English in between the supplications. The women around us expressed genuine shock that we would bring into such a holy place the language of the devil himself. They told us that our prayers did not mean a thing and would gain us no rewards in heaven, for by forcing them to listen to us speak the devil's language we were affecting their own piety.

Our two worlds, Sahra's and mine, coexist in the same city streets, but one is framed above all by the oppression of individuals, especially women, and the other glorifies individuality. Can those two sets of values ever be reconciled within Sahra, between her and her daughter, or on the streets of European cities? Will she ever understand that home is where she is, instead of an imagined past in a Somalia that is no longer even a whole country, riven as it is by war? For how long will Western societies whose roots drink from the rational sources of the Enlightenment, continue to tolerate the spread of Sahra's way of life, like ivy on their trunks, an alien and possibly lethal growth?

Perhaps Sahra had been there, among the crowd of women standing at the bus stop outside the hospital. She would have been under her *jilbab*, so I would never have recognized her.

Sahra's baby daughter, Sagal, was born in England. She may grow up to be a successful, self-reliant career woman. With luck, good schools, patient educators, and personal resourcefulness and



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