

1

ADUA

I am Adua, daughter of Zoppe. Today I found the deed to Labo Dhegax, our house in Magalo, in southern Somalia. It was tucked away in an old pewter case I had in storage; it'd been there for ages and I'd never noticed.

Now I have my papers. Now if I want, I can go back to Somalia too.

I have a house, and most important, an official document stating in writing that it belonged to my father, Mohamed Ali Zoppe. Therefore, it's mine.

Finally I'll be able to clear out the squatters who've occupied it since those sad years of war.

Labo Dhegax means "two stones." A strange name for a house, perhaps not such an auspicious one. But I wouldn't dream of changing it now. It wouldn't make sense.

It started out with that name and with that name it is destined to exist.

Legend has it that my father, Mohamed Ali Zoppe, once said: "These are the two stones, the labo dhegax, upon which I will build my future."

Who knows whether he really said that? Sounds like something out of the Bible.

Fact is, by now the legend has taken root in our hearts, and I must say, regardless of its truth the family is still attached to it.

Every night before I fall asleep, I wonder if I too, like my father, will be able to build what future I have left in our land.

I asked Lul if she'd check on Labo Dhegax since she was leaving Rome soon.

I said: "Please, I'm counting on you, *abaayo*, to find out every little detail about my old house."

It was a windy day. Our scarves fluttered over the buildings of the capital.

I hugged her and said: "Don't forget Labo Dhegax. Don't forget me, sister." She didn't make any promises.

Lul was the first of my friends to go back. She called after a week in Mogadishu and said, "The air smells like onions." She didn't say much else. I asked her question after question. I wanted to know if our country had really changed that much and if those of us who'd been away for over thirty years could reconnect with the new, the brand-new, peacetime Somalia.

"Is our dream going to last?" I asked her. "Is it possible to make a home there?" I pressed.

But Lul didn't answer. On the phone she used words like "business," "money." She kept telling me that the time to make deals was today, not tomorrow. Now was the time to make money. Now was the time to cash in.

"That's peace, honey," she sneered. "If you care about

your two stones, come.” Peace. Before August, I’d thought peace was a beautiful word.

No one ever told me that it’s really an ambiguous one.

Civil war broke out in my country in 1991. In 2013, peace is breaking out. Hooray.

Now it’s all about business for the Somalis. For Lul ...

But I’m still in Rome and from here it all seems so strange. I love Rome in the summer, especially the light in the evening when the sun is setting. It’s hot, even the seagulls seem nicer and make you want to hug them. They dominate the piazzas, but here you are, my little elephant, and they don’t dare. Shoo, away from Piazza della Minerva! I feel safe when I’m around you. Here, I’m in Magalo—at home. My father had big ears too, but he was never good at listening, and I was never able to talk to him. It’s different with you. That’s why I’m grateful to Bernini for having made you. A little marble elephant holding up the smallest obelisk in the world. A toothpick. Don’t take that the wrong way. I need you, you know.

Lul is gone and I don’t know if I’ll ever see her again. But you remind me of her. You’re a good listener. I need to be heard, otherwise my words will fade away and be lost.

“Look at that black lady talking to herself,” people say, pointing at us. But we don’t pay them any attention. We understand each other perfectly, you and I. After all, we’re both from the Indian Ocean. Our ocean of magic spells

and scents, of separations and reunions. You're a nomad, like me.

Right now Lul is breathing in our tuna-scented ocean air. Drinking *shaah cadees*.

Ordering everyone around like *adoon*.

I know Lul, she's a good person, and for that very reason is the sneakiest sort of charmer.

Lul is first in my thoughts. What is my friend doing in Somalia now? What business has she gotten into?

What if I really went and joined her? My suitcase is ready. I never unpacked.

It's been ready since 1976. I should put the suitcase along with my tired body on a plane headed for Ankara and from there direct to Mogadishu.

But that's just a fantasy.

Yesterday there was this girl on the tram. She was black and had a shaved head and thick legs. We were on the fourteen where it turns toward Porta Maggiore. She'd been staring at me since Termini. I was irritated by her hard gaze. I felt like turning around and saying "Stop," like mixing my mother tongue with Dantean Italian and creating one of those scenes that make public transport in Rome entertaining. I wanted to be vulgar and go overboard. I wanted a big scene, that way I'd stop thinking about Lul, about Labo Dhegax, about the strange peace in Somalia. But the girl got wise. She sauntered over and virtually without warning shot me her question: "You're Adua, right? The actress? I saw your movie." And then

after a pause, as if she'd planned it out, she added: "You really make an impression, you know that?"

I was completely rattled.

My movie? There was actually someone who still remembered that movie?

2

TALKING-TO

Don't misbehave, Adua. Get your elbows off the table. And wipe your dirty mouth. Sit up straight, for God's sake, why are you all hunched over? Your hands are filthy, go wash them or I'll thrash you. Is that how you look at Zoppe, your father, you heathen? You're just like your mother, Asha the Rash, that good-for-nothing. Your mother, that whore, who went and died on me, leaving me alone with nothing but my love. How could she let herself die? Tell me, how could she let that happen? That damn woman! And what about you? Are you going to die on me too? You have her eyes, I can't stand it! But you'll see, I'll fix you. There's no messing around with me, we have manners, girl. Now the tune has changed, it's not like out there in the bush where you were spoiled. And if you don't mind me, you know what'll happen, don't you? Good, then sit with your back straight and for heaven's sake don't whine like that, you're hurting my eardrums. Quiet now. That's it, be quiet!

3

ZOPPE

That February day in '34, pink dust covered the buildings of Rome.

There were three of them on top of him. One pinning him down, two pummeling him. The youngest gripped Zoppe with all his might. The brutes laughed with cheap zeal.

"Yeah, Beppe! Hold him, get that darkie bastard good." Beppe complied.

Zoppe could feel heat radiating from his skin. And he had soiled himself like a baby. "*Waan isku xaaray*," he cursed himself. "Shit ... why ... me."

The words came out slowly. He felt humiliated, alone, a withered fruit on an unripe vine.

"Oh, Mama, when will this torture end?"

Meanwhile, blood had begun to trickle from his mouth.

"Mama ..." he called.

Hooyooy macaan ...

"This dumb nigger is talking to himself."

Hooyo ...

"*Camerati*, this dummy's still yapping."

Hooyooy macaan ...

“He really wants to piss us off.”

Hooyo ...

“Let’s burn his feet, boys.” *Hooyooy macaan ...* “Let’s poke out his eyes.”

Hooyo ...

“Let’s break his nose.”

Not his nose, not his beautiful nose. With a kick in the rear Zoppe found himself flat on the ground.

“You’re disgusting, you know that, you little nigger?” Beppe taunted. “And now you want us to clean up your shit too, eh, boss man?”

“Come on,” his buddy replied. “Lick it up.”

“Party’s over for you now, maggot,” the three added in unison.

Zoppe saw the round toes of military boots over his head and squeezed his eyes shut. And he thought of the blond little girl and her giant father.

Zoppe was intoxicated with fear. But at that vision he trembled with joy.

The giant and his blond little girl. Oh, how he missed them. *Wallahi*, he missed them to pieces.

Seeing them in that strange dream haze was an unexpected surprise for him. Why had they come? Had they heard his cry for help?

“*Xayaay, xayaay, xayaay, xayaay,*” he’d cried.

“Help,” he whispered as they tortured him.

The father and his little girl ...

They looked so nice together, strolling contentedly down the streets of Prati. For months he had seen them walking hand in hand. They lived a few buildings down from where he was staying. The first time they saw one another, it was inevitable: he studied them and they studied him. Without that vicious curiosity white people have, those ravenous hands in his curly hair, those vile comments about the color of his skin. The father and the girl looked at him with human eyes.

It was so nice to see them again in that dense fog. The vision had plenty of interference, but those two, the father and the girl, stood crystal clear against that sky laden with uncertainty.

He wanted to tell them, "Thank you for coming to see me in this dark hour," but can you say thank you to a vision? And his mouth was too swollen with blood to be usable. He could only sputter curses and prayers, in no particular order.

In other circumstances, he would have stood up and embraced them. Yet they remained shadows, projections, visions. They were neither made of flesh nor bone. They were there worried about him. Every vision, as his soothsayer father told him, always has some basis in truth, in the incarnate. The man and girl weren't really there, but maybe they were thinking about him. They had sensed, glimpsed something, in a mental haze.

Father and daughter didn't know he was in danger, but

sensitive souls can catch a scent in the air like warthogs. Nothing ever gets past them, at least according to his old man. Oh how wonderful it would have been to actually touch them, smother them with affection, melt into their kind concern. But Zoppe didn't know how to embrace people. In his village in Somalia, hugging was for the privacy of the marriage bed, the intimacy of lovers. An embrace wasn't something to spread around. Hugs weren't for friends or people you met.

Zoppe couldn't feel the brutal kicks anymore. All that existed were the father and the girl, hand in hand, on the hilly streets of Prati.

And then his mind drifted to his sister, Ayan ... "I miss you ..."

"Magalo is so far away, my little sister. Magalo is so far from this city I've ended up in. You must be grown now, you must be a woman. Tell me, Ayan, what are you doing? There, now, what are you doing?"

Zoppe searched for her, but she wasn't there. "I wonder if our father taught you to read the stars," he thought.

He was thirsty. So, so thirsty.

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"Let's give it a rest, eh boys?" Beppe said after a while.

"Yeah, otherwise we'll kill him. They told us to just have some fun with him. Not to kill him. He works for us, after all, and it's not like we have stockpiles of interpreters. My commander always says we ought to treat

these ones with kid gloves; they'll be useful soon in the war against the dirty Abyssinians ...”

“But if he's a nigger, what use is a nigger? Come on, man, be serious.”

Zoppe barely heard their words. They could do whatever they wanted with him. His fate was already written. It was all *maktuub*.

He remembered his father telling him: “Look at the stars and then at their reflection in the basin. In that light, you will find yourself.” How long had it been since he'd performed the rites? Rome had made him so lazy. He forgot to pray five times a day to Mecca, he forgot to bless his ancestors, he even forgot the simplest *duco*.

His father would have berated him and his sister, Ayan, would have looked down on him. They wouldn't listen to him and might not even believe his complaints. “There are no stars here in Rome, you can't see them, they blend in.”

“The stars,” his father would have said, “aren't in the sky. You haven't even tried to look for them.”

It was true. He was consumed by work. Every day he had to translate, translate, translate, translate. There were words to decipher every minute, sighs to indicate every second, and all those damned commas to figure out. He was an interpreter, virtually a magician. It was a serious job, not like the *askari* who had to blow the bugle and trek across the sand, cannon fodder for the battlefield. He was always elegant in his khakis. Never an irksome wrinkle to ruin his

symmetry. He was one of the best in the field.

Everyone told him he was the best. In a class of his own. Even a few party officials had noticed him. He spoke Arabic, Somali, Swahili, Amharic, Tigrinya, and several minor languages that would be useful for the coming war. He had gotten this gift from his soothsayer father. Italian, on the other hand, came from the Jesuits. It had taken him some time to break it in and master it. He thought that working for the country's new masters would yield him a nest egg. "I wouldn't do that, my boy," his father said upon learning his intentions. "The stars say ..." But Zoppe interrupted him: "Enough with the stars, Father. Real life is about money, and I want enough to have a happy life and be the envy of everyone. I want people to kneel at my feet." His father looked at him the way one would look at excrement. But he said nothing. We each have our own path to follow, our own missteps to make. He fell silent and gave no more advice to that deranged son fate had brought him. Zoppe was satisfied with that silence. His father and all his wisdom got on his nerves. He was always so moral, so perfect. "Let me make my own mistakes in peace," Zoppe yelled once he was alone.

"You're not dead, are you, little nigger?" said Beppe, nudging him.

Before those blows and insults there was a time when he had felt fulfilled by that motley world that praised him, those people who complimented him. It was Rome itself that had conquered him. When he'd been told he

would be going to spend a few months in Italy, in the Eternal City, Zoppe thought it was a miracle. A Negro in Rome? Him?

Rome was his dream, he knew it even before seeing it. "We'll give you some work. Mostly documents to translate." He accepted that transfer like a prize, recognition for his sacrifice, his loyalty. The work was plentiful, but most of all, painful. Because those papers stank of betrayal. War was nigh and some were already rushing into the victors' open arms. They could have said the same thing about him, even called him a collaborator. But he wasn't betraying anyone. He would never take arms against a neighbor, a man with the same color skin. He translated, that's all. He was a linguistic ambassador, a mediator, he didn't hurt anyone. His work involved the present, the passing moment. And maybe he would end up with a nice chunk of change. He would return to his land and build a big house one day. There he would bring Asha, daughter of old Said the Sightless, there he would take her, there she would become his woman, there she would raise their heirs.

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The vision was still there, comforting him.

Father and daughter ... The streets ... The trees ... The dome of St. Peter's ... And the wisteria in bloom ... The women's perfume ... Take-away sorbet ... The soldiers' military step ... The rustle of colored skirts ... The cries of

swaddled newborns ... Boots on cracked stones ... And another father ... And another daughter ... The touch of their hands ... Their smiles ...

Their hopes painted in the sky ...

Zoppe was comforted by those murky, shaky images. By those visions, softer than the wind.

His photographic memory surprised him.

He had recorded every detail, every nuance of the recent past. He remembered the girl in particular.

Her little flower-print dress, tan coat, red gloves, and that felt bucket hat.

What a pretty little head she had. An oval-shaped head that disappeared entirely in that tiny old hat.

She reminded him of his sister, Ayan.

Ayan had a pretty head too. But Ayan never had a cute hat like that. "If I come out of this alive," he muttered, "I'll get her one just like it."

Fists had been replaced by feet. They kicked him good and hard. Zoppe clung to the vision so as not to give in to death.

They were shadows in front of him, but it was to them that he entrusted his soul. The girl smiled. Zoppe noticed tenderly that she was losing her baby teeth.

"If these goons ruin my nose, the little girl won't recognize me." The thought of his face changing terrified Zoppe.

"I hope your papa takes you away. As far away as possible. Yes ... as far away from here as possible."

Zoppe remembered going for lunch at the man and his daughter's house three months earlier.

It was a Wednesday and there was an unusual air of anticipation in the streets.

The smells from the countryside formed a heady mix with the acrid scents of the city.

Horsehair, wild rose, and hay merged with automobile combustion and motor scooter exhaust.

"Why don't you come to our house for lunch?" the little girl asked him.

Zoppe, who was dressed in his usual khaki uniform, was taken aback by the odd invitation.

He was standing on the corner, ready to cross the street and rush toward his daily life, toward more words to translate. The little girl was standing on the same street corner.

And her giant father a few steps away, shielding her from wind and desperation. "Anyway my name's Emanuela, with an *E*, mind you. I don't like it when they call me Manuela with an *M*," and then taking a breath, she added, "and this is my papa. His name's Davide. Now shake hands. That's good, like friends."

And they shook hands. All three.

The little girl had a know-it-all tone. Almost annoying. She liked being bossy. You could tell that her parents spoiled her rotten, she was the darling of the house. She had no discipline.

But all the same there was something about her that delighted Zoppe. The Somali extended his right arm and opened his hand to greet Davide.

Zoppe noticed that he had a firm, powerful grip. A grip that put you at ease and gave you a sense of trustworthiness.

“So will you come?” the little girl implored.

He had been observing them from afar for a while. The father and his little girl. The little girl and her father.

Same keen eyes. Same furrowed brow. At a glance the girl seemed eight, maybe nine.

The same age as Ayan.

And she too had eyes that sparkled like emeralds in the sun. “So will you come?” the little girl asked. What could he say?

He had been in that strange land for months now and the girl with her big father were the only people who ever gave him a nod of greeting. The only ones in those nasty never-ending months. In that city that had been so stingy with him. And to think that he had imagined blonde girls at his beck and call and hordes of friends to play billiards with. But he had quickly discovered that a Negro in Rome had to keep vigilant. “If possible,” one of his supervisors had told him, “you should do everything you can to disappear.”

He had imagined Rome to be an open-air palace, but instead it was a pisspot for dogs and humans alike. And sometimes the latrine stench turned his stomach. But never as much as the sorrow of seeing how unliked he

was. Sometimes others' disgust provoked unexpected gobs of spit that he'd learned to dodge with great skill.

That's why he was supposed to disappear, make himself invisible.

When he was out, he was always in a hurry. He wanted to be seen as an optical illusion, not a Negro.

Now he crossed Rome like a thunderbolt. No one noticed him anymore. He was too fast to catch.

He missed Magalo and the bovine slowness of that ocean city. There, he was important, at all hours of the day and night. No woman snubbed him or shunned him. He had all the women he wanted.

"My name's Emanuela, what's your name, mister?" the girl asked.

"My name is Mohamed Ali, but everyone calls me Zoppe."

"Zoppe because you're *zoppo*?" the girl asked.

"Yes, because of my limp. When I was little I caught a bad illness, but I was saved."

"He was lucky," Davide broke in.

"Lucky ... it's true," Zoppe replied.

"Papa and I have been seeing you around for a while, you know?" the girl said.

"Well, I've seen you too," Zoppe wanted to tell them, but said nothing. He waited for the strange passing pair to continue.

"So will you come over? Huh? Will you come?"

"I don't know. I wasn't prepared to have lunch out," Zoppe replied, embarrassed.

“You don’t have to be prepared, mister.”

“Don’t be rude, Emanuela,” her father admonished.

“Don’t worry,” Zoppe cut in. “She’s young. I spoke that way when I was little too. That’s the nice thing about that age, don’t you think?”

“When you were little were you brown like you are now?” she asked. The father went pale and reddened.

“Emanuela, don’t make the gentleman uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine, really,” replied Zoppe, amused. “I can answer your daughter. Yes, brown when I was little too. The same way you’re pink, I was brown and I still am, as you see.”

“Are there ferocious lions in your town? I saw them in books at school.”

“Yes, and zebras too,” Zoppe replied.

“And rhinoceroses? Have you seen rhinoceroses?”

“Yes, and more, there are antelopes, hyenas, giraffes, and one day I even saw a herd of wildebeests ready to chase a dream.”

“What’s a wildebeest? That’s not in my book. What is it like?”

“It’s like a big cow with a hump and lots of hair.”

“Do you eat it?”

“I’ve never tried it.”

The little girl looked at him in awe. Her father’s eyes were filled with curiosity too. “This is the first time that a brown man is coming to eat with us. And you’re lucky, today Mama made a big pot of artichokes and a cherry tart.”

“Sounds good. But I don’t have anything to bring you. Let me at least pick up some cookies.”

“You’re our guest today,” said Davide. “Today you’re sacred to us. Tomorrow you can get cookies if you like.”

Zoppe smiled. He was no longer used to kindness.

“Well I’m curious too,” he added. “I’ve never been in a Catholic home. Do you have a crucifix?”

The girl looked at her father.

Zoppe sensed that something in the cheerful atmosphere from before had broken. “We’re different,” the father murmured.

“The kids at school call me ‘killer.’ They say I killed God and my family goes around stealing children. Yesterday, Graziella, the fat one who still doesn’t even know the alphabet, pulled my hair and called me ‘pork-hater.’ I started crying ’cause she pulled it so hard.”

Zoppe didn’t understand, confused by the rush of words. “Emanuela,” the father broke in, “is trying to say that we’re Jewish. Is that a problem for you?”