4

ADUA

My father has never seen my movie. If he has he never told me.

Haji Mohamed Ali, aka Zoppe, my father.

It's funny to feel the sound of that word in my mouth. When he was alive, I didn't call him Papa much. He was just Haji Mohamed. Haji because, like every believer worthy of the title, he too had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

And anyway the truth, my little elephant, is that we never got along.

We both had strong personalities, we were prima donnas, battered by life. Neither made room for the other and sparks were inevitable.

Although by the end our relationship had become almost decent, in the beginning it was out-and-out war between us.

To me, my father was "the one who brought me into the world" or "the man who impregnated my mother" or "the person who tore me away from real life."

Never Papa.

But since I've been bombarding myself with questions, elephant, I've reclaimed this word. It has a bittersweet

taste, the word "father." Its spines poke the tip of my tongue. But my palate is somehow soothed by it.

The word makes me uncomfortable. It's as if I have no support. As if it delegated my happiness to someone else. The word father terrifies me. But it's the only one that can help me breathe anymore.

I'm pretty rusty at saying it. I'm not used to its vibrations. I'm not used to all its deep curves. And what if using it too much pushes me into a hole, with no way out? Who will save me from myself then?

You, elephant, or what? Father …

Aabe …

I say it again. I've gotten a taste for it. Father …

Aabe …

I'm old, flabby. Maybe I can allow myself this difficult truth with you.

My husband, the boy I married, I never talk to him. I don't even know why we got married.

He was a Titanic, someone who'd risked drowning at sea to come here, a boater who landed at Lampedusa, a bum. He needed a house, a teat, a bowl of soup, a pillow, some money, hope, any semblance of relief. He needed a mama, a *hooyo*, a whore, a woman, a *sharmutta*, me. And even if I'm all wrinkled, I was able to give him what he was looking for. I didn't want a nice young man like him out starving on Via Giolitti.

I got him to toss that bottle of cheap gin that he bought from the Bengali and that kept him warm on cold Roman

nights. I got him to toss it and took him in, here on Via Alberto da Giussano, in Pigneto.

There were not many guests at our wedding. I called a few friends, we ate *sanbuusi*.

Someone gave me a *shaash*, like a regular virgin bride. They perfumed me, massaged me, hennaed my hands.

I wore an old costume that had belonged to the famous actress with the gray eyes. I snatched it at Cinecittà during that fateful 1977. The cast was just steps away from my set, from my movie. I'm not a thief, but that dress felt like it was mine. It was a three-piece dress: bodice, capelet, petticoat. One of those old outfits that could have come out of the closet of a Jane Austen character. The ochre linen gave me a certain solemn air, which was promptly broken by the pearly violet flowers dotting the dress. But it was the taffeta petticoat that really gave me substance. That taffeta hidden from the world made me feel precious. I was a cloud. Frothy and free like the foam on a Guinness.

The women sang ritual songs for the new union. I laughed. It was nice to hear them. No one had ever sung for me. No one had ever celebrated me. It was a joy, a great joy.

And so I laughed, happy for all the tradition finally washing over me.

The wedding made no scandal among the Somalis of Rome. "You did the right thing, sister," several of the women told me. "You chose your little lamb well," they remarked, winking.

After all, I'm not the only one to do it, I wasn't the first.

There are lots of us now who have gotten a second youth with these fresh arrivals. No one sees anything wrong with it. It's a perfect trade. They get a roof and we get a little attention. They kiss us and we sew their holey socks.

One day they'll go away, toward love, other lands. But for now, they're curled up at our feet, ready to satisfy our longings.

Every night my little man falls asleep on my droopy chest like a baby hungry for milk. I rub his head and nestle my hand in his hair. It makes him forget the cruel waves of the Mediterranean that nearly swallowed him up. It makes him forget the tranquilizers they put in the bland soup at the immigrant welcome center. It makes him forget the girl he used to love, who was raped and murdered by Libyans in the desert.

He dozes off on my grandmotherly breast and gets an erection. So many times I've asked myself: "Don't I disgust him?" But he says: "You're so beautiful. No woman is as beautiful as you."

Only when he gets mad does he call me Old Lira. That's what young Titanics call women from the diaspora. They are as cruel to us as we are to them. It's not fair to call someone who risked their life at sea the name of a shipwreck. One time my husband even said to me: "I know that *Titanic* is a movie where everybody dies. But remember that I'm not dead." Old Lira, in compar-

ison, is harmless. And maybe it's even true. When many of us came to this strange peninsula it wasn't the euro that captured our dreams, it was still the lira, the beautiful lira that intoxicated with promises of wealth. Too bad he won't listen to me, my husband. He doesn't want to know anything about the past. He's not interested. It bores him. He wants to drink the future. Luckily I have you now, elephant, and I can vent.

At first, all these memories scared me. I was afraid your big ears would rip the soul from my chest.

But now I feel calm. I can tell that we'll last, you and I.

You and your big ears are the only ones left to listen to my voice. The world has long forgotten me.

It's only you, little elephant, who remembers me, Adua, beautiful Adua. Only you.

5

TALKING-TO

Is that how you greet a relative, Adua? With that look on your face? Smile. What else have you got teeth for? Smile. Open that big mouth of yours. And do it quick if you don't want me to get mad.

6
ZOPPE

Zoppe knew that the best escape route was through his head.

That was the place where he found all the lost scents of his childhood. There, *caano geel*, *shaah cadees*, *beer iyo muufo*.

Candied ginger. Marvelous cinnamon. His Wonderland Somalia.

Zoppe thought about all this crouched down on the cold floor of his cell in Regina Coeli. His head between his knees and his thigh anxious against a battered chest. Vertigo and stabbing pain coursed through his tired veins. And his aching limbs felt defeated. He suspected he had two broken ribs. It was hard for him to breathe and even to bend over.

"Those bastards really mangled me."

And as if that weren't enough, they had tossed him unceremoniously in solitary. "This way you'll learn what happens when you mess with us."

Beppe gave him a pat on the head before handing him over to the prison. He touched him like a mother her young. Then he had him sip a yellow liquid.

"Drink, nigger, drink."

Zoppe gulped with difficulty. He made a horrified grimace and felt something burning inside. Was he dying?

Beppe patted him again. "Drink up, you'll feel better."

And Zoppe drank and died once, twice, three times. Then with the fourth sip, the warmth began to reach his spent cheeks.

"My aunt's walnut liqueur can revive even the dead. You'll feel better soon, you'll see," the soldier said, smiling.

In that miserable cell where they'd stuck him there was a cot and a bowl of slop. Limp potatoes floated alongside prickly worms. Zoppe was young, he was famished, but he couldn't bring himself to eat.

"I don't want to shit myself to death in this stinking cell." The room was square, gray, repugnant. Words inscribed with bloody fingernails covered the walls with pain. Zoppe started reading to try to figure out what lay ahead in his increasingly uncertain future.

Mauro da Pisa, Alessandro da Bologna, Antonio da Sassari, Lucio da Roma, Giulio da Pistoia, Simone da Rimini, have all passed through here. The oldest date was 1923. The best inscription was dated 1932. Zoppe recognized it immediately, the supreme poet was one of his favorites:

> Through me is the way to the city of woe.
> Through me is the way to sorrow eternal.
> Through me is the way to the lost below.

"They've never cleaned up, that's clear," he said, addressing an imaginary audience. Actually, he didn't mind the quiet of that isolation. It was a reprieve from the torture, from the senseless beatings that had defiled him down to his soul.

His tormenters would soon appear with their stinking farts and vulgar taunts. But in the meantime there was that strange, rat-scented calm to cradle him.

The pain didn't subside. It was his groin that hurt to death, especially his testicles. Beppe had really beaten him badly. Zoppe asked himself if after all those hits his seed would still be fertile. His testicles throbbed and a yellowish liquid dripped from the tip of his penis. He felt heavy. And he could barely open his puffy eyes.

At the age of twenty he was an old man.

A premature *oday*, with a drooling mouth and achy bones.

He had his visions to comfort him. His mind catapulted him back into the home of Davide the Jew and his little girl, Emanuela.

He had recently been their guests, and the details were still so effervescent and fresh in his mind that he could almost remember without trying.

He could see the sour cherry preserves that Rebecca, Davide's wife, had prepared for dessert. He'd filled up on that delicious tart and had also relished what had come before.

"What is this dish called?" he'd asked, astonished at his overflowing plate.

"It's *rigatoni con la pajata*," Rebecca replied.

Just then Zoppe noted how much mother and daughter resembled each other. The same wide forehead, the same big ears, and those sparkling emerald eyes. But whereas Emanuela was exuberant like all children, Rebecca had something mysterious and seductive about her.

Zoppe envied Davide.

And he said: "It smells good. I envy you this rich dish." Davide accepted that sweet envy.

Looking around, there was really little to be envious of. It was all so small. Even the furniture was tiny. The house was composed of two rooms united by the reddish light that filtered in through a small window. The kitchen with an iron stove was in plain view. In the middle, a table, some tattered chairs and a flesh-toned armchair. The space was packed with furnishings. In every detail there was a certain affinity for symmetry that made such a chaotic space endearing. Zoppe was drawn to a blond walnut cabinet with drawers covered in faux vellum. It was an exquisite object that did not fit well with the overall simplicity. It was a little bit like Rebecca, that cabinet, too refined to be the centerpiece of that set.

Rebecca ... Davide ... Emanuela ...

It was incredible for him to see white Jews. Zoppe had known only Falasha Jews, the Beta Israel, from Lake Tana, even though his father had told him that in the West there were Jews "with skin as pale as the moon." These were pink Jews, so cordial, and their Roman house so cozy and inviting.

Zoppe was blinded by the ochre walls that matched harmoniously with the violet flooring. He was impressed by the hoard of books; they formed a cathedral. And the knickknacks scattered all over the place: ceramic dolls with real hair, decorative wall plates, tasseled colorful boxes and lots of photographs of old people in shiny, faux, silver frames.

Zoppe liked this middle ground where sour cherries intermingled with knowledge.

If he had his basin with him he'd have read the fate of those three people. He would have seen their beginning and their end. All their happiness and their atrocious suffering. Their passionate kisses and betrayals. If only he had his basin he would have warned them about all the dangers and joys of the world.

•

"Water," he requested to the guard. "I'm thirsty."

"Not so fast, Negro," was his answer. "You're not at the Grand Hotel. Learn some manners. You say 'Water, please.'"

"What difference does it make? You people don't have good manners anyway," Zoppe retorted.

"Ah, we've got a rebel here," the guard said. "If times were different," he added, "we would have shown you, you piece of shit. In Regina Coeli we don't like rebels. You're ticks, useless lice of humanity. In Regina Coeli it's easy to die of hunger or thirst, learn that. It's easy to bring down that cocky crest you've got. In Regina Coeli it's a

short path to the graveyard. But you're a damned lucky louse. They told me not to let you die. So I'll bring you your water. But mind you, I might not be able to kill you, but put you through hell, that I can do."

Zoppe said nothing. He wanted to smash that fatso's face. But he was in chains. And weak all through his insides. Eventually he ate the slop of potatoes and prickly worms. From the very first bite he could tell that his stomach would refuse to digest it. Vomiting was the logical consequence of an unwanted meal.

Zoppe was a cesspool. The worms dropped from his mouth whole. Restless worms, still alive and a little stunned. He could see them creeping slowly over his wasted body.

"Where's my water?"

He needed to try to sleep. But could one sleep in such a state?

He wondered whether his father, Haji Safar, knew that he was in prison now.

"I'm sure he had a vision." And Zoppe prayed that it hadn't made his father suffer too much.

Happy images from his former life stopped the pain. The lively eyes of his sister, Ayan, his father's gentle hand, the discipline of the Jesuits who had taught him Italian, and the intense letters from his Ethiopian friend Dagmawi Mengiste. They surrounded him and urged him not to give up. He saw their prayers spiral around him in an embrace of courage. "They love me," Zoppe thought,

"and they're thinking about me right now." Even the Limentani family was thinking of him.

He could hear the little girl asking her mother, Rebecca, "How do you draw a wildebeest, Mama? Do you think it has the same hump as a camel? Why don't we invite the brown man over for lunch again and ask him to draw one for us?"

Zoppe saw Rebecca's face tensed in a mask of fear. Maybe she knew about him.

Maybe news of his arrest had spread.

He'd ended up in trouble over Francesco Bondi, that Romagnolo with the flat nose and yellow teeth.

Zoppe appreciated nothing about that man. He was too tall, too invasive, too chatty.

He detested the droopy mustache and red hair that the Romagnolo showed off like a trophy. Bondi was always there asking question after question, waiting for amazing answers that Zoppe was never able to give.

And also, he only ever talked about women—bottoms, bosoms, lips, sex. Zoppe found him vulgar. Obviously.

"Do you have a girl?" the Romagnolo often asked. But Zoppe didn't open up.

Of course he had a girl, but he had no intention of telling that guy about it. Asha the Rash was his woman. Every night in his dreams he savored the moment when he would make her his. But he didn't want to share such private thoughts with anyone, let alone that lout Francesco Bondi. He didn't want to sully her beautiful name

with a filthy person like him. The Romagnolo ruined women, for sure. Every day he went bragging about his conquests. Mirella, Graziella, Elvira, Carlotta. All of them with big busts and big bottoms. All snatched up under the nose of distracted husbands. These provincial Don Juan routines bored him. He didn't have all that time to waste. He had to work, not dawdle around. Zoppe's greatest desire was to impress his superiors. He wanted honors. He wanted cash. So he had to look active. Lots of work didn't scare him. Especially when he thought of the nice gifts that he would be able to give his Asha the Rash one day.

But then that strange morning came.

Francesco Bondi pounced on him with breath that still smelled of sleep.

Zoppe wasn't alone. In that miserable and miniscule room he was ashamed to call an office, there was a man with yellow hair.

"Hey, Negro," Bondi yelled euphorically. "I saw another Negro like you on the street yesterday. I thought you were the only one in Rome."

Then the Romagnolo noticed the man with the yellow hair. "You're not military," Bondi said, a little irritated. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't judge by appearances. I'm even more, in a sense. The name's Calamaro." The two men shook hands hesitantly.

"And this Negro you saw on the street, what was he like, if I may ask?"

"He was a Negro, what do you think he was like ..."

"They're not all the same, did you know that?" said the man with the yellow hair. "There are different types, in every region. Their hair and noses diverge wildly. It depends on the climate."

"Hair? That stuff this guy has on his head, you expect me to call that hair?"

"Yes," said Calamaro, calmly.

"Are you kidding me?"

Zoppe buried his nose in his papers and mentally wandered through the city of Rome in search of the other African Bondi was talking about.

There was definitely Menghistu Isahac Tewolde Medhin. The Eritrean hothead. He ran into him one day around the Pensione Tedeschi on Via Flavia. The Eritrean walked slowly, he didn't worry about being seen too much like Zoppe did. Medhin didn't want to hide, let alone disappear. His movements were filled with pride. He walked with his head high. He had just finished at the Monte Mario international college run by the Methodist Episcopal Church and was trying to figure out what the future held for him. Zoppe didn't like the man. His words were too learned, complicated. And his avid anti-Italian ferocity terrified him. That man would soon get himself into trouble. "I shouldn't have anything to do with him, otherwise he'll ruin me."

As he was lost in these thoughts he saw Francesco Bondi's hand sink into his curly hair.

"You call this hair? This is wool, not even good quality wool!"

"It's hair," Calamaro replied calmly. "It's not pretty, but it's hair. The gentleman is a Negro, but his features are less Negroid than the anthropological specimens I examined in the Congo."

And then he too, no different than Bondi, sank his hand into the hair on Zoppe's exhausted head.

The Somali exhaled with all the strength he had in his lungs and sat there despairingly listening to the two Italians.

He couldn't say exactly when the discussion turned into something more serious. Had it been Bondi who offended Calamaro, or maybe the reverse? Zoppe was confused. He saw only, through his hair, that the two had moved on to hands—their hands. Fists, in short.

"Please, gentlemen," said Zoppe, disconsolate. "Please," he repeated. Then he got the inauspicious idea of trying to break it up.

The police arrested only him for that strange morning brawl.

7

ADUA

A big storm was beating down on our camp when the man with the red beard entered our *tukul*.

That's how things began with my father. That's how I met him, little elephant. That was the last happy day of my life. I was seven or eight years old at most.

I remember that our straw roof was soaked with water and it dripped from every corner of our temporary dwelling.

It was the '60s, but I didn't know that yet. I was just a flea and I struggled with the shaky, provisional nature of our daily life. I was a nomad, a little nomad with a pointy nose and I thought that life was contained in the gleeful bleat of a baby goat. The rain that day was violent. If we held out just a few minutes then it would be paradise.

In the bush, the golden rule during torrential rain is curbing damage at all costs. We all knew that after that brief initial difficulty the sun would come out, even in our hearts. Hope, which had woven the threads of our survival, would never abandon us. A greenish mold, meanwhile, was expanding under our feet. It would bring the worst microbes, the most insidious dangers. But we were used

to it. The important thing, as the camp's old madwoman, Howa the Crooked, always said, was to dry the bottoms of your feet well once it had all stopped. *Si fican u tirtir* was the motto. And already the cloth scraps on our wood *ganbar* were ready. Howa would have appreciated, and maybe even smiled happily about our feverish readiness. Because we truly were happy about the cruel rain that was pounding over our heads. *Wallahi!* So happy. That rain was a true manna from the heavens. Not by chance did everyone's mind go to our rust-colored basins filling up with good rainwater that would quench our thirst in the coming days. Dreams soon gave way to worries of drought.

I was used to rain.

But that man with the red beard jarred with everything. He was so different from the shepherds in our camp. He was as clean and smooth as a young girl.

And his turban had an almost blinding otherworldly glow. Between white and light blue, it was almost frightening.

Then came a sudden thunderbolt.

But instead of coming from the sky, it came from the mouth of the man who until that moment had been the center of my existence.

"Girls, this man is your father," Papa said.

My sister, Malika, and I stood there staring at the man with the red beard. I noticed that he was bowlegged and had a devilish goatee.

And his back was curved like a pregnant woman's. And also, why did Papa introduce him to us as our father?

I wanted to get rid of all of that angst.

"You have to shake his hand. He's your father. Aren't you happy?"

Malika and I were dying to ask, "Aren't you our father?" But neither of us had the nerve. Maybe it was Papa's look, the look of the man who up until that moment we'd considered our father, that dissuaded us. Maybe it was also the eagerness with which he pushed us toward that unfamiliar, lopsided man who inspired no confidence whatsoever. So we kept our mouths shut. As if a crocodile had caught our tongues.

We couldn't even breathe. Or think.

Around us, the bush howled fiercely like it did every night.

I could hear the hyenas cackling and the fierce hunger of their obscene feasts. The crows cawed. The *gorgor* snored.

The lions made love to lionesses worn out with exhaustion. A woman gave birth in pain.

Malika and I stood there, barefoot, between two fathers.

I didn't like the new one at all. He was too old. Too hunched. He had twisted feet, rotten teeth, and the receding chin of a false virgin.

I looked at Papa with a silent plea for help. He broke eye contact and at that moment I realized he was rejecting me.

"Tomorrow you will leave with him for the big city, for Magalo," he said. Leave? For Magalo? Us?

I had heard talk of the big city. Someone had told me that Malika and I were even born there.

I didn't want to go. I sensed that the big city would

swallow all my purity, all my dreams.

I was fine there with my goats, with my camels, and with that golden land that had become part of my bones. The land and I lived for each other. In harmony with the song of the elephants.

I was a nomad. I didn't want to be rooted.

I was a nomad. I wanted to be free to run in the wind.

Malika was different from me. She didn't have many wants, no. All she wanted was for people to love her. She was a person who only had to be given an order and she would follow it. Even the most atrocious order was for her the best possible solution. She refused to think, to decide. She didn't want to be vulnerable. Let other people do that. Her attitude was, My life isn't mine anyway.

So she bowed to this new father. She shook his hand. She signed the pact. She became his slave.

And so with that submissive gesture, she gained his eternal love. I was foaming with rage.

"I don't want to," I shouted. "I want Mama. I want to stay with my people."

Papa told me: "Asha the Rash was your real mother and we aren't your people. Your father, Zoppe, has asked for you. The woman who nursed you is one of my wives. Call her 'godaunt.' You have different blood in your veins. You must learn this, you must learn it fast. We have been your caretakers."

I didn't want to learn it. I wanted to see the woman who to me would always be my mother. Mama was pretty. She smelled like jasmine.

"I want my mama."

And that was when the bowlegged man broke into that absurd conversation. "Your mother died when she brought you into the world."

"Yes," my ex-father said. "She's dead."

But I'd seen her just a few hours ago.

"But I saw her …" I murmured.

"That's not your mother," the new father yelled.

"But …"

"No 'buts,' you brat. Learn to trust my words. I am the one who brought you into the world."

I looked at my sister with contempt. She had already surrendered to the new order. I couldn't bear such horror.

I saw the old man, the one I would never call father, pick up a thorny branch.

Then he pulled me toward him and gave me two lashes. Two hard lashes. This was my baptism.

The thorns stuck in my skin.

I was like the Christian Jesus, a martyr for sins I hadn't committed. I felt a deep sorrow well up from my unhappy gut.

"Mama, where are you?" I lamented. No one answered.

My papa, the one who had been my papa, left the *tukul*.

I heard his steps rapidly move into the distance. I thought I heard the echo of a sob. "Mama," I called out. Then I fainted.

When I came to, I had become an actress. No one would ever see my real face again.

8

TALKING-TO

Adua, why did you tell your teacher that your name is Habiba? How many times have I told you, your name is Adua? Habiba is the name you had as a nomad, the one that silly romantic of a mother gave you when she was pregnant with you. Habiba is a dirty, filthy name. It's a common name, for a prostitute. Surely my daughter wouldn't have such a common name, would she? Habiba means love in Arabic … bah, I spit on love! There is no such thing as love. It's a useless name, get it into your head. Adua's much better. You should thank me, I named you after the first African victory against imperialism. I, your father, was on the right side. And you must never believe the opposite. I did only the right things in life, only the right things. Not like that good-for-nothing Asha the Rash. The only truly rash thing your mother did was die. She did nothing else, just die. Whereas I, on the other hand, fought alongside the just. Inside your name there's a battle, my battle …

You don't believe me, do you? Do you dare doubt me?

9

ZOPPE

That night Zoppe dreamed about Benito Mussolini's war.

In that muggy dream the war began in a place like so many in the Horn of Africa, where animals were taken out to pasture. A border zone where it was easy to lose your head and fight with the nearby Ethiopians.

The casus belli that Benito Mussolini was yearning for to officially wage war against Ethiopia.

Was it a dream or a vision of the future?

Zoppe had never known how to distinguish between reality and fantasy. He had never learned to manage what he saw very well. Haji Safar had taught him, but he lacked the soul. The second soul that Haji Safar had, the one that allows you to enter into empathy with time.

The second soul.

He was sick of hearing his father say that he didn't have that damned second soul. "I'll make do without! Plus, if you've got money, what do you need an extra soul for?"

Zoppe remembered the smell of sulfur in the dream. Nothing else. He woke up with fright. With the feeling that he'd dreamed something terrible that would perhaps

take over his little life too. Something that could be sensed even without a second soul.

"What's all that racket?" the fat guard asked his colleague.

"It's black face going crazy." And then in a strange show of mercy, he said, "Maybe we should give the guy a bath. Otherwise the fleas'll eat him alive."

"Let's take care of it tomorrow," the big one said.

Zoppe scratched his head. What time was it? How long had he slept? Was it daytime or the middle of the night?

He suspected that making him lose his sense of orientation was part of a plan. They wanted him to drive him crazy.

Zoppe curled back up in the cot. He closed his eyes and began to summon a vision. The first image that came to him was his sister, Ayan, looking for red peppers in the Warta Nabbada souk in Magalo. "That means someone at home is making stew today and the good fragrant *injera* with the holes that the Ethiopians showed us how to make." Zoppe preferred Ethiopian to Somali injera. Yes, he really disliked the Somali kind. It was small, meager, dry. The Ethiopian kind was sour and soft. With the Ethiopian kind, sauce, any sauce, absorbed deep down. Whereas with the Somali kind, sauce slid off without the least resistance. It was hard for him to admit that Ethiopians were better at making injera, but it was the truth.

But with rice and meat, Zoppe consoled himself, there's no contest. The *bariis iskukaris* we make is the best

on earth. Bariis iskukaris, where the meat, rice, and cardamom blend together to satisfy palates ready to drown in a sea of perdition. Ah, bariis iskukaris … Zoppe wondered if he would ever eat it again.

Nothing but slop, worms, in that cell.

Meanwhile his sister, Ayan, was looking for potatoes at the market stalls.

The cell filled with different aromas and concentric visions. Zoppe didn't dare reopen his eyes for fear that they would leave him too soon. He had to keep them there with him in that dark cell as long as possible. He needed their company, their comfort.

And then the *cadar* which Somali women use to perfume themselves began to mix in with the myrrh that Asha the Rash used to make their environment more pleasant. And then the cinnamon, incense, sandalwood, golden amber, passionflower, ripe mango, healthy papaya, sensuous pineapple.

Somalia was a step away.

He just had to grab it. He just had to dream it.

And from Somalia he was catapulted to a back street in the Prati quarter of Rome.

•

All it took was a glance at her face to see how much she was suffering. Poor, sweet little Rebecca.

She was a vision too. A stronger, more incarnate vision. Almost real.

"Why have you come to see me, woman? Why here in this cell?" Zoppe wanted to ask the vision, but ultimately he said nothing, because he already knew the answer.

"You're a wizard, right?" Rebecca's shadow asked. Zoppe never liked to answer questions with a yes or no.

Certainties were the devil's daughters. He was well aware. Salvation lay only in doubt. In that middle ground where the gears rebelled against the master clockmaker. But she needed him. She was so desperate.

"I'm a seer, or rather, my father is, and my dear aunt too. I see things, but I don't have the gift. I see but I don't know what to do with my visions. I feel the vibrations of the universe. I read the world, but I don't know how to decipher it."

Suddenly, Rebecca's eyes lit up with interest. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," replied Zoppe.

"And what am I now? Why am I here?"

"I don't know," Zoppe replied slowly. "That depends on you."

"I'm in bed and I'm dreaming. And in the dream I find myself in this foul cell. And in the left corner there are five dead rats. I'm afraid of rats, even dead ones. But now I have no urge to scream. I don't feel afraid here."

Zoppe couldn't say anything to that shadow. Say that he was the one who wanted to see her. That maybe it was only his dream, a projection. He couldn't say that he found her beautiful, fascinating, enchanting, that

he desired her as much as, sometimes more than, Asha the Rash. That he'd dreamed of her naked, white, pure, almost every night since first seeing her at her little house in Prati. And that he envied her husband, the giant Davide, for all the orgasms given and received, for all the sighs, for the intimate conversations whispered at dawn.

There was also another reason he couldn't tell her anything. The woman was in danger, Zoppe could feel it. Aside from desire, he felt a boundless sorrow for her.

But things were changing, everything was changing. Zoppe could feel it in the air.

There was a hostility toward the Jews that with every day became more overt, more bold-faced, more hateful.

•

It was Aunt Bibi who, years before, had taught him to read animal entrails.

He never called her "aunt," just Bibi. In Swahili, "bibi" means Mrs., lady. She was the lady of the house, of hearts and of reclamation. It was Bibi who presided, giving orders at the *xus* for our ancestors and hosting the commemorative *zab*. She was the one who decided which goats to buy, in what order to butcher them.

Zoppe saw himself as a little boy again in Bibi's yard. He was maybe four or five, playing with a baby goat full with milk. The kid had suckled hungrily from the maternal teat only a moment before, and now, like any other

little one, she just wanted to enjoy the company of the butterflies fluttering lazily around her tail. She was pretty, the little goat, sweet. Little Zoppe wanted to cover her with kisses. Pet her soft coat. And learn her uncertain language made of high and low *baaaas*. What he would have given to understand her, to talk to her. She would have been so charming. She had a lively face, all round and soft.

But without warning, Bibi broke through that explosion of affection. His aunt, with her great stature and necessary cruelty put an end to the idyll between the little boy and the baby goat.

"Get out of the way, you little *balaayo*," and with a push, she shoved him away. "But we were playing ..." stammered Zoppe.

"She's done playing," and she grabbed her by the neck with her plump, capable hands.

Zoppe remembered her stunned eyes, her confusion, her increasingly tortured bleats. "Where is this big woman taking me?" those sweet eyes asked. And Zoppe didn't have the heart to answer that sweet little goat. How could he admit to her that beyond that yard there was nothing but death awaiting her?

He suddenly felt cold. And he started convulsively rubbing his body.

"Help her, Lord, when the blade enters her." He sat down and curled up, in wait. And he waited to hear the last cry of his dear friend.

The cry of death did not take long to arrive.

Hours later, the goat's insides were presented at lunch. Zoppe was surrounded by ravenous mouths waiting to feast.

Zoppe was a good boy. And tears fat as bushels of hay ran down his smooth, oval face.

"What is it, sweet boy?" Bibi said.

"It's ..." and he couldn't manage to finish the sentence.

"You don't like it? This is a special dish, you know. The goat is nourished on its mother's milk until the very end. Then, once the animal is butchered, the intestine is removed while it's still full of milk and mother's love. The intestine has to be removed very carefully, otherwise it will break. Then you cook it and make *baug*, which is like the cheese *gaal* make. Infidel's cheese. A stringy paste that melts in your mouth."

Little Zoppe hesitated before the steaming tray. Could he really eat a friend?

Then his aunt stuck a piece in his mouth. And he melted at the taste of those succulent entrails.

He felt like a murderer.

"She died for a good cause, don't be sad for her. Everyone dies sooner or later."

Sooner or later ...

And that was when Bibi told him: "Look at the folds on the insides. From them, you can read the world."

A deep scar lined those soft mounds.

"I don't see anything. It's all mixed up."

"Look, son, look harder. Don't you see that stretch of the road to Galkayo? Don't you see a man carrying a bundle? And don't you see the horrible vulture lurking overhead? Don't you see the sky laden with promise? Don't you see the hyena giving birth in pain? Don't you see the children on the pasture? Don't you see the sweet bulbul bird that cheers the heavens? Observe that scar, smell the fresh baug. Get nice and close. Let yourself go. There is the *aliif* and the *taa*. The *miim* and the *ra*. The *saad* and the *daad*, the *shiin* and the *siin*." Bibi enumerated the letters of the alphabet, showed them to me in the entrails. "Here you'll find the writing of the world and little by little you too will learn to decipher it."

Zoppe moved his nose close to the plate. And he smelled a strange odor of aged cheese.

He looked at the scar again. And he saw her, the little goat. She was skipping around happily and the butterflies gaily joined in.

"You're grown up now, my boy. We are the descendants of tribes that have been lost in the night of time. And the history that runs through us has brought more knowledge to our already full treasury. And today, you have become a *faaliyaha*, a soothsayer. Sweet boy, none of us can escape his destiny. Now eat your baug, otherwise it'll get cold."

"What a fine destiny," thought little Zoppe, and he dug in.

10

ADUA

"Tell the stories you have, as best you can."

That's not my quote, it's from a famous writer. I didn't know who he was. But yesterday I flipped through one of his books at the grocery store. I opened it randomly and that line popped out. I read it a few times. At first I didn't even understand it much. But then something in my gut told me that maybe that random sentence had more to do with me than I could imagine. I frantically dug through my purse for money. In hard times one has to do things a certain way. Every cent has its weight. The fact is, I wanted that book so badly. I really, really wanted it. I grabbed the story collection with both hands. To give me some motivation, infuse my tired veins with a little courage. I was trembling. In the end the book cost me nineteen euros. That meant giving up my wheat semolina, chunks of squash, citron soda, and new potatoes.

I didn't buy anything I needed to buy. No liquids, no solids. I bought pages.

The shelves filled with delights looked out at me disconsolately, a little shocked. I was abandoning them. The pistachios were dejected, the spreads sad, the mustard prey to an entirely new panic. Was I really abandoning them?

Meanwhile, the book did a polka in my green bag. Happy to have a new owner, a new house, a new reader.

Meanwhile, I thought of my little husband all full of spunk. The young man "Made in Lampedusa" who I got on sale anyway.

What would I make for him that night? "I'll give him yesterday's leek soup."

My boy has a healthy appetite. He likes everything I make him.

It's hunger, the hunger he suffered crossing the Sahara desert, that makes him as docile as a little lamb.

He's not one of those brutes who expect steak every day. He's just as happy with the stew of leftover vegetables I make in lean times. By the end of the month meat is too much of a luxury for us. But no one will take our roasted half-goat with potatoes at the beginning of the month away from us. Then he sucks every bone dry like a teat full of milk.

The only thing my little one can't give up is *shaah*, our cardamom, cinnamon and clove tea. When he drinks it he sweats like a pig, but then I see him shine with an entirely different light inside. When he's in a good mood he even pours in a little milk and makes a shaah cadees that takes him back to childhood.

I don't drink cadees anymore. It ruins your figure. Gives you cellulite.

Gets you with water retention.

But when my little husband, my sweet little Titanic, sips a brimming cup of it sprawled out in front of the TV, I confess, I feel jealous.

So much nostalgia for old times.

My father, Mohamed Ali Zoppe, liked cadees too. I'm sure it was the excessive amounts of sugar he put in it that led him to death. Diabetes had turned him into a swollen, noxious blob. So I was told—I wasn't there when he passed, between flatulence and regret. But my father always added a dash of ginger to his cadees. He said that *sanjibiil* "reinvigorates the manhood and warms the muscles." I don't know if ginger works like Viagra. But as far as warming goes, it works. On cold winter nights it's a lifesaver. I recommend it, my little elephant. Yes, a real lifesaver.

The first time I saw my father, or Zoppe as I called him at the time, adding ginger was at the house of Hajiedda Fardosa, one of his wives. My mother, Asha the Rash, as I found out later, was the first. But when she died bringing me into the world she was immediately replaced by a girl with braids and her first period. So I was told. That night, that first night when I saw him add ginger, I'll never forget.

He had dragged us from the bush to the city by the sea, tearing us away from what I thought of as my family, my mama.

I'm speaking for myself, because of course Malika, my sellout of a sister, had followed along meekly.

That night, that cursed night, was the first of my new life. Hajiedda Fardosa lived in the city by the sea.

Magalo was a port city, one of the many on the south-

eastern coast of Somalia. "H
us. "It is here that you will
wasn't as big as Mogadishu,
either. Magalo had schools,
several mosques, a Catholic
of the central university, a bo
markets, a stationery store, f
hardware store, two boutiqu
and lots of other things. It
happened. In order to be so
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Only there did the India
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eastern coast of Somalia. "Here are your roots," he told us. "It is here that you will bring your glory." Magalo wasn't as big as Mogadishu, but it wasn't a two-bit town either. Magalo had schools, offices, a nice big city hall, several mosques, a Catholic church, a library, a branch of the central university, a bookstore, a pasta factory, two markets, a stationery store, four cafes, three restaurants, a hardware store, two boutiques, three tailors, a dry cleaner, and lots of other things. It was in Magalo that real life happened. In order to be somebody you had to be a part of that cursed homeland. And Magalo had a sea that took your breath away.

Only there did the Indian Ocean roar with pleasure. Only there did the whales come to make love at sunset.

At first I didn't like Magalo. For me, it was a usurper. One who wanted to take the place of my adored little goats. One who had torn me away from my parents, the people I loved most in the world.

It was hate at first sight between me and Magalo.

Magalo was the end of a life, an ominous change of destiny.

And Magalo was also home to Hajiedda Fardosa. I don't remember much about that fateful first night. Except one detail. On the ground I saw a female lion skin. It seemed alive and so proud of being the most beautiful. The coat was intact. A perfect shade of gold. I felt sorry for her. I had seen many in the bush. They were vicious and blood-thirsty. But there was something magical in their wander-

ing. Nothing like the dirty, vulgar hyenas we always had to deal with. The lionesses' stride was that of precarious nobility fighting against scarcity and bullets. The stride of a queen whose crown had been stolen by a male.

I looked like that skinned lioness. I too was proud and trapped. Proud and confined in the baroque house of the revered fat wife.

I remember that night, that unforgettable night; the pungent odor of burned myrrh pervaded the air. It made me sneeze and I felt the strange specter of fear hover like a vulture over my live carcass.

"You'll have to civilize them," my father told Hajiedda Fardosa. "They're savages. Especially the taller one."

And that was when, after those cutting words, I saw him add a pinch of ginger to his shaah cadees.

11

TALKING-TO

Adua, go apologize to your sister right now. Who taught you to be so wild? Is it your desk mate teaching you these things? Starting tomorrow you won't speak another word to her. Who knows what she put in your head. You're like your mother, Asha, you trust everyone around you. The world is cruel, Adua, you shouldn't trust anyone. Now be off. I believe I've made myself clear.

12

ZOPPE

Everyone was waiting for Maria Uva.

Eyes glued to the cliff. Spirits in nervous anticipation. "Will she be wearing our tricolor?" Orazio Civa asked Zoppe.

"Maybe," the Somali said with little enthusiasm.

"Ah, Maria Uva, they say you're as beautiful as a siren."

"Sirens, mister," Zoppe said disdainfully, "are dangerous creatures, especially here in Port Said."

"But I'm as strong as Odysseus, Zoppe my friend, there's no siren who could resist me; Maria should watch out. And I want to immortalize her in my notebook. Up to now I've only drawn birds and a few wayward fish. A pretty lady would be a nice addition, don't you think?"

Civa had a nice smile and eyes that recalled the forests of Europe's far north. A handsome fellow, dark hair, refined bearing, medium height, and biceps that not even the Laocoön at the Vatican Museums could match.

Civa's looks were something that emerged gradually, with time and a certain dose of perseverance. He wasn't a heartthrob out of a romantic melodrama, listless and vain. He didn't have the sparkle of someone like Rudolph

Valentino. He was more like Amedeo Nazzari, a man to be discovered frame by frame. But women are impatient. And a good-looking man like that found himself all alone sighing over a mirage that was about to appear over an Egyptian cliffside.

Maria Uva.

Frenzy over Maria Uva, the patriot Maria, the mature, plump Italian woman the legionnaires pined for. The one with the high-pitched voice who saluted the future soldiers in the war that fascism was preparing for.

"She'll come out soon, I want to be ready, my heart is already racing for her." Zoppe studied the young man and found him a mix of contradictions.

His sentimentality didn't fit well with his blind and total loyalty to the National Fascist Party that he loved showing off at society events.

Civa said that Benito Mussolini was a beacon, the light of all knowledge. He also claimed that he would swallow even the bitterest pill for his *Duce*.

But then there was that dissonant note in his crystalline voice. The one that made you doubt his loyalty to fascism.

You would stare at his light eyes to figure out the truth, but they knew exactly how to evade scrutiny.

But Zoppe didn't care whether the boy was a fascist or not. To him, he was a tool, the weapon that destiny had provided him to free him from his jailers. In the end he was grateful to Civa. Without his help he would have probably been left to rot in that hovel, Regina Coeli.

It had all happened so fast that day, the day he was freed, months ago.

One of his guards, the bigger one, had come over and said to him, "Negro, we have to wash you today." And his colleague added as a little joke, "Maybe rubbing you with soap will turn you white."

That morning, besides the promise of being clean there was also a timid ray of sunlight penetrating the cell to cheer him.

Rome was covered in pink dust.

Maybe the tramontane is coming, the old people said.

•

"Cat got your tongue?" asked a sergeant whom Zoppe had never seen before.

The room was full of light and Zoppe had been dumped there unceremoniously by the guards.

Finally clean, shaven, groomed, he felt like he could meet the soldier's gaze. That irked the sergeant.

"There's someone outside who has come to collect you. You will finish your sentence in the service of the distinguished Count Anselmi, a father of the nation, a more illustrious fascist would be hard to find. The count wants you. He insisted on having you, you know. In no time at all he moved heaven and earth, you know how these counts are, and in a certain sense he bought you. Your fate was decided at the highest levels. Thank your saints. Be glad. You were lucky, louse, keep that in mind.

You earned yourself an entirely different destiny and you know it. But the count wants you and there's nothing I can do about it."

The sergeant gritted his teeth at that last sentence.

Zoppe remembered Haji Safar's words. *"Qofkii aammuso waa dhintay."* He who chooses silence is already dead.

And he decided that even if the battle was lost, he could at least try to fight the future ahead of him.

He didn't want to die a count's slave.

"But ..." He had trouble getting the words out. "But, sir, I can't go into the service of a count. I have a job to finish at the base, in Rome."

A thunderous laugh filled the room, burying his minute words.

In that same room were also the three goons who had beaten him days ago. "Are they going to start up again?" he wondered.

He felt a pang in his chest and a pitiful creak between his balls. That's where Beppe had hit him the hardest.

"Here are your friends. Aren't you happy to see them again?" To distract himself from that miserable sight his eyes began to wander. A lone portrait of Benito Mussolini stood out on the wall. No trace of the king.

"Maybe," Zoppe wondered, "they forgot about the king?"

It was a sad room. The gray walls gave it a touch of claustrophobia, which rendered every sensation stagnant. No flowers, no family photos, not even scratch paper with

doodles or stubby pencils for company. A layer of pink dust remained the single sign of life.

"For a while, boy, you're done with the base."

"But … if … that is, that's the only reason I'm here, to translate, they sent me specially. Has anyone notified the priests?"

"Forget about your Jesuits. Erase them from your memory. Only they could dump a Negro like you in Rome. And to translate what? There's no war yet. You would have been useful later. Right now you're only in the way. We tolerate Father Evaristo's little priests because the Vatican gave us strict orders to do so, and it's trouble if you ruffle a single hair on their heads. But we've got their number, oh yes, we do."

Zoppe sank to the floor like a rag.

"Come on, don't be like that. We don't want to hurt you. Consider this a little chat among friends."

Zoppe's hand instinctively went to shield his groin. He would defend his manhood even if it cost his life. They wouldn't leave him sterile. Death would be better. And he had promised Asha the Rash, beautiful Asha, that he would come back to Magalo and marry her.

Zoppe bit his tongue.

And he began mentally reciting a prayer, one he had known since childhood, that had the ancestral power of driving away the evil spirits that whispered horrors in the heart of creation.

"We found an interesting photo among your personal effects." Photo? They'd searched his room.

"Pretty girl, this one. How old is she? Nine? Ten? Her chest isn't too developed yet, I see … hmm …"

Ayan, his sister.

What chest was this guy talking about? She was still a child. He felt a wave of disgust.

The photo was from a year ago. Ayan had an innocent, expectant look. Braids close-knit like ants framed a perfectly oval head. And her big lips were bursting with stories and laughter.

She was pretty and sweet, his sister.

One day, like a good brother, he would give her away to the best of men. But now, Zoppe wondered, would he live long enough to keep that promise? What would Ayan do without her brother?

If those three fascists went back to work on him, he wouldn't live through it. "Your sister, right? We know."

Zoppe shivered. *Please, not Ayan, Lord, save her from his madness.*

Not a single muscle on his face betrayed his concern. Zoppe opened his big dark eyes wide to show them he wasn't afraid and that their threats had no effect on him.

But his temples throbbed and his stomach juices jetted into his esophagus. Back straight, chin out, eyes fixed, shoulders wide.

"It would be a shame if something happened to this little girl, don't you agree?" and then he snapped his fingers with a sound that to Zoppe was louder than the bells of St. Peter's.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

Beppe stepped forward.

The scene went by so fast that Zoppe had almost no time to figure out what was happening.

Beppe unzipped his fly, pulled out his penis, rubbed it for a minute and then released his warm spunk all over little Ayan's photo.

"Ugh, what a careless soldier," the sergeant said. "It would be a shame if something like this happened to your sister, wouldn't it?"

Zoppe was shaken, but his face remained impassive.

"She's at Via Cardinal Massaia, in the Littorio Quarter … the one you Somalis have the nerve to call Warta Nabbada."

Via Cardinal Massaia … no one called it that. Everyone knew that was Haji Safar's street, the street of the soothsayers and storytellers. That was where the stars were studied and worlds were glimpsed in the eyes of newborns.

The Italians had stuck some unknown cardinal's name on it. There was a Via Cardinal Massaia in Mogadishu too, in Xamar Weyne, right in the middle of the marketplace.

The name was an abuse in Mogadishu too.

13

ADUA

There was a small movie theater in Magalo, the fascists built it in the '30s—an ideal vehicle, they thought, for colonial propaganda. There were several in Somalia. Ours was a movie theater intended for the local population. It was so run down, with busted seats and a sheet metal roof, nothing compared to the Cinema Xamar in Mogadishu, with its austere Mussolinian structure. Magalo's little cinema had no pretensions—it was plain, subdued, almost hidden. The people loved it, it felt like it belonged to them, like the well in the center of the city, the city hall, the livestock market, the goldsmith square. When the Italians left in 1960, a magnate born in the old quarter of Xafad, a man named Idris Shangani, decided to restore it. Idris Shangani was one of those Somalis who had made money during colonialism by sending bodies to the front during Italy's war against Ethiopia. Then after the end of World War II, when the United Nations decreed that Italy and the newly-formed Trust Territory of Somaliland would ferry us to independence, Mr. Shangani got even richer.

"He was a crook, that one!" my father repeated daily at lunch.

"He was a collaborator, they're the worst." He trembled as he said that word, his voice broken, fragmented. A tremor went through his whole body, turning him to jelly. My father grew agitated and spit on the ground, his mouth filled with curses and insults for the figure who in his eyes incarnated the greatest sin.

But these outbursts were rare for him, because Father didn't like to talk about the past.

Yes, he preferred to keep quiet.

Sure, Mr. Shangani was a crook, but how lucky we'd been to have him as a fellow citizen of Magalo! Without his money we would have never known about the existence of Ava Gardner or Norma Jean. The movies they showed were dated, but in Magalo, where there'd never been anything of the sort, those old films dubbed with literal translations from Italian were manna from the heavens. In Magalo, thanks to the big screen, the women had an hour every day to dream. They lined up after the *Dhuhr* prayer, only after stuffing their fat husbands with food. They never managed to see a whole film, they didn't have time. At home there was the mending, ironing, cleaning, cooking, nursing the children, bathing the grandparents. They went to the little cinema just to catch a few frames, a few fleeting details. In fifteen minutes they'd decided whom they loved and hated. Lots of them needed just five minutes, the minimum to get lost in the blue eyes of a fleeting Paul Newman. The virgins of Magalo, however,

preferred Gregory Peck. And they were all crushed when, almost without a fight, he let go of that sweet flower Audrey Hepburn … And then there were cowboys and Indians, every little boy's favorite. It took only a moment to turn a movie into a shared game played on Magalo's blistering sands. Most cheered for the Indians, of course, which makes sense—they were more impressive. They had trouble relating to John Wayne. "He waddles like a pig," the kids yelled. And on the blistering beaches they made a show of imitating the heavy walk that made Wayne look like a freshly infibulated girl, the stitches still enflaming her tender vagina. No, no, the Indians were better. They had boundless bravery and those fantastic feathers.

Yea for the redskins, down with the John Waynes!

Magalo's little cinema was called *Il Faro*, The Lighthouse, or *Munar* as we say in Somali.

In fact everything was a munar, in Magalo. Everything was a reminder of the great labor of our forefather Torobow, who had erected the tower that later became our city's beacon by his strength alone. In Magalo, wherever you went, you saw a lighthouse. There was the Munar nightclub, the Munar grocery, the Munar Italian bakery, Munar Square.

Our lighthouse was considered, like the one on Cape Guardafui, one of Somalia's historic monuments.

My father no longer liked the lighthouse after it was modified in the thirties. "They defaced us," he would say.

But if you asked him to elaborate he shied away like a virgin at her first kiss. The additional element Papa hated so much was the blade of an axe. With that, Torobow's

Moorish tower was transformed into a grandiose *fasces lictoriae*, the bundle of rods symbolizing fascist power.

"For the perpetual glory of Rome," was inscribed on the base. For me, reading that inscription made me long for that faraway Rome, full of *la dolce vita* and cabaret.

I didn't understand fascism then.

The memory of it was already gone. And you would always find people like Idris Shangani who would happily tell you how life wasn't so bad under the Italians. Usually it was a former *askari* or a *madama* who hadn't minded being a kept woman. But how could a little thing like me understand those details? One master is as good as another, that was the gist. And Magalo wasn't Mogadishu; in Magalo, history went by at an angle. There was no Abdullahi Issa, the spirit of Somali independence, to educate us. To explain to the little people of Magalo that the value of our land lay in us, African citizens, architects of our own destiny. No one had ever told us that colonialism was the problem. Even those who knew the truth said nothing. My father, for example, said nothing.

He muttered a few things, comments so vague they didn't express, they didn't explain. I was a little girl, I didn't think about political matters.

I wanted to be like Norma Jean. I didn't care about the rest. I wanted the lights, the makeup, the awards, the red carpets, the passionate kisses.

I wanted to dream, dance, fly. I wanted to escape. Italy was everywhere in my life.

Italy was kisses, holding hands, passionate embraces. Italy was freedom. And I so hoped that it would become my future. In Magalo, before the socialist nationalist Siad Barre came to power, lots of Italians lived in the city. You would see them strolling down the main boulevard in their elegant clothes at sundown. Perfect ties and cufflinked sleeves. Women often sported pretty little hats that transformed their petite frames into proud and beautiful Grace Kellys. The Italians opened restaurants and gelato shops. The wealthiest had banana plantations just outside the city. At school, among us girls, we would talk about their beautiful houses and the legions of servants they had looking after them. We were jealous, I admit it. And more than one dreamed of marrying an Italian when she grew up.

It was Papa who dragged me and Malika to the Munar cinema for the first time. We had been in Magalo for a month when it happened. The trauma of separation was still fresh. The wound still raw. The bush was still there, frozen in front of my dark eyes.

Papa Zoppe hated Mr. Shangani, but he loved cinema too much to deprive himself of such a joy.

That day, when we came home from school, he told us: "Tonight we're all going to the cinematograph." He was happy. I was not. I was alone, terribly alone.

I missed the goats and in my dreams I cried for my mama, the woman I'd thought was my mother.

"Mama, rescue me," I called out to her. "Mama, help me," I begged. But the nights went by and no one came.

Only the broken coo of romancing owls soothed my fitful sleep.

Especially at night, I couldn't accept my new condition as a city girl, even if with every day my body was slowly adapting to the sweet seductions of a too-comfortable life. I was getting used to it—almost without noticing—to silence, a soft mattress, and morning breakfast, injera with melted butter and sugar. The rhythm of my life was marked by the call of the muezzin and the school bell. I didn't have to worry about hyenas and lions anymore. And in the bright midday sky, sweet birds chirped. The vultures, horrid flying vermin, were just a memory.

"I love it here," my sister Malika once said to me. I spit in her face. The betrayal didn't come as a surprise, but it hurt. It hurt badly. It was a hurt that was overwhelming and full of anger.

The night we went to the cinema, the old man had in mind celebrating Malika's tenth birthday. It had just rained and the frogs covered the earth in a cloak of green. The silly things had emerged from their burrows to take advantage of the sudden cool. Slick and jumpy, they basked in the last drops of the rainy season.

"Remember, stay in your seats. And don't move," our father told us. "Especially when the lights go off. You'll bother the others."

"All right, Father," my sister said. I nodded slightly.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, but if you disobey you'll get a taste of my *karbaash*."

The karbaash—we'd heard about that. It may have been Hajiedda Fardosa herself who put us on guard. A karbaash was a whip used for donkeys.

We entered the theater. And we sat down, Malika and I, as we'd been instructed. Then I suddenly felt a tug on one of my braids. My heart jumped.

"Ow," I said. It was Sultana Patel, my Indian classmate, sitting behind me. There were lots of Indians in Magalo.

"Don't you know I'm with my father? If you make me yell you'll get me in trouble. We have to be quiet, you know!"

"I'm not dumb," she replied. "I saw him get up. And what's the big deal if you talk to me? The movie hasn't started yet."

I froze. I wondered if it was a good idea to explain to my new friend that I didn't know what was going to happen in the room. What was a movie? And how could you tell when it started?

I was embarrassed. I had so many questions I wanted to ask Sultana, so pretty and kind, my only friend. But I didn't want her to laugh at me. Discover my ignorance. "Have you seen the Maciste movies?"

"No, you?"

"Yeah," she replied. "They're boring though. There's a guy, the star, who thinks about nothing but battle, from start to finish. No love scenes, kisses, pretty clothes … Of course, I love Nadira. She dances a lot. I learn a new step from every one of her movies."

"Oh," I remarked as if I had understood. I was hopeless. I had to get out of the conversation, as quickly as possible.

"Promise you'll teach me to dance." My tone was peremptory.

"Promise," she murmured. I looked at her.

She was beautiful.

Her mother had gathered her long silky hair into a bun, which she'd decorated with a garland of flowers. The white petals reflected the colorful bundle of the sari that Sultana wore with elegance and ease. It was the first time I'd seen her in a sari. At school we wore uniforms: pants and white shirts. But now we were at the cinema and Sultana looked beautiful.

I felt so ugly.

I looked at myself and sadly noticed how monotone I was. Scruffy braids, a potato sack as my only good clothes, half-broken clogs that were a humiliating sight. I was as dingy as a defective lamp.

Despite everything Sultana smiled at me, as if she really liked me.

"Okay, we'll start with a few steps." Then her smile faded. "Hey, your dad is coming. We'll talk about it at school, sister."

We were partners in crime, true friends. I was happy, but my nerves didn't go away.

The movie was coming and I had no idea what a movie was.

The lights in the theater went out. My father, with his

long, henna-red beard, turned and said to me, "Remember, don't get up for any reason. And you'll be in trouble if you wet your pants."

Dark. Then in succession the sea, a sunset, music so loud it hurt my ears, words bigger than in the textbooks at school and a sense of anticipation that shook my soul. It was the first time I'd ever seen the sunset without the muezzin calling us to the *Maghrib* prayer. That plastic sunset almost seemed sacrilegious. Born of the son of Satan. I was frightened. I looked at my father and Malika. But they seemed immune to the terror that was consuming me inside, entranced by the words that ran before our eyes.

Then the voice came. It was Italian but at the time I wasn't very familiar with the language. But I was able to understand that long ago someone called Ulysses had tricked a sorceress called Circe—what a pretty name! There were unusual names going around at school too. There was a Mario in our class and a Ginevra. Skin pink like the pulp of a ripe grapefruit. Red like watermelon when the teacher called on them. Ginevra and Mario often changed colors. Sometimes they were green, especially when they caught cold, or white, when they were really startled. They were funny, with their rainbow. And unlucky. Unlike me, who was always brown.

Sultana was brown too, but not as dark. Sometimes she changed color too. Mario and Ginevra more, though.

As I was lost in these thoughts, a woman in a blue dress

appeared on the screen, on some kind of strange boat very different from the ones I had seen in Magalo. The woman seemed to be wearing a kind of sari. But her shoulders were covered by a light veil, much like the *garbasaar* our Somali women wear. But that blue-clad figure had just appeared when the scene changed. No longer the sea, but a gloomy, dark place like one of my nightmares where the vultures devoured my goats. I closed my eyes for a while and it felt like an eternity. When I opened them again there was the woman in blue with two men next to her. One was nearly naked. He had a leopard-print cloth covering his privates and lots of muscles he showed off very proudly. To his left, there was a strange white man with stuff all over his face and body.

I wondered if Maciste, that blond in the loincloth, at the end of this thing everyone called a movie, would come out of the screen to greet us.

To me, that night, all that fiction seemed a reality. But a reality that was better than my present one.

I don't know when it happened, but as the story went on and the characters multiplied, my fear began to fade.

By the time the movie was halfway through I was completely won over. That night I didn't dream of the bush. No goats, no mama, no rains, no vultures. There was just Maciste to soothe me. His hair blond like the horizon.

I slept soundly.

And Magalo no longer seemed like such a horrible place.

14

TALKING-TO

Adua, come here, now. Don't make me lose my patience. What's the meaning of this? Come on, out with it. Why am I sending you to school, eh? To read this junk? What is this? Come on, answer! I'll tell you what it is: crap! It's a photo novel, paper full of foolishness. Love is nonsense. Love, Adua, doesn't exist, better get it in your head now. Don't be like your fool of a mother Asha the Rash, she really believed in love. She called her outbursts love and disgraced us all by dying. The neighbors say I killed her by leaving her alone while she was pregnant. They say she died of love, of love for me.

Have you ever heard such colossal nonsense? Dying for love, as if that were possible. She died, your mother, because she was a fool, to spite me. I won't have you, my daughter, go down the same road to perdition. Get all your photo novels and bring them to me. We'll burn them. We'll make a nice bonfire. That way you'll see what happens with love. Love, my child, always goes up in smoke.

15

ZOPPE

"Maria, come out, I love you!" "Maria, I worship you!" "Maria, you're gorgeous!" "Sing me something, Maria! Please, sing me something. I left my girl back at home and I'm homesick."

"Maria, will there really be war?"

"Maria, bless me in case I die, I'll die happy thinking of you!"

Zoppe couldn't understand the *gaal*. They were all huddled at the steamship landing to see that woman decked out in the Italian flag, greeting the legionnaires about to leave for East Africa.

"The war is coming soon," said a soldier on his right.

"And Maria Uva is going to boost our spirits for all the hardships we'll have to face."

Zoppe's desire to run from that landing was strong. What did he have to do with those pink people and their dirty colonial war?

Avenge Adua, stand on the side of the empire, make way for the virility of Rome … He pissed on that propaganda.

All he wanted from the Italians was the money to buy a big house in Skuraran for his Asha.

Everything else was of no consequence to him.

"What am I doing here?" Zoppe asked himself, watching the throng of Italians grow on the unsteady steamship landing. The Italians clamored, waving their hands, sending their enamored sighs toward the bare cliffside.

Oh, Maria, love me, take me, hold me, kiss me, squeeze me, smother me. Pray for us sinners, Maria, now and in the hour of our death.

Amen.

•

Zoppe was hot and his head was fuming. Getting all worked up over some whore, especially one who was pudgy and plain. That Maria Uva must have had some advantage. Maybe she earned money from these shows for the troops, or was even the kept woman of some big fish in the regime.

Meanwhile, the clamor continued.

The soldiers confused their hard-ons with the old catechism lessons they'd learned by heart as children.

And any Maria Uva would rise up in their hearts as if she were the Virgin Mary in the flesh. A sister, a mother, a wife, a goddess.

Maskiin … Zoppe thought. Poor kids. Was this how Italy betrayed its youth?

Zoppe felt his breath falter on that landing heavy with sighs. The pungent odor of cheap cologne combined with the soldiers' smelly armpits was making him woozy.

Maria, Maria, Maria …

Come out, love, sing for us, blessed are you among women. Was bringing out some hairy old cunt all it took to convince them that Benito Mussolini's war was good and just?

•

When Maria Uva appeared on the rocks, the cries of the worked up men drowned out the sound of the sea. A wave of repressed manhood crashed over the bulkheads and every surface was bathed in desire. Maria Uva's voice was shrill, high, almost irritating. But for those little soldiers the show was paradise.

It was in that moment of general captivation that Rebecca appeared to Zoppe.

The vision was clear. There was Rebecca, and she was holding her little girl's stuffed bear.

"I didn't think you would cross the sea," Zoppe said. "I thought I wouldn't dream of you anymore."

"How are you?"

"I don't know."

The vision started growing dimmer and Rebecca's face less clear.

"Atrocious news is coming," she merely said. "My husband minimizes it, almost doesn't notice. He keeps talking about his father who died fighting in Vittorio Veneto, his uncle Nathan's medal of honor. He's a nationalist, my Davide. Just the other day he told me, 'If Mussolini goes to war with the Abyssinians, it would be nice to enlist and go to East Africa.'"

"There's money in this war."

"But don't you feel pity for your people? Don't you feel pity for the deaths it will cause?"

"Money is the only thing that really counts in this life. You can't wipe your behind with pity and I need to get married. There's a woman waiting for me down in my country."

"A woman? Really?"

"If I gather up the money I'm hoping to, then yes, there will be a woman."

"Davide told me that we could have a plot of land there just for us, even servants."

Rebecca pulled her knees to her chest. In an instant, she disappeared. She would never come back again.

•

Zoppe touched his head, fingering the folds of the turban that Count Anselmi made him wear.

"Ah, bravo Zoppe, look at you, you're a vision. That blue turban gives you class. My mother, rest her soul, was English, my father, Count Ludovico Anselmi, met her during one of his trips to India. She and her family were in the retinue of the ambassador to the greatest empire on earth. There, my parents admired the class of Indian soldiers with blue turbans."

The British Empire, that's all Count Celestino Anselmi talked about. It was his great obsession.

"Italy deserves one just like it," he went around saying in every drawing room. "We're the ones, after all, who

gave the world Augustus. It's up to us to civilize the savages, we're the ones who must bear this heavy burden."

Despite the imperial conceit that made him unpalatable at times, Count Anselmi was the best employer Zoppe could have had in those circumstances.

He was a delicate creature, Count Anselmi, of medium build, with a pearl-gray face. Long hands, thin fingers, ideal for the piano. His straw-colored hair clashed with the dark hair on his arms and his full brown eyebrows. Zoppe suspected that the count manipulated more than one aspect of his body. He was so feminine, polished, evanescent.

It was in Tivoli, at an eighteenth century estate, where the count had received him for the first time two months before.

Zoppe was stunned by all that wealth. Rhinoceros horns and Murano glass, fabrics from Goa and furs from Kazakhstan, Turkish kilims and Persian rugs, miniatures depicting emperors in erotic poses and bound volumes on the holy British Academy.

Next to the rhinoceros horns, Zoppe noticed a stuffed buffalo head. On its face there was almost a sneer of satisfaction.

The room had a pungent odor, like sweaty bodies. Zoppe felt nauseated. Past orgasms and cries of terror resounded in his ears. What had gone on in that house? If he could, he would have run away that instant. But he was no longer free to do anything. The count, with his

benevolent air, had bought him. Now Zoppe was his. If he wanted to return to Magalo, if he wanted to see Asha the Rash's beautiful eyes again, he had to get in line.

"Do you know how to dance?" the count asked, starting a pas de deux. "Ah, silly me, you must practice savage dances where you come from." His words had a mix of arrogance and prurience. "Those dances where you're all naked and thrashing around. Like snakes, you know what I mean."

"We don't dance," Zoppe said. "I've never seen anyone in my family dance."

"If affairs of state didn't summon me to higher duties, I'd stay here and dance out my most extreme fantasies. But now I'm thirsty, we need water."

He picked up and rang the bell.

"Teodoro, there you are finally. Bring us a carafe of cold water, I'm dying. Be quick."

The count was pale and not even two glasses of water brought back his color. Zoppe had the impression he was trembling. The count pulled a blue vial out of his pants pocket, brought it to his nose and sniffed hard.

"Listen to me, Zoppe, I pulled you out of trouble because I'm good and you can be of use to me. Show me your tongue."

Zoppe obeyed. By then that was all he knew how to do.

"What a nice, thick, red tongue. Mmm … I like it. It'll be useful in Africa, and if it proves itself, it will be well compensated. Count Anselmi is generous."

16

ADUA

I feel so tired. My face in pieces.

I feel so tired. My eyes swollen. I feel so tired. My back broken.

I want a shower, a pillow, a dream.

But at home my little Titanic is sulking. I don't have the courage to go back. We had a fight, my little elephant.

He and I always got along. Always sweet words between us. Always affectionate. But today this fight, and I'm really not used to it. I'm a softie. I love sinking my hands in my man's spongy, curly hair. I fall asleep there and I feel younger, with more energy.

But today he didn't let me anywhere near his head. "Leave me alone," he said.

He was surly, hostile.

That cowardly boy I saved from the street is now rebelling against me. I should have let him rot on Via Giolitti with that cheap gin he bought from the Bangladeshi for some spare change. Toxic hooch that would have wrecked his arteries and his breath. I should have left him there at Termini station, at the mercy of the elements and the skinheads. At least now I wouldn't have to put up with his sulking.

But my little Titanic is under my protection now. I am his armor. It's my money that protects him from the elements and the skinheads. He has a roof over his head, a belly that's always full, and even time to chitchat with his little friends who have found refuge in Northern Europe. I'm sure he's there all day writing "darling" or "my love." He's glued to Facebook. He sits at the computer spying on the lives of others. And these other people are always young women. Their names are Howa, Halima, Habshiro, Anisa. They live in places where Somalis can count on subsidies and housing on the state's dime. And now that every day my little husband sends his insipid declarations of love to Norway, Finland, Great Britain, Sweden … damned Sweden. I have the impression there's a girl there he really likes. Some Zahra, I think it is. Every time I ask him, "Who are these girls?" he hastily replies, "Cousins."

I've forgiven him these virtual distractions. I know he's going to leave me sooner or later anyway. I know our union is temporary. I'm old, after all. I have skin like a checkerboard and it's not like I feel like having sex all that much at my age. He wants me to take it in my mouth … I feel so dirty telling you … but that's what he wants … and, you know, I try to do it. But I always get horrible neck aches. I do it to make him happy. Plus it's the only thing like that he asks of me. Other than that it's him making me happy. But today he got all sulky and I can't stand it.

You know what we fought about, my little elephant? He saw my movie. Yes, the one movie I made.

It was showing on one of those regional channels with a strange name. He saw the whole thing. From the first frame to the last.

He saw me running naked on the golden sand at Capocotta, he saw when Aldo de Luigi put his hands on my butt, he saw me making out with Nick Tonno in a 1953 Chrysler and he also saw what my privates looked like then. Yes, he saw everything.

Now he has all my kisses and moans imprinted on his mind, and he too was sucked into my headlong expressions of love dubbed at the Via Margutta studio. They gave me a languid, honeyed voice for the movie. "Yours is too harsh," the director told me. Then he added, "If it's dubbed, your sacred body will get the drawl it needs to make every man in the world go head over heels." I nodded like a spring, a forced yes I didn't understand.

Just standing there in front of a movie camera like Rita Hayworth seemed incredible. What mattered was being a diva, the adrenaline, wanting immortality more than anything else.

I wanted to explain to my sweet little Titanic, to my little suckling husband, that I was young then, inexperienced, lost in my celluloid dreams and so alone. I wanted to explain to him what my life was like then. That of course his had been hard, and I understood that it had been difficult to escape from desert marauders and sea junkers, but mine too, as far as difficulty goes, was no joke.

I wanted to tell him how I used to be. How I had imagined my future self. The things I'd wanted for myself when I was younger.

But as usual he didn't let me talk.

He sealed my mouth with his own shouting.

And then he finished with the word sharmutta, whore. My heart was pounding. I was afraid I was going to burst from pain right there in front of that boy.

I pulled myself together and threw a pan at him. Then he started sulking again.

Him judging me. I wanted to strangle him.

17

TALKING-TO

Are you crying, Adua? Do you dishonor me like that? Good girls never cry. Did you see your sister Malika? She didn't even shed one tear, and you, what are you doing now?

Trying to drown me? Did you expect just a tiny cut, Adua? Don't make all this fuss, come on now, you're irritating me. Aunt Fardosa called the best midwife to do your *gudniinka*. Now you're free, Adua, just think about that. You don't have that damned clitoris that makes all women dirty. Snip, it's gone, finally! Thanks be to God. The pain will pass. The pain is momentary. Whereas the joy of this liberation, Adua, endures.

Later, you will have only the happiness of being pure, finally closed as God commands. Your sex won't dangle anymore, Adua. It's beautiful to be pure. A good thing. The best. Think what a nice life you'll have without that nasty knocker hanging obscenely between your legs, as if you were a man. I've seen women with it, and I'll tell you, it's not a pretty sight. They're repulsive, they're hungry for flesh, violent. Noisy. You've been spared, Adua, from this shame. Now you're closed, clean, beautiful. You're like my

mother, like my mother's mother, and like all the women worthy of esteem in this big family of ours. Your mother, Asha the Rash, that fool, was against the practice, imagine. She said, "No one will touch my daughter, no one will infibulate her." Luckily she's dead. And now you're saved, closed, without that filthy clitoris reminding you you're a woman. Now nothing will distract you. You'll get a good degree and then I'll give you away to the best of men. When you're older you'll thank me.