

# A Slow Moving Night

---

Ahmed Ismail Yusuf

On the high mountainous land of the Sanaag region in Somalia, *jiilaal* season showed neither compassion nor mercy on its inhabitants. The trees stood still, the boughs refused to sway, even slightly, and the reflection of the sun's rays shone on rocks with flat surfaces. A herd of sheep and goats moved about in a mad fury to seek sanctuary under the shade of a tree, which had shrunk within the past two hours or so, from a sizable length able to provide shelter to a negligible hue. Once they got under the tree and into the shade, the sheep huddled in concert. Some sat, some remained standing, and some hid their heads under the others, but the goats butted one another, competing for better positions. The day slowly progressed beyond the zenith, yet the heat persisted, driving the herd into a delirious lust for water.

Ewe (she-the-sheep) finally had enough of it. Suddenly she broke out of the herd's temporary huddle and moved on, westward. One by one, the rest of her family flocked behind. The goats, too, left the shade, but instead of trailing the sheep chose to scatter about, scrub grazing.

Thousands of years of experience, passed down from generation to generation, had taught herdsmen to recognize the behaviors of certain animals. Thus it was quite apparent to both of us (my younger brother and I) that the sheep were on the move in search of water. It was our job, however, to keep them away from drinking, regardless. The reasons were many, but chief amongst them was that, in the *jiilaal* (winter) season, as well as *xagaa* (summer), nomads in Somalia water-feed their livestock in a managed manner. Through their thorough knowledge of nature, they are able to weigh the severity of drought by estimating how much moisture the trees have stored in their roots and how much

juice is left in their leaves. The data they gather help them to decide how long a flock of sheep or goats could lust for water but continue to survive without it. It's a matter of economic grazing, calculated by the amount of available food. Trying to control the amount of water their animals are taking in, they make sure that there is enough space left in their stomachs for the fodder as well.

Naturally, sheep are a bit slower and less adventurous than the goats. Feeling safer in packs, they neither spread over nor ascend to the highest peaks of mountains. Goats, on the other hand, climb high on the roughest rocks, and graze precariously on tilted slopes and cliff edges. Yet always alert, they rarely let a foe catch them off guard. If they ever blunder into a mishap and awaken a beast stealing a nap, they let out a high-pitched distress bleat. The sheep, however, may keep on feasting on foliage while a coyote is goring them. And just in case you might ask, sheep "baa" mainly on two occasions: one, when they are looking for their broods and, two, when they are in search of water. Yet both goats and sheep share a single misfortune—the need for a vigilant, tireless watcher, necessitated by a plethora of predators (hyenas, leopards, jackals, coyotes, lions, cheetahs, and men). All of these carnivores are prone to wait for a chance to snatch a meal.

For his size and age it was not an accident that my brother instinctively saw fit to follow the breakaway herd of sheep, for he knew that I, the older of the two and thus the stronger, was going to make him do so anyway. He was aware, of course, that I would try my best to avoid sweating more than he!

From a distance too far from our view, the howling of baboons echoed through the hollow valley beds. To the west of us a falcon soared high in the heavens, vexing me to wonder whether it was searching for a long lost companion or was just cheerfully flying for the joyous ride.

My train of thought was rudely interrupted, however, when I spied an army of ants approaching only inches away. I turned around and faced them as though they were an invading enemy, and sized them up. Instantly, I was rather disarmed by their ingenuity to serve the full circle of life. Some were carrying cutaway green leaves ten times heavier than their own weight. Others burdened themselves with as much of their mass, yet some simply followed the rest in droves. My eyes could not help but try to trace back their origin as I stood up staring far beyond the present sight, but I only saw a tiny, darkened line, snaking through the terrain.

As I began to follow the trail, I saw a chameleon, lashing a vindictive tongue, tossing ants from the procession on the other end of the line into his mouth and gobbling them down. He barely acknowledged me before scurrying off. I rushed forward to survey the damage that had been inflicted on the delicate path, almost invisible to human eyes. At the moment, it had not yet occurred to me that I was not going to be able to tell where the ant bridge had brutality been broken nor had my marginal thinking permitted me to conceive that I was not going to be proficient enough to build it back.

The line was battered in several places. A lonely ant, trying to go about her daily chores, appeared confused, stopped, ran, stopped and ran again. Apparently another befuddled one ran back and forth, then left and right. Carrying a cutaway clump of leaves, yet another ant seemed to be following an invisible map and veered off to the left. Then a lonely one emerged from the dust and imperviously went straight onward as though she were on a definitively determined line to lead them all away. Alas, not a single ant followed. There was no longer that confidence of marching on with carefree pride. There was no sense of marveling at the serenity and beauty of nature that surrounded them.

As usual, I thought a human being should mend the mess, laying tiny twigs on the end of where I thought the line was broken to the other end of where I thought that it had begun. Then I would pick a twig and place it right in front of the disoriented ants. If one got on it, I would transfer it onto the line that I had aligned. But to my misfortune, each one declined to follow my moronically constructed line of logs.

"Let them be doomed to their death of stupidity," I consoled myself. "God helps those who help themselves."

Not more than a minute had passed, when to my dismay, two ants emerged from each end of the line, met in the middle, kissed-greeted, and then proceeded on their respective ways. In another minute, columns of them miraculously converged from opposing ends, of an invisible line. A parade began on a single thread, with all now facing the same direction as though nothing had disturbed the path.

I was about to take leave when I saw another group from the same colony unfolding a theatrical trick by dragging a small dead gecko with a precision that human soldiers would have had difficulty matching. The unfortunate creature was turned over, her white belly turned blue in the spots where the ant bites were greater and the poison had been injected into her blood stream. The army, many under the tiny

gecko, more on the front than the back, latched on to the legs, transporting an eliminated foe.

The ants' ingenious, collaborative effort had engaged my curiosity until suddenly a distinctive, distraught bleat of a goat caught me off guard. And then it hit me that I had committed the cardinal sin that all herdsmen are sworn to avoid: You should never let your herd out of your sight, lest you shoulder a dreadful consequence. As I dashed off to where the plea was emanating from, my apprehension was heightened a thousand-fold when I heard my brother cry out from the middle of the valley bed. I knew immediately that he had fallen off the edge of a steep slope somewhere. Ignoring the cries of the bleating goat, I took off to find him.

Frantically I ran down the slope, dislodging shells, stones, and small sticks. The cacophony of the tiny avalanche of stones echoed throughout the valley below causing the goats to stampede, climbing to the highest tip at the other side of the ridge. Heading down in a haze of confusion I came upon Shamad, my favorite goat, who had just delivered twin kids. I did not stop for her but could see from distance that one of the kids was waddling with the placenta still swathed on him. I predicted a problem: that this could attract the most heinous, hideous creature of all, the spotted hyena. But I had no time to attend to them. The fear that I was going to find my brother with lacerations and broken bones besieged me. "God, please don't let it be the spinal cord," I pleaded over and over again.

My legs were about to give out. And now charging through the thorny underbrush, my shabby clothes were torn to pieces from my body. But I kept on pleading with God to give my brother a chance and not to penalize him for my witless neglect. I solemnly swore that if He would heed my plea today, I would never, ever, be consumed with admiration and awe of those small creatures that had rendered me mindless!

I was, as well, leery of how I was going to convince my mother later on that whatever calamity had befallen our goats happened because of "God's will." She was a severe disciplinarian and, worse, she had already admonished me on numerous occasions about all the mishaps that could hit the earth with no warning when one did not remain vigilant while herding. I knew she was going to wail at me and bemoan my carelessness. But of utmost concern for me now was my brother. I was terrified that I was going to find him with a broken hip, a hand or a leg, or maybe just a pulled muscle. Much worse, I was frightened that

I might find him lying in a pool of his own blood or with a severed spinal cord that could render him paraplegic for the rest of his life. Since it was the *jilaal* season, I was quite worried that even a minor injury would take longer to heal.

Realizing that I was going to be in a lot of trouble from my mother, I began to pray for a mild beating, or better yet, a harsh scolding.

All of these thoughts collided in my head as I hurled myself down the steep slope. But my fears for my own survival were interrupted by the cries of the sheep and my brother's piercing howl. And then I spotted him! It looked like he was just sitting on the ground, facing away. As I got closer, I was able to see that he had a sheep by the leg and was pulling it away from something. When I was a few feet away, I realized that he was in a contentious tug-of-war with one of the most dangerous predators—the leopard. The elusive beast was strangling a thoroughbred ram and had torn off a slab of fresh flesh from its jaw. Because of the ensuing struggle, blood from the wound was trickling down to the ground. The leopard, in a crouching pose, looked ready to pounce at any moment. Every time my brother tried to pull the ram away, the leopard, claws fully extended, feinted to lunge but hung onto the ram with his powerful jaws. Whenever the leopard made his deceptive move, my brother would let go of the leg, jump back and wail louder. Startled, the leopard would recoil, growling, and my brother once more would summon up the courage to lock onto the same leg again and again!

Approaching the impasse and dancing with danger, my heart froze with fear as my brother tossed back a look at me. Not knowing how I could save him, I ducked down. My petulant brother, however, was putting up a valiant fight and, with my arrival, expected to be bailed out or at least assisted. It should not surprise you that I wanted to do just that, but I could not wrench a whiff of courage from my soul. Lying low and supporting my weight on one hand, I freed the other for defense. I raised my head up from behind a bush. There was the leopard in full view. His sheer presence forced me to wish that my brother would not play this game. I wondered what he was trying to prove and how on earth he was going to get out of this stalemate.

My brother stuck his neck out and with eyes bulging, looked into the brush, as though that would hasten help, when the leopard rose slightly, seized the ram by shoulders with his claws and tried to snatch it away. I quickly ducked down again, praying that the leopard had not spotted me.

By now the silent ram had had enough of the pain. He baaed so loud that the rest of his family, huddled only a few feet away, felt compelled to join his plea. Contributing to the chorus of terror, my brother continued to shriek like a boar. Helplessly, I yearned for the land to give away under me. I was begging God to deposit me back into my mother's warm womb when my brother audaciously let out, "Doogle, where are you?"

Let me tell you, I was not impressed at all that my brother had thrown my name into the ethereal air when all he had to do was to let go of the ram. We had plenty of sheep, and losing one, even a thoroughbred ram, wasn't going to make us poorer.

But my brother continued to call me, "Doogle, show me your bravery, show me the valor you mustered when you fought off that jackal long ago!" What my brother could not remember, because I had never told a soul, was how terrified I was facing that jackal.

With the misfortune of hearing my name disseminated so generously into the air, I decided to come out to defend it despite the distorted dare. Yet I still could not move, nor could I garner the gift of courage to confront that roaring beast. And it dawned on me that my brother was not fair about his adoration of me, for he was inveigling me to face the "Dean of Danger." This was not a jackal, and he knew it.

My brother would not let up. He kept the heat on me, furiously fanning it. "Brother Doogle," he yelled, "The whole neighborhood knows you are brave. I know you are brave and the leopard knows you are brave. That's why I've been waiting for you, so that when he feels your aura of gallantry approaching, he will unlock his jaws, rein in his claws, and slouch away!"

I was ashen with fear and anger that my brother kept on disposing my name to the predator. I thought that the predator was going to take up his offer to challenge me at any moment now. Yet I wanted my brother to believe in me and I wanted him to keep calling me brave. And if you ask me, yes, I enjoyed it while it lasted. What I was objecting to, nevertheless, was calling me brave only if I confronted the leopard! Why would one *not* be called brave if he chose a non-confrontational approach?

I was not going to show my face because I knew that this majestic creature would cast his spell on me and I would cave in, probably whimpering with fear. I also knew that my family would preach that

if I let the leopard have this ram for a meal, he would come back for another and another and another for a lifetime of food!

I did not want to let my brother believe that I was not worthy of his praise, but still I could not move a muscle when, again, he let out, "Brother Doogle, this fool leopard has not yet gotten a whiff of you. Please hurry, just come closer and he will vanish in fear of your mere presence." My brother always spoke with maturity and unmatched eloquence.

I, on the other hand, the one who was devoid of wisdom, would say, "No little man, no. This is a leopard, the most resourceful cat of all. Once I come out of hiding, he will cast his spell on me and leave the ram, to feast on me."

I forced myself to crouch on all fours, hinged up a bit as though I were about to take off at full speed. But my legs were wobbling, my hands were weak, and my heart was pounding like a bouncing ball. I grabbed my soaring, spineless soul, and attempted to stand upright. I was not fully erect when I began to backpedal, hoping to hide myself in the shadowed field for a moment, before galloping away at full speed. Alas, my brother turned around and caught me in my compromising crouch.

In that instant my brother changed. He stopped chanting my praises and began to chide. "You fool, coward," he barked, "Where in hell are you trying to run off to?"

Furious at hearing him call me a coward I stood up, turned around, and with my chin up, I tossed up some phony courage. My brother was holding the ram by the leg while the leopard still clutched onto the shoulders, but once he began to shout at me he fortuitously loosened his grip. The leopard, unnerved, now seized the moment to snatch the "meal" away.

Completely letting go of the leg, my brother dashed off like a dart and pasted himself onto me so tightly that I thought a spirit had possessed him. I let him cling to me, so relieved that he had let loose the ominous, untamed enemy.

In relief, my body let go and sadly I realized that I had wet my pants when my brother harnessed himself to me right after the leopard had plunged his fangs into the ram's throat. The poor ram had been instantly overpowered and was not even able to manage a minor, convulsing move. He just shivered a few, feeble twitches. In a blink of an eye it was all over!

In earnest, the killer began to tend his prey, letting go of the throat and licking the blood oozing out of gaping gashes where the fangs had penetrated, growling at us every now and then. He then stood up, straddled the carcass, grasped its neck in his jaws, lifted it up, and sidle-dragged the body away. All the while he kept an eye on us. Growling and dragging the body, he lumbered up the steep slope, behind the thick brush, beside the huge rock that seemed as if it could roll away if touched, past the dry weeds, and onto the top of the slope, where he disappeared.

My brother released me from his clutch, let out a sigh, took a few steps away and started to examine me, but stopped short as he became aware of his own strange discomfort.

"Doogle," he started, looking at his pants, first one leg, then the other, then at his palms, then twisting his pants from front to back, "what...!"

"What's the matter, Taahe?" I interrupted timidly.

"Do you notice that I am wet?" he asked. And to my dismay he began to get closer, examining me with a look of disgust and surprise, showing not a shred of an emotional scar caused by his encounter with the leopard. He was no longer the petulant, buzzing, petrified child. As though nothing else had happened, he shed his horrified demeanor and put on an oblivious coat of armor, turning the tables on me.

"What are you talking about?" I cried, mimicking his conspiratorial gaze.

"Why am I wet?," he asked.

I wanted to come up with an ingenious way to protest my innocence; to deny that I had wet my pants because fear had penetrated my total being and I could no longer will my internal organs to obey me.

"I had my period," I said off handedly.

My brother jumped five feet away, laughing hysterically. "Since when did men begin to menstruate?," my thirteen-year-old brother barked.

"Since Adam and Eve," I persisted. "Besides, what the hell do you know about men's menstruation? You are too young to know and too inexperienced to care."

"Unlike you, at least I have been around long enough to know that our Dad has never menstruated," my brother jabbed me.

"How on earth do you know that? And let me hear you clearly. Are you accusing me of cowardice when I just saved your ass?"

My brother was not ready for confrontation, I guess, or perhaps he realized how desperate I had become to defend my deflated ego.

"I am only saying that I have never heard either Dad or Mom or anyone else talk about this, Doogle," he said.

"I'll have you know," I stated, thinking to stem the tide, "that women have theirs and men have theirs too. But the man type of menstruation is different from women."

I thought I had convinced him when my brother went on to ask, "And Doogle, where does this type come out?"

Damn it, I thought. What the hell, I was going to say that men fart theirs when they are scared, but at that moment the throng of sheep that had been huddling under the trees, hugging the waterhole, suddenly began stampeding toward us. I jumped up and took off, saved from any further discussion of a topic that had gotten out of hand. My brother was not far behind.

Triumphantly we had chased away and defeated an enemy.

We soon collected the rest of the held, goading them out of the waterhole and moving them up the steep climb to the top of the mountain. Exuding an animus of unease, my brother had not exchanged a word with me on our way up. On top of the ridge we would be able to see any enemy approaching. It was surrounded by steep cliffs and populated by precariously perched boulders and atrophied trees that were lean and gnarled. We let the herd graze.

Abruptly, again we heard Shamad bleating. My favorite goat with the twin kids—that I had stumbled upon earlier and then temporarily forgotten—was still in danger! I pelted away in horror, sprinting to reach her, trying to rescue her. Because of my knowledge of how jackals exercise their primal cruelty on many a goat, I thought I might be able to save her. Racing to reach my destination, it hit me that the rest of the herd of goats was nowhere in sight. Waves of nauseating regret began to inch their way to the surface, yet remained somewhat submerged within my soul. To me, Shamad was not just a goat, but also a treasure. She was blessed with a wealth of milk, was very friendly, and whenever I called her from the corral in the middle of the night, she would rush to reach me. The rest of the rascal goats would wait for you to sludge through their manure to get to them.

I raced from the top of the ridge, down the twisting slope to the riverbed, and up the opposite slope. With aching muscles and panting breath, I pushed forward. I could hear in the distance the rest of the goat herd, but, ignoring them, I used my remaining strength to get to

Shamad. There she was, oblivious to the dangers around her, caring for nothing but her new kids!

The kids were not strong enough to follow their mother yet, so I would have to carry them. I picked them up by the paws, hung them over my arms, and began to make my way down the slope, through the valley bed and up the other side of the ridge. Shamad was right on my heels, bleating as she tagged along! I was exhausted and every few yards I would stop, put down the kids, sit for a minute catching my breath, and then lift them up again and trudge a few more yards. I knew that I had no time to waste to catch up with Taahe, where I would leave the kids and Shamad, before setting off in search of the rest of the herd. It was not lost on me that if I let dusk arrive without the herd secured in their corral, the animal kingdom of carnivores would be feasting on them.

Not immediately finding my brother and his herd of sheep, I began to fear falling on yet another mishap or another disaster waiting for an unfortunate victim. Glowing with sweat, kids draped over each arm and Shamad trailing behind me, I negotiated the treacherous slope. Then I spied Taahe. Thankfully, he had already collected the sheep and was in the process of prodding them back home.

As my brother began to approach me with the appearance of manufactured menace, I knew that he was going to remind me that, as the head of the herdsmen, I had failed in my duty. He was not going to let me forget that I had committed the cardinal sin of losing half of my flock. Until that moment, however, I had still entertained a vacuous hope that my pride would remain intact. Now it was quite apparent that there was precious little else I could do but to come to terms with my embarrassment. A chill rushed up my spine.

In the dry season particularly, goats are highly valued for their enviable ability to provide milk, thus a failure to find them was not only going to be unbearably embarrassing, but economically, devastating.

The sun was hanging low and it seemed to be racing to rest behind the imposing mountain in the west. Without saying a word to one another, my brother and I both knew what that meant: there was no time to recover the remaining members of the herd. The legacy of a disastrous day in history was looming. Whatever manhood was left in me was riding on a boat of despair, so I was desperate to find the appropriate words and at least feign a recovery attempt.

"So," he said, "That's it, I guess. I mean, what else is there to do? The sun is about to descend. The goats are nowhere around and every bastard predator is going to be on the prowl in a few..."

"Shut up," I shouted. "Shut up."

He took a few steps away, bent down, picked up several pebbles and randomly threw them, one after the other. Then he turned to me with the look of "get the hell out of my sight," but instead, he just said, "Why don't you try to see whether you can find them? Goats are very smart. They can outmaneuver most predators, perching on peaks where no danger can molest them. Or, they might just choose to head on home and, in that case, they'll meet you half way," my brother said.

My brother had now infused me with a bit of hope that if only I could gather the courage to go, I might meet the herd mid way. I could at least show some effort to search for the goats.

"Taahe, you're right," I said. "I have to go and search for the goats. Take the sheep home, but whatever you do, do not let our mother know about me and the missing goats!"

Taahe was not amused. "You're putting yourself in danger. We've already lost half of what we are worth. We are on the verge of getting into the gale of neighborhood gossip and you're asking me not to tell! Well, I could try to not say a word, but tell me, how would that be possible?," he yelled.

"Please, I beg you," I pleaded. "You know I'm going to find them and bring them home. All!," I went on, not knowing why I had said that.

My brother, who was defiantly in control, now shook his head in disgust, picked up the two kids, one in each arm, and walked away towards the sheep. Shamad, who had never before wavered in her loyalty to me, chose to trail him. They just left me standing there. My brother went on from one wing of the sheep herd to the other, gathering them into a throng and then goading them away toward home.

I waited a while to see whether he might change his mind, to come back to collect me, but to no avail. Of course, he had caught me in violation of the herdsman's golden law and, at the same time, recognized that dusk was ominously approaching with its menacing darkness. He was not willing to wade through the danger nor was he to wage a war with complacency. Thus, he moved on decisively.

Watching my little brother turn on his heels made me mad but forced me not to waste a precious minute. I took off and ran and ran with such speed that I didn't notice my bleeding legs, where thorns had

ripped through the flesh, leaving wounded streaks on my calves and thighs. Racing from the top of the ridge, and, once more, descending into the valley, and then climbing again, and again, I finally reached the peak where I thought that I had last heard the goats' bleats. But to my despair not a single goat showed herself in appreciation of my valiant attempt, nor did I hear a damn bleat to allay my apprehension. The silent solitude severed my serenity, so I moved about, restless, climbing one rock after another, scaling up into a thousand-year-old tree, trying to extend my range to survey the surrounding scene. Nothing, nothing gave me the slightest glimmer of hope. As a matter of fact, as I looked out to the west, my heart sank when I saw the sun receding behind a hollow mountain that had cast its gloomy shadow. Hopelessly, I hollered at the sun to slow her descent. She ignored my pleas and dropped a shoulder while blowing a conspiratorial amber glow around a halo arc.

With nowhere to go and with nothing else to do, I chose to stay in the ancient acacia tree. I crawled up and perched on the base of a masculine branch that was high out of the hoodlum hyenas' reach. Desperately watching the sun's lazy descent, my heart sank. As the thick darkness closed in around me, I found solace in knowing that lions were not going to maul me tonight. I knew that lions had no ecological attachment to this high mountainous land; that hyenas were too heavy to heave themselves up; that human thieves were too impatient to bear interest; that cheetahs were too timid to tussle with me; and that jackals were too clever to waste tactical maneuvers on me. But still, that one fearful thought remained: that the daring leopard could dispatch her demons of death on me. The racing thought of what to do if disaster should arrive wrestled with me wantonly, yet solutions were evasive. The blanket of darkness that covered me, the howling of the jackals that harassed me, the baboons that began to yowl, and the batches upon batches of bugs that relished biting me kept me paralyzed all night long.

Right around goat-milking time in the evening, I heard my mother calling my name, "Doogle! Doogle!" But every inch of my body was immobilized, even my voice box. I was terrified that the hated predators would hear my hapless cry and race against my mom's shouts to have me for a meal. Her voice reverberated throughout the hollow valley, leaving dissonant, deep echoes. She kept it up all night long, only alternating the pitch of her voice from high to low. On my behalf all I could do was muster the strength to keep myself off the ground, nei-

ther falling asleep nor muttering a word. As I heard my mother mourn, the night whip washed me with dew. It was a mercilessly slow moving night. But, as she probably intended, my mother's distant, dissonant cries kept me company and hopeful that the dawn would provide a chance for a safe return home.

Throughout the night I suffered the savage beating of hysteria until finally daybreak dispatched the hopes that had departed with the darkness. An orange glow glared through the eastern mountain above the tree line of amber beauty that I had known and seen so often, but never admired. Resuscitated by the sun's morning rays, my fear vanished. Within an hour of those first morning rays, I felt warmer and wiser.

The limbs that were numb last night, the larynx that lacked the courage to cough, and the legs that were limp, miraculously filled with renewed vigor and I climbed down from the tree. Once I landed on the ground I hastened to take an inventory, checking to see whether the host tree had taken any of me for itself! Satisfied that I was whole, I hurried on to where I thought my mother was calling. Suddenly I heard her melodic, musical voice again and melted into exuberant waves of emotional exhilaration. Her voice of reason, passion, and the power of love warmed me. As soon as my eyes caught sight of her, I dashed forward with a maddening speed, reached her, raised my arms and threw myself on her, holding on to her ever so tightly, just weeping.

It seemed ages before we both gained our composure. My mother released me from her embrace and held me back to stare lovingly at me before pulling me back into her again. She did that many times, as though she were not convinced that it was me.

"I thought I had lost you last night," she finally uttered in a hoarse voice, "*Hooyo*, don't ever, ever do that to me, again."

"Yes, *Hooyo*," I responded.

"No matter what, do you hear me, *Hooyo*?" my mother asked.

"Yes, *Hooyo*. I will never do that again."

"Whatever else is in danger, I don't care, *Hooyo*. Your life is more important to me than everything we have. Do you hear me, *Hooyo*?" my mother repeated, wiping the tears from my face with the hem of her gown.

"Yes, *Hooyo*," I said, savoring for the first time the meaning and weight of the word '*hooyo*,' which means *mother* and also *my child* in Somali.

"Now, let's find those useless goats that have caused me so much grief and almost cost me my son's life. Okay?" my mother said.

"Yes, *Hooyo*," I said, surprised that she was no longer distraught or distressed about the loss of the precious goats whose care she had always grumbled about.

"Where were they when you saw them last? And where the hell were you anyway?"

"O, ooh, she cha-a-anged her mind, 'watch out,'" I thought to myself.

"Never mind, *Hooyo*, never mind about where you were. Just tell me where you last saw them," she checked herself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Over the mountaintop, then over another and another, we finally came upon a gigantic rise that was fortified by cliffs and flanked by chasms. These cliffs and chasms were empowered by solid, massive rocks seated in the corners of each twist of the trail. Carved by nature, in the middle of the mountain face, was a dark cave. The cave that normally was inhabited by baboons was not easily accessible to the hated hyena. It was, however, not a safe haven from cheetahs, jackals, man, and certainly not the most ingenious cat—the leopard. There they were, our throng of goats, just chewing their cuds. My mother slowly and cautiously approached, stalking as though she were encroaching upon a wild herd of mad gazelles. As we carefully approached, she called out a few goats by their names and they each responded with a friendly bleat. Both my mother and I began to wade through the flock, petting each in passing to show our gratitude for the grand reunification.

My mother, swimming through them, caused most of them to rise and begin milling about. She grabbed one of the strongest he-goats by the leg but he jumped and jerked away. Getting a hold of him by the ear, she took control and hauled him out of the cave. Once she let go of him, he leaped into the air, landed on all fours, and dashed down the slope, before coming to an abrupt halt. He then turned, and appeared to give a silent signal to the rest of the herd. In a minute the rest of the goats followed, by twos, threes, and on and on until my mother, who was trying to make a head count, decided to restrict the flow.

"Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, hundred, hundred-one..."

I had no clue when or how she had reached the hundreds. "...hundred-two, three, hundred-four ..., hundred-seven, hundred-eight," she

went on while holding her ground and using a stick to thin the flow as the goats left the cave.

"Did I say hundred-five and six?" she asked, looking at me.

"Yes, Hooyo," I said, trying not to contradict her.

"Hundred-ten, hundred-eleven, hundred-twelve," she went on, looking back, then letting some pass by her again.

"Hundred-thirty-seven, hundred-thirty-eight, nine," she sighed as the last two goats scuttled past her.

"Ooh, they are all here, thank God for His mercy," she said, turning towards me.

"Or did I over-count them?" she whispered to herself, looking back at them.

"No, no," she reassured herself, "It doesn't matter much now even if there are one or two or twenty missing. I have my son and, if not all, the rest of my prized goats. Thank God," she said, almost too soft to share her thought with me.

My mother turned around, dropped her stick to the ground, and opened her arms up for me, smiling ever so gently. She received me with the boundless energy of a mother's embrace. I entered her arching, stretched out arms. She clutched me so tight around the ribcage that I had to beg her to go easy on me. Minutes passed before she seemed satisfied. She let go of me, stood back, held my hand, twirled me about, pulled me to herself, held me away, and inspected me all over again before she led me out of the cave into the herd. "Now," she ordered, "Collect the herd from the left, and let's get home before the kids let the sheep out of the corral." Without another word, she then presented me with her herding stick before walking to the other side of the herd.

"Jii, jii, jii, hoow, hoow, hoow, caa, caa," she said, ordering the herd to stay tightly together as she guided them back home.

On the way back, the sky turned to azure. The eerie feelings of loneliness and desolation had departed. The sound of the goats' hooves beating on the poor earth resounded like that of pouring rain. A mile away or so from our enclosure, a pack of the most despised creatures of the savannah, the hyenas, appeared in our view. We, the mother-son pair of brave souls broke down with laughter, for we were aware of how ridiculous the hyenas looked. They had lost their opportunity to feast on our herd.

"Had they only known where to look," my mother quipped, looking at me, "had they only known where to look last night."

I laughed with an exaggerated disgust at the hyenas' misfortune. The hyenas assured themselves about the loss as well, and moved on.

Yards away from our enclosure, the rest of the family—sisters, brother Taahe, and all—came out to greet us. With an embellished pace my brother, Taahe, rushed toward me and then suddenly came to a halt a few feet away.

"Has your men's menstruation let up?," he called out for all to hear, laughing. Then he dashed away, putting a greater distance between the two of us, pairing up with Mom. From behind her, he waved at me furtively!