Introduction

“Always Alone”

An essay on the dream of the desert

Who am I? What do I want? Who do I miss?

My soul slowly goes into decay because I’ve been separated so long from the desert. I can no longer bear to talk about that curse over my childhood—that terrible civil war I barely survived. I find it difficult to talk about war at all, or anything that is unpleasant and destroys human lives. I decided many years ago not to talk too much about death. Death is unpredictable and inevitable. It comes and goes, and we have little control over that. That has always been the case.

Instead, I would rather talk about the desert, about nature and the animals and people that live there. I often dream about the desert, the scent of it, and its soul and spirit. Over the past several years, I’ve had a great longing to revisit my family and homeland of Somalia. But most of my family has long since disappeared from there, and Somalia is all but invisible now, as if it no longer exists on the world map. I have always had a desire to return, to see the dear people and the beloved countryside before I die. Gradually, though, I am letting go of the idea of returning. How do you return to a place that no longer exists the way you remember it?

But if I were able, I’d most like to visit my father and reexperience a nomadic lifestyle. When I visited my father out in the bush, it was very different from my life in the city with my mother. The more I think about it now, the more fascinated I am of nomadic life. I was always proud of my father for sticking to the traditional nomadic lifestyle despite the hardships. I think back to my vacation stays with my father as a wonderful time where I wasn’t controlled by other people, and where I had full freedom to do what I wanted and live according to my own desires. I miss many of the animals I interacted with there, especially giraffes, zebras, ostriches, and camels. When I visited him, he always slaughtered an animal such as a camel, and then there was feasting and dancing throughout the entire little nomadic village. Sometimes, when I was a teenager, I would dream I was living a different life, the life of a beautiful nomadic girl. Nomadic life seemed so strong and real to me—and still does.

The best thing about staying in the desert with my father was the rainy season. The desert was not barren and desolate, but full of life. During the rainy season, the desert was green and lush until the sun burned away the color again. There was so much to discover and learn in the desert. There are no traditional rules and duties. No prejudice. Neither hatred, revenge, nor condemnation. Nature is changeable and yet largely safe. Nomads live freely out there, a real life that many people only dream about. The question is, what is a real life for each individual human being?

One of my big dreams as a teenager was to meet a handsome and sweet young nomadic man and fall in love in the middle of the bush. We would fall in love at first sight, and our love would be so strong that soon after he would propose to me. After the courtship, he would promise that he would give everything he owned so he could marry me. I still remember how this fantasy played again and again in my head. Although I was a girl from a big city who went to high school like other Somalian city girls in the 1980s, I dreamed often about this ghost life—the life of a nomad girl.

Now, as I sit alone beside a blazing summer bonfire in Lolland, an island in Denmark, I think about the fires of the desert, and imagine I can see and hear a group of nomads dancing joyously around their own fire. When I look around at my view here in Lolland, I see beautiful open fields that are flat and green, with the sun disappearing from the sky in the distance. Despite the beauty of Lolland, I can't forget how much I miss the other life, the other land that is the Somalia desert.

In the desert, one cannot see where the horizon ends. The desert has its own history, its own charm and soul, which is immortal. Every night I see the desert in my mind, that lost land that was part of my childhood. Now it's part of my dream life, a distant and unreachable place I can only access through my imagination. The desert has always been a source of inspiration to me, an escape route to return to in my memories. Here in Lolland, I cannot smell the red earth or the scent of the acacia trees or the Indian Ocean with the blue salt water. But I can remember even the smallest things: the red sunsets, the great sandbanks, the lush green mountains, the thousand stars in the night sky. I hear the roar of lions and the sound of camels munching in the dark. The beauty of Lolland cannot erase these memories.

One afternoon not long ago, a cousin called and told me that my father was ill and might not have much longer to live. My father had asked my cousin to phone me. My cousin said I should hurry to Somalia if I wanted to see my father before he died. I have not seen my father since 1986. He was a nomad then and is a nomad still. When I spent time with my father, we did not celebrate birthdays. We didn't know what month or day it was, and we didn't care. We didn't think about age and appearance. Now, my experience has been that the more you think about appearance and age, the faster you grow old. You do not talk about age or how old you are or how old you will be on your next birthday. You simply live and let the years pass.

My father has led a good and long life. I have dreamed about seeing him once more before he dies, but unfortunately, I can't return to Somalia because there is still civil war and the Islamist terrorist group Al-shabab is active there. Since I'm married to a Dane and my last name is now Schmidt, my husband and I would be considered infidels and potential targets for terrorism and killing. I've been in exile in Europe for thirty years now, and as much as I long to return to my homeland, it's no longer possible. For the rest of my life, I will carry the pain and sorrow of not being able to return to that land of my childhood. I can only return to Somalia and my father in my dreams and memories, in the stories that I tell.

My First Childhood Years

When I was seven years old, I started first grade at a school in Mogadishu, Somalia. Even though I was a child, I knew that all Somalians were divided into clans. Yet at school, my classmates and I learned immediately that we were forbidden to say which clan we belonged to. There are three major clans in Somalia: the Darod, Isaaq, and Hawiye. In addition, there are three smaller ones: the Dir, Digil and Rahanweyn. All clans are divided into sub-clans. I belonged to the Marehan clan, a sub-clan of the Darod clan, but couldn't admit that to anyone.

In Somalia, girls are circumcised when they're still quite young. Most girls my age had already been circumcised by the time they started school. During recess, several girls would rush off to the bathroom to show each other their mutilated genitals. Sometimes they would vote on who had the nicest circumcision. Several of the girls had received the most extensive form of circumcision, which meant their vaginal openings had been stitched up and had only a tiny hole left for urine and menstrual blood to pass through. For these girls, peeing was both difficult and painful. Sometimes they had to sit on the toilet for half an hour to empty their bladders. Despite the pain of the circumcision, they were glad they had been circumcised. Now they were like all the other girls in Somalia.

I stayed away from the bathrooms as much as possible because I didn't want the other girls to know my shameful secret—that I hadn't been circumcised yet. If the other girls found out, I was afraid they would bully me. Whenever we went on a school outing to the ocean to learn how to swim, I kept on my underpants even though the other girls swam and bathed naked. The underpants irritated me—I wanted to throw myself naked and free into the waves like everyone else—but I was too afraid someone would notice I wasn't circumcised.

As I grew older, I became more curious and impatient about circumcision. One day I asked my cousin Sofie, who was twelve and circumcised, if I could see her genitals. We went behind the schoolyard and hid between a couple of houses. At first Sofie resisted my pleas and said she didn't want to show me anything. I begged some more, and eventually Sofie pulled down her clothes and exposed her genital area. I was amazed because I could not see anything but stitches and a small opening that was the entrance to her vagina. Everything else was gone. I squinted but didn't dare look closer. "Where are they?" I asked.

Sad and ashamed, Sofie pressed her legs together, pulled her underpants back into place, and stood up. "I don't want to talk about it anymore," she said.

I didn't want to embarrass Sofie further but also had a burning desire to know more. "How do you pee?" I asked.

Sofie looked away, and for a moment I thought she wasn't going to answer or would cry and run away. "The hole is for you to pee and menstruate and have babies," she said. She sounded like she was reciting information that had been told to her. "I don't like to talk about it."

The tone of her voice and the pain in her face began to scare me. "Did it hurt?" I asked in a whisper. "The circumcision?"

"Yes. I bled a lot." She turned back to face me and met my eyes. "Never get circumcised," she advised me.

One of my friends at school was named Maryan. She was a thin and coal black girl whose mother was a doctor at a city clinic as well as a history professor at the local university. Maryan, an only child, was a quiet girl but also stuffy and a little sad. Despite this, she was the smartest girl in the class. She read

everything from children's books to women's magazines, whereas most of the rest of us didn't bother to read much. One day I asked Maryan if I could see her genitals. She didn't seem bothered by my request. We decided the school bathroom was too cold and clammy, so we went to a private place in the back of the schoolyard. "The whole thing was nasty," she said earnestly after we were finished. "You must refuse to get circumcised."

Her story resembled Sofie's. I was confused when I tried to picture the actual circumcision procedure. I couldn't understand why girls were circumcised if it caused so much pain and terror. But when I finally worked up the nerve and asked my mother what circumcision was like, she only said with a frown, "It hurts, but it's nothing you die from."

I wasn't sure if I believed her. My mother wasn't a kind or loving woman, and I didn't trust her. She'd grown up with nine brothers and had been neglected by her father, and this experience had toughened her and made her harsh, cold, and often distant. She was aggressive with all of us kids—my two older brothers, Rush and Wali, and sister Diina and me—and often yelled and struck us for no reason.

One day my mother pulled me aside and told me she'd arranged for my circumcision during summer vacation. We would travel to Baardheere about twelve hours away, where I would get circumcised along with three other girls on the same day. A "skilled" woman would perform the circumcision. My older sister Diina would join us, and we would turn the circumcision trip into a family vacation. My mother, divorced from my father, got time off work from her job as an office assistant at the Maritime Authority to make the trip. As time passed, I grew more uncertain about how to feel about my upcoming circumcision. On one hand, I was excited to get the circumcision so I could finally stop hiding my body and feel normal like everyone else. On the other hand, I was afraid of the procedure and the pain Sofie and Maryan had told me about. *Don't get circumcised:* their words echoed in my head like a warning.

When summer break arrived and the day came to travel to Baardheere, I felt uneasy and apprehensive. As the car rumbled down the road and Diina laughed and teased me, I was completely silent. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, but my mind was really in turmoil. We stopped for lunch at a nice restaurant, but I couldn't eat anything because I was too worried. My stomach was in knots.

My mother glanced over at me a few times and didn't bother to hide her irritation. "How are you feeling, Qaali?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

"You're not eating anything."

"I'm just tired," I said.

We spent the night in a grubby hotel in Baidoa, a border region between Somalia and Ethiopia. People in Baidoa, mostly nomads, dressed differently than most people in Somalia, usually wearing spotless white clothes and allowing their hair to grow Afro-style—thick and bushy. The hotel workers spoke a dialect we couldn't understand well, which only added to my feeling of discomfort. When my mother, Diina, and I drove down a Baidoa street, several people glared at us and even snapped pictures. I was glad when we left Baidoa the next morning.

Finally, we arrived in Baardheere. It was the season of the rains, which had turned everything—bushes, shrubs, fruit trees—green and lush. My mother warned me and Diina not to swim in the river because there were a lot of crocodiles around and many people had been pulled underwater and eaten, especially children. Since no one lived in my grandfather's house, that was where we would stay during our time in Baardheere. It was also where my circumcision would take place.

The next day we drove out to a small nearby village, surrounded by large fields where people were hunched over, working. I saw a bunch of elephants under a big tree, and nearby were zebras and large vultures perched on branches. “Who are we going to visit?” I asked my mother.

She told me that the lady who was going to circumcise me lived here, and that she needed to talk to her.

“Why do girls have to get circumcised?” I dared to ask my mother.

I saw how she stiffened whenever I brought up circumcision, and how her face turned cold and scolding. “Because that is our tradition and culture,” my mother said.

“But why?”

“Don’t ask questions.” Her expression made it clear that she didn’t feel like listening to me. I stopped talking because I didn’t want her to hit me.

When we had been in Baardheere for a week, the lady who was going to circumcise me showed up at my grandfather’s house. She was an older woman who resembled a scary witch. She was blind in one eye; I could see that it was completely white. She looked eerie, her hair long, tangled, and grey, and her face was covered with sharply marked wrinkles. She was wearing a long dirty black dress and smelled of sourdough. She didn’t smile once the whole time. She terrified me.

I hurried over to my mother, who was laying out a clean tablecloth on the dining room table. “I don't want to be circumcised after all, Mama,” I said. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“Stop that!” she scolded me, smoothing out the wrinkles in the tablecloth. “You're a strong girl. Don't say such a thing.”

Eventually, the other three girls came to the house with their mothers and other female family members. One by one they went into the dining room. Each circumcision took at least two hours, and each time the girl screamed and sobbed, her voice raw, harsh, frightened. I was standing outside with my mother but could still hear the screams. The searing sun beat down on my head, but I was too scared to feel the heat. My thoughts were jumbled and chaotic. Twice I pulled away from my mother and tried running back to the village where Diina was staying with a family member, but someone caught me both times and held me back. Finally, my mother grabbed my hand in a tight, pinching grip and refused to let go. We sat under a tree which provided what little shade there was and waited our turn for the circumcision. I tried to block out the sounds of the girls screaming, but I couldn’t. Each cry was so painful I felt like I was the one getting cut into. A few times I screamed along with the circumcised girl, my cry melding with hers, a collective howl of pain. I begged my mother to put an end to this; it still wasn’t too late for us to leave. But my mother ignored my pleas and my screams. She stared off in the distance and paid little attention to me. She just wanted the whole thing over with.

When it was my turn and I stepped into the dining room, I saw blood on the floor and splattered across the tablecloth. The woman with the white eye was sitting in a chair and had blood smeared across her hands, as did the two other women in the room, women who were paid to assist the witch lady and to hold me down during the circumcision. I stared into the faces of these women, but they didn’t look back. They were as cold and distant as my mother. Part of me wanted to turn and run out of the house, but I knew my mother would catch me before I could get away, and there was no one around to help me. I was surrounded by women, including my mother, but was all alone.

Timidly and obediently, I lay on the dining room table while the women helped the witch lady to her feet and guided her over to the table. Then the other women held my legs while my mother pinned

down my arms. I was not sedated. The witch lady with the white eye stood ready with a razor blade in her hand.

I could hear the blade cutting into my flesh. I screamed and tried to pull away, but my mother and the other women were holding me down too tightly. “Mama, please!” I sobbed. “Make her stop!”

But my mother did nothing. Her eyes were glazed as she tightened her hold on my thrashing arms**.** The witch woman continued to cut. At some point, the stress and pain were so unbearable that I went numb. The world seemed to dissolve around me. Nothing felt real.

When the witch woman was finished, she stitched me back up. Then my legs were tied together with strips of fabric from my hips and down to my ankles to prevent me from walking and possibly starting up the bleeding again. I had to lie with my legs together for four days and afterwards I had to be laced from the hip to the knees for another eight days. I’m not sure what happened to the other circumcised girls. I suppose they returned home with their mothers.

My mother and the other women placed me in a small room of my grandfather’s house. I lay on a blanket on the floor under a tent. The witch lady with the white eye said I must sleep alone for the first four days. I must remain stationary in bed and not move. Exhausted from all the screaming and crying, I fell asleep at around noon. When it was seven o'clock in the evening, my mother brought me food. I started to cry. Why hadn't she helped me when I’d asked her to? Why was she never there for me when I needed her? She had betrayed me by listening to the witch woman instead of me.

I didn't eat or drink for a couple of days because I was so angry and hurt. Occasionally, my mother came into the dark room with a container for me to pee in, but I just shook my head defiantly and refused to do that too. I didn’t urinate because I was afraid of the pain. During this time, I wasn’t allowed to bathe. I only saw my mother when she stepped into the room to offer me food or tell me to brush my teeth. Otherwise, I lay on the floor all day and night, frightened and lonely, sometimes feeling weak and sick from the circumcision, without anyone to reassure me. Finally, I couldn't hold my water any longer. My mother held the container under me while I urinated in one long and painful gush.

After five days, the evil witch lady came again to check on me. I was bleeding more than was normal and my mother had grown worried. I was so furious at and scared of the witch lady that my body started shaking and I fainted. When I came to, I grabbed my mother’s hand and shouted: “Mama, help me! Make her stay away!”

My mother tried to reassure me. “Qaali, she just needs to see how your genitals are doing,” my mother said.

The witch lady stared down at me and was silent while I sobbed. I was just another faceless and terrified girl to her.

When I’d regained enough control, she spread out my legs and began her examination. She had a weird smile on her face as she poked and prodded. Her touch was rough, and I could tell she didn’t care about me or any of the girls she operated on. Was it possible she took pleasure in cutting into girls and hearing their horrified screams? The witch lady told my mother there was inflammation in the wound because the stitching had “gone up” after I’d urinated too violently. She suggested that I get stitched up again after a few weeks, which would give my genitals time to heal. The witch woman recommended a treatment: my mother should dig a hole in the ground, fill it with leaves to burn, and then twice daily I should sit over the smoke rising from the hole. This method was supposed to help reduce inflammation. Then the witch lady walked off without another word to me or my mother.

My mother followed the witch lady's recommendation, but the smoke treatment did not help me. I felt the hot smoke rising between my legs and the sensitive area of my circumcision, and the burning sensation only made me feel more uncomfortable and afraid. I grew more and more sick. I couldn't eat anything now and felt tired and nauseous. My abdomen began to swell up.

After ten days I was hospitalized in Baardheere and given medicine to fight the infection. The doctor said I had to stay in the hospital until my pain was gone and I could urinate comfortably. I was hospitalized for a month. My family became upset and worried, and Diina was disappointed that her summer holiday had been ruined. My mother regretted choosing the old woman in the bush to circumcise me instead of taking me to a hospital in town. The witch woman who'd circumcised me had cut away too much and had cut it all wrong. Later, my mother admitted, she'd been afraid of losing me. I didn't remind her that she'd once told me circumcision was not something girls died from. After a few months, I was sewn together again at a private clinic once we'd returned to Mogadishu.

Circumcision has had a profound impact on my life because it's given me several problems over the years, including in my adult life. For example, I still experience a lot of pain when I'm menstruating. Plus, I had major problems when giving birth to my children. The doctors had to cut me open each time and deliver my babies through C-section. It took me a long time to recover from that. Despite my problems, I feel more fortunate than many Somali girls who have suffered even greater problems resulting from botched circumcisions. Some have died from infection or blood loss. Many have become sterile, and some have bad or painful sex lives as adults. And yes, some circumcised women have bled to death during childbirth.

While there has been a large decline in the number of Danish-Somalian girls who get circumcised, there are still some Danish-Somalian parents who, unable to move past the old Somalian ways, insist their daughters must get circumcised. Recently, when I attended a party at the Somalian Women's Association in Copenhagen, we discussed circumcision, and most women in attendance agreed that they wanted to help rid the world of this ancient and barbaric tradition. Unfortunately, there hasn't been a decrease in the number of girls getting circumcised in Somalia. There, circumcisions still take place in the same way they did when I was a child—in unsanitary conditions, with young girls getting operated on by an old bush woman with a blade.