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The Road to Jijiga

Time, in the Somali desert, exerts itself gently on the visitor. There's little to mark its passage, such is the constancy of the light, so that the days seem at once eternal and evanescent. Which is to say the afternoon caught us by surprise. We'd spent the morning in the hills north of Hargeisa, filming a pair of doctors as they reminisced about the civil war. They were like joshing schoolboys, each trying to outdo the other with his stories of hasty amputations and midnight supply runs fraught with engine trouble. Who was the first to run for cover when the Somali Air Force strafed their makeshift field hospital? Who saw the worst cases of gangrene? It had been twenty years; they couldn't agree.

The field hospital, what remained of it, spanned a few acres of thin, sun-washed forest — a string of vanishing footpaths, a few clearings. As we followed the two men, sidestepping acacia bushes and camel dung, I began to grasp the logic of the place. The clearings had been wards: here, beneath this canopy, they had performed triage; there, at the foot of that tree, they'd buried the dead. They lingered over every detail, incredulous, luxuriating in dangers past from the safety of the present.

"At night, when the MiGs were gone, this place became a city of light," the big doctor marvelled. "Cooking fires under every tree. What a sight it was." His nickname was *Bergeel* — Camel Liver — on account of his father's dark complexion. The Somalis love teasing nicknames.

The other doctor, the thin one, pried a broken ampoule from the dirt. He coughed and spat. "The children played in the dark while we worked," he said, scraping at it with his thumbnail. "It was a great relief to hear their laughter."

Bergeel grasped his forearm. "Remember the old man who used to count the cries of the hyenas?"

The thin doctor laughed. "Every night he said to us, 'If it is an odd number, we are going to be okay.' And if there were ten cries, he always heard eleven, even when nobody else could — but we believed him!"

The memories of terror and uncertainty were yielding to a

pleasurable romanticism, for the doctors' stories ended happily: they'd fled to the West, reinvented themselves. This last-minute excursion into the desert was going to be our little documentary's *pièce de résistance*. Now it was time to move on.

And so we found ourselves rattling across plains grey and vast towards the Ethiopian border. One hundred and forty kilometres separate Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, and Jijiga, the capital of the Ogaden — Somali Ethiopia — but the cities are a world apart. Somaliland broke away from Somalia during the civil war, in 1991, abandoning the irredentist dream of Greater Somalia (an ethnic megastate comprised of Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, and swaths of Ethiopian and Kenyan desert) in favour of *realpolitik*. Hargeisa, a bombed-out ghost town fifteen years ago, was now thriving. Across the border, though, there was trouble. The Ogadenis were fighting their own, doomed war of secession. Recently the Ogaden National Liberation Front had stepped up its guerrilla campaign against the Ethiopian government, provoking vicious reprisals, and a mantle of military paranoia had settled over the region. I anticipated our passage to Jijiga with grim curiosity.

"You are beautiful, no matter what they saay," sang the taxi driver, trying to make eye contact with the girl in the backseat. He divided his attention between the girl, the road, and the treats arrayed in his lap: khat, a half-litre of Sprite, a packet of cigarettes. His name was Abdurahman. He was young and spoke English with a North American accent.

The girl didn't look up. Abdurahman pretended to receive a text message.

"Words can't bri-ing me down," he mumbled. Abdurahman had grown up in the refugee camps across the border and, later, in Canada. He was taking classes at the vocational college in Hargeisa and driving his uncle's taxi for something to do. Recognizing a missed opportunity, he asked us how much we would've paid him to be our translator. I suspected he was what locals would call *dhaqanelis*: 'a person without culture.' It was an epithet usually reserved for diaspora Somalilanders who'd run afoul of their parents (or worse, the law) and been dispatched here for cultural rehabilitation.

Villages accumulated along the road, a human sediment deposited

by the recent flood of cross-border commerce. There were rumours Ethiopia would be the first to recognize Somaliland's claim to independence. But Hargeisa always buzzed with talk of impending statehood. A visit from a Canadian official two years earlier had occasioned feverish speculation that the West would throw its weight behind the aspiring republic. Nothing ever materialized. And so the Ethiopians remained Somaliland's closest ally and primary trading partner, even as they oppressed the Ogadenis and occupied Mogadishu. Horn of Africa politics were nothing if not complicated.

To the north, rubbly fields yielded to pasture land, erupting into mangy hillocks as the landscape emptied out. Cloudshadow streaked the grass like errant cue-strokes on an old billiard table. When a young shepherd dared to steer his flock down the middle of the highway — by now a loose curl of tracks sketched across the green expanse — Abdurahman lost his temper. He stomped the brakes, whipped the door open, grabbed the boy, and kicked him roundly in the ass. The shepherd threw a hurt look over his shoulder as he ran limping after his sheep. One of the stragglers received a brutal kick of its own.

"Boy," Abdurahman said. A cruel appraisal. We drove on.

The amphetamine effect rolled in on euphoric waves and every so often he seemed newly awake to the world and the possibilities it presented. He savoured everything: the traffic, the sun, even the rancour of his slow-burning argument with a man in the back. When the man thumped the driver's seat with his fist, Abdurahman only grinned and disagreed more loudly. Another glimpse, perhaps, of his erstwhile delinquency. He described the Internet business he would someday run, back in Ottawa, and the places he would travel. At one point he tried to steer with his knees, the better to defoliate the khat, but another curve in the road sent us briefly, terrifyingly, into the other lane. Experiment over.

Abdurahman had been living in Hargeisa for nearly a year: "It's amazing, man. They know you're not a local just by the way you walk down the street. The dudes here have a different kind of swagger, you know? But I love this place, it's like a second home to me, know what I'm saying?" I wasn't convinced. He seemed adrift, beset by a deep, undefined hunger that manifested itself physically: in the haggard youthfulness of his face, which pulled at the cheekbones and bled around the eyes, in the open parentheses of his bony shoulders.

His clothes, probably new and certainly fashionable when he'd arrived, at least by the standards of local kids, looked outmoded, carelessly worn. Abdurahman radiated an aura of anxiety, exhaustion, false cheer. I thought he might be the loneliest person we'd met. Perhaps it was the khat, and this was what acculturation looked like. After all, half the men in Somaliland looked strung-out and underfed by two in the afternoon.

Born a decade earlier, he would've sought his fortunes with the Somali National Movement, a teenage guerrilla fighter like the ones we'd met in the dried-out settlements beyond the capital. These were young men who'd settled into middle age by their early thirties, contented, uncurious men for whom the stretch of desert they'd wrested from the once-mighty dictatorship of Siad Barre and could now call their own was world enough. One veteran, an engineer at the water sanitation plant in Gadabiley, had shown me the jagged stump of his arm. He was haunted, still, by the ghost of his hand, which sometimes curled into an invisible fist, but the sacrifice, he explained, squinting at my translated question, had been worth it. "We are free," he said, "and that is enough." (The thin doctor admitted he'd performed the amputation: "You can see the tools we used were not made for people.")

Another, younger veteran bore a shrapnel scar that bloomed, caramel-coloured, around his misshapen bicep. Half the muscle was gone and what remained squirmed up his arm like the braids of a rope. He'd been at the front line on the outskirts of the capital when his unit was strafed by MiGs. By the time he saw a doctor a week later, the wound was badly infected and the dead flesh had to be cut away. It was strange, he said, but he'd seldom dreamed about the war, even during combat.

Almost to a person, the Somalilanders we'd met believed statehood was their right and their future. Demographics played a role in this. The older generation recalled with a certain nostalgia the post-colonial fever-dream that had unified Somaliland and Somalia in the early sixties, but for most people the civil war was the defining moment of their lives. It helped, too, that Somalilanders belonged overwhelmingly to a single, persecuted clan — the Isaaq. They had suffered the most under Barre and been the first to rise up against him. But we met others (Issa, Gadabursi, Darod) who shared their sense of grievance and their optimism. The beginnings of a national identity, one that

might some day supercede clan, had been forged in the crucible of war. It was a rare thing in Africa and it boded well, I thought, for the future of the breakaway republic.

I asked Abdurahman what he remembered of the fighting. “I remember the camp where I lived with my family. I remember having fun because there was no school, and I remember my uncle going away to fight against Siad Barre. My father and my brothers went to Jijiga and they bought scrap metal. The Ogadenis, they looted our empty houses and sold them back to us, piece by piece. It’s weird, but those were happy days.”

No one wanted to talk about the crisis in the Ogaden. Somalilanders regarded the O.N.L.F. as a band of dreamers and criminals, but towards the Ogadenis they felt an estranged kinship and, I think, an obscure but abiding sense of shame. They owed them nothing, but they didn’t feel right about the way they were being made to suffer, either. In Ethiopia itself, the Ogaden wasn’t — couldn’t be — talked about. At an airport bar in Addis Ababa I’d met a relief worker headed back to Jijiga. I was reckless with my questions: What kind of work was he doing there? Had he seen evidence of a scorched-earth campaign? He smiled darkly. The situation was not good, he said. Then he stubbed out his cigarette and excused himself.

The mood was light as the taxi pulled into the border town of Wachaaale. We’d arrived in time for a football match between local teams. The khat vendors had locked up their stalls and a moneychanger was bagging huge, filthy bricks of currency in a plastic sheet. The roads were gutted, the day’s rain filled the potholes. A yellow froth scummed the puddles. But the pitch, around which a crowd began to form, was striking: a neat white grid laid over manicured grass. The players, too, in their immaculate kits, green and black, red and gold. I thought we should stay for the game, but we had too far to go.

We said goodbye to Abdurahman (he tried to sell me his iPod, settled for my email address) and hired a wheelbarrow-boy to port our equipment across the border. The Ethiopian customs officer was an elegant man in his thirties, better dressed, in his shirt and tie, than he probably needed to be, managing a provincial outpost like this one. Pasted to the filing cabinet behind his desk was a photo of two little girls, his daughters, maybe, their hair in plaits, giggling.

“Why did you go to Somaliland?”

“We were making a tourist video,” said Sean, hopefully.

“Moment.” The customs officer stepped into the back room.

From my seat against the wall, I could see him consulting with a man who lay curled around a bowl of steaming wat on the floor. The soles of his feet were cracked. I stepped outside. Past the low wooden houses, with their bare, churned-up gardens, a pack of ruderal children chased a ball in the dirt. Locals wandered in no man’s land.

At six o’clock the bus sputtered to life and ambled nightward. People were anxious to move on and there’d been a fight for the last seats. I wondered whether it mattered — at this point everyone would be travelling in the dark. But a mood of foreboding was palpable inside the bus. The women hugged their bags and comforted children; the men pretended to sleep. Outside a storm was gathering. Bean fields swished under a hard, crystalline sky.

Then: a roadblock, manned by Ethiopian soldiers. They were fit, well-equipped, their expressions grim. We stepped off the bus into wind. Distant clouds drifted across the sky like a smack of luminous jellyfish, aswim in spectral light. Lightning tentacled from their blackening underbellies. Everyone knew the role they were to play. The women lined up first, documents in hand, and they were searched while the men looked on in silence. The soldier tasked with the pat-downs was careful, almost deferential. Old and young, slender and stooped, the women cut austere figures. Their dresses — flickering yellows, reds, turquoises, purples — bled into the dusk, a mess of colour expressing what their inscrutable faces did not. They were a pageant of ghosts. I was taken aback by their beauty. So, I think, was the soldier. As they climbed back onto the bus, they were apparitions become flesh once more: mothers nursing bug-eyed infants, old women minding painful joints.

The men were frisked and shoved. A soldier climbed atop the bus and made the conductor pick through the luggage. They were on the lookout for arms coming across the border to supply the O.N.L.F. “This is yours?” the soldier yelled down at us, tugging at one of our bags. Sean nodded. The soldier gestured for the key. He rooted through toiletries, clothes, notebooks. I was glad of the stock footage we’d recorded.

Half an hour later the storm was upon us. I watched my reflection

float beyond the window, disfigured by the rain. People were falling asleep. I thought about my wife, how in the heat of the Toronto summer we drag a mattress downstairs and sleep on the floor. Our own little island. The hiss of summer rain and the relief it brings. The sound of her feet peeling from the hardwood as she rises, an hour before I do, to wash and dress for work. It was the first time I'd thought of home in awhile.

The sky flinched and there it was: the second roadblock. A man with dreadlocks and a kerchief wrapped around his face boarded the bus while another guarded the door. These weren't soldiers. If their masks didn't give them away, their equipment did. A ragged satchel and an old Kalashnikov hung from the man's back, their crisscrossed straps burrowing into his chest.

"What is this?" Sean whispered. There wasn't the same alienated calm inside the bus this time.

"Nothing," I hissed. "Don't talk." I hoped we'd be leaving the checkpoint with our cameras and tapes.

The man strode down the aisle, stopping halfway to loosen the kerchief. Something caught his attention (his own disembodied face, suddenly strange?) and he stared out the window. His long fingers caressed a seatback. He was a little younger than Abdurahman, about twenty, and in that instant reminded me of him. The same yearning look, the fuzziness around the edges. But it passed when he shook his reverie, and anyway the comparison was probably fanciful: there was a look of real impoverishment to him. He was counting us with his eyes.

The man spoke to the conductor in hushed Somali and the conductor handed over a wad of bills. I guessed now that such contingencies accounted for the higher nighttime fare. Finally, the man stepped off the bus and we pulled away. For awhile no one spoke. Then a cellphone flared in someone's hand, illuminating a row of weary faces. Somali faces. A murmur issued from the broken silence and drifted through the bus. Rain struck the roof in loud, sharp volleys and settled into a thrum. Again the small talk dissolved into silence. In the distance I could see Jijiga, a smear of light along an invisible horizon. In the foreground, another roadblock.)))