



砂漠の女ディアリー

DESERT FLOWER

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FOR MAMA

I realize that when one travels the road of life, weathering storms, enjoying the sunshine, standing in the eye of many hurricanes, survival is determined only by the strength of one's will. Therefore I dedicate this book to the woman upon whose shoulders I stand, whose strength is unyielding: my mother, Fattuma Ahmed Aden.

She has shown her children evidence of faith while staring into the face of unthinkable adversity. She has balanced an equal devotion to twelve children (an amazing feat on its own) and shown wisdom that would humble the most insightful sage.

Her sacrifices have been many; her complaints, few. And all along we, her children, knew that she gave what she had, no matter how meager without reservation. She has known the agony of losing a child more than once, and still she maintains her strength and courage to continue struggling for her remaining children. Her generosity of spirit and inner and outer beauty are legendary.

Mama, I love, respect, and cherish you, and thank Almighty Allah for giving me you as my mother. My prayer is to honor your legacy by parenting my son as you have tirelessly nurtured your children.

*Oh, you are a kilt which a young dandy set out to choose
Oh, you are like a costly rug for which thousands were paid
Will I ever find your like you who have been shown to me only once?*

*An umbrella comes apart; you are as strong as looped iron;
Oh, you who are as the gold of Nairobi, finely molded,
You are the risen sun, and the early rays of dawn,*

Will I ever find your like, you who have been shown to me only once?

—TRADITIONAL SOMALI POEM

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Desert Flower is the true story of Waris Dirie's life, and all the events presented are factual, based on Waris's recollection. While all people portrayed in Desert Flower are real, we have used pseudonyms for most of them to protect their privacy.

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than I expected.

Allah: "It's the end for me, my God. Please take me now."

My long journey across the desert had come to an end. I had no protection, no weapon. Nor the strength to run. Even under the best of circumstances, I knew I couldn't beat the lion up the tree, because like all cats, lions with their strong claws are excellent climbers. By the time I got halfway up BOOM one swipe and I'd be gone. Without any fear I opened my eyes again and said to the lion, "Come and get me. I'm ready for you."

He was a beautiful male with a golden mane and a long tail switching back and forth to flick away flies. He was five or six years old, young and healthy. I knew he could crush me instantly; he was the king. All my life I'd watched those paws take down wildebeest and zebras weighing hundreds of pounds more than me.

The lion stared at me and slowly blinked his honey-colored eyes. My brown eyes stared back, locked on his. He looked away. "Go on. Take me now." He looked at me again, then looked away. He licked his lips and sat down on his haunches. Then the lion rose and paced back and forth in front of me, sexily, elegantly. Finally, he turned and walked away, no doubt deciding that I had so little flesh on my bones, I wasn't worth eating. He strode across the desert until his tawny-colored fur was lost against the sand.

When I realized he was not going to kill me, I gave no sigh of relief, because I hadn't been afraid. I'd been ready to die. But evidently God, who has always been my best friend, had something else planned, some reason to keep me alive, I said, "What is it? Take me direct me," and struggled to my feet.

This nightmare journey began because I was running away from my father. I was about thirteen at the time, and living with my family, a tribe of nomads in the Somalian desert, when my father announced he had arranged my marriage to an old man. Knowing I had to act fast or suddenly one day my new husband would come to get me, I told my mother I wanted to run away. My plan was to find my aunt, my mother's sister, who lived in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. Of course I had never been to Mogadishu or any other city for that matter. Nor had I ever met my aunt, But with the optimism of a child, I felt somehow things would magically work out.

While my father and the rest of the family were still sleeping, my mother woke me and said, “Go now.” I looked around for something to grab, something to take, but there was nothing, no bottle of water, no jar of milk, no basket of food. So, barefoot, and wearing only a scarf draped around me, I ran off into the black desert night.

I didn’t know which direction led to Mogadishu, so I just ran. Slowly at first, because I couldn’t see; I stumbled along, tripping over roots. Finally, I decided to just sit down because snakes are everywhere in Africa, and I was terrified of snakes. Each root I stepped on I imagined to be the back of a spitting cobra. I sat watching the sky gradually lighten. Even before the sun came up whoosh I was off like a gazelle. I ran and I ran and I ran for hours.

By midday I’d traveled deep into the red sand, and deep into my own thoughts. Where in the hell was I going? I wondered. I didn’t even know what direction I was heading in. The landscape stretched on to eternity, the sand broken only occasionally by an acacia or thorn tree; I could see for miles and miles. Hungry, thirsty, and tired, I slowed down and walked. Strolling along in a bored daze, I wondered where my new life would take me. What was going to happen next?

As I pondered these questions, I thought I heard a voice: “W-A-R-I-S... W-A-R-I-S...” My father was calling me! Whipping around in circles, I looked for him, but saw no one. Maybe I was imagining things, I thought. “WA-R-IS W-A-R-I-S...” the voice echoed all around me. The tone was pleading, but I was frightened all the same. If he caught me, he would surely take me back and make me marry that man, and probably beat me besides. I was not hearing things; it was my father, and he was getting closer. In earnest now, I started to run as fast as I could. Even though I had gotten a head start of several hours, Papa had caught up with me. As I later realized, he’d tracked me down by following my footprints through the sand.

My father was too old to catch me so I had thought because I was young and fast. To my childish thinking, he was an old man. Now I recall with a laugh that at the time, he was only in his thirties. We were all incredibly fit, because we ran everywhere; we had no car, no public transportation of any kind. And always I was fast, chasing the animals, heading after water, racing the oncoming darkness to reach home safely before the light was lost.

After a while I didn’t hear my father calling my name anymore. so I slowed

down to a jog. If I kept moving, Papa would get tired and go back home, I reasoned. Suddenly I looked back toward the horizon and saw him coming over the hill behind me. He'd spotted me, too. Terrified, I ran faster. And faster. It was as if we were surfing waves of sand; I flew up one hill, and he glided down the one behind me. On and on we continued for hours, until eventually I realized I hadn't seen him for some time. He no longer called out to me.

My heart pounding, finally I stopped, hiding behind a bush, and looked around. Nothing. I listened closely. No sound. When I came across a flat rock outcropping, I stopped to rest. But I'd learned from my mistake the night before, and when I began to run again, I went along the rocks where the ground was hard, then changed my direction so my father couldn't follow my footprints.

Papa, I reasoned, had turned around to try to make it back home, because now the sun was setting. Still, he would never make it back before the light faded. He'd have to run back through the darkness, listening for the night-time sounds of our family, tracing his path by the voices of children screaming, laughing, the animal noises of the herds mooing, bleating. The wind carries sounds great distances across the desert, so these noises acted as a lighthouse when we were lost in the night.

After walking along the rocks, I changed my direction. It didn't really matter what direction I chose, since I had no idea which was the right one to lead me to Mogadishu. I kept running until the sun set, the light was gone, and the night was so black I couldn't see. By this time I was starving, and food was all I could think about. My feet were bleeding. I sat down to rest under a tree and fell asleep.

In the morning, the sun burning my face woke me. I opened my eyes and looked up at the leaves of a beautiful eucalyptus tree stretching to the sky. Slowly the reality of my circumstances came to me. My God, I'm all alone. What am I going to do?

I got up and continued to run; for days I managed to keep it up. How many days, I'm not sure. All I know is that for me, there was no time; there was only hunger, thirst, fear, pain. When the evening grew too dark to see, I would stop and rest. At midday, when the sun was at its hottest, I would sit under a tree and take a siesta.

It was during one of these siestas that I fell asleep and the lion woke me. Rv

It was during one of these episodes that I fell asleep and the lion woke me. By this point I no longer cared about my freedom; I simply wanted to go back home to Mama. What I wanted more than food or water was my mother. And even though it was common for us to go for a day or two without food or water, I knew I couldn't survive much longer. I was so weak that I could barely move, and my feet were so cracked and sore that each step was agony. By the time the lion sat in front of me licking his lips in hunger, I had given up. I welcomed his quick kill as a way out of my misery.

But the lion looked at the bones jutting out of my skin, my sunken cheeks and bulging eyes, and walked away. I don't know if he took pity on such a miserable soul, or if it was simply a pragmatic decision that I wouldn't even make a worthy snack. Or if God had interceded on my behalf. But I decided God wouldn't be so heartless as to spare me, simply to let me die in some other, crueler way, like starving to death. He had another plan in store for me, so I called out for his guidance: "Take me direct me." Holding on to the tree to steady myself, I rose to my feet and called out for his help.

I began to walk again, and within a few minutes came to a grazing area with camels everywhere. I spotted the animal carrying the most fresh milk, and ran to it. I nursed, sucking the milk like a baby. The herdsman spotted me and yelled out, "Get out of there, you little bitch!" and I heard a bullwhip crack. But I was desperate, and kept right on sucking, draining the milk as fast as my mouth could take it.

The herdsman ran at me, yelling, loud and mean. He knew that if he didn't scare me away, by the time he reached me, it would be too late. The milk would all be gone. But I'd had plenty, so I started to run. He chased after me, and managed to lash me with the whip a couple of times before I outran him. But I was faster than he was, and left him behind me, standing in the sand, cursing in the afternoon sun.

Now I had fuel in me; I was energized. So I kept running and running until I came to a village. I had never been in a place like this before; it had buildings, and streets made from hard-packed dirt. I walked down the middle of the street, just assuming, this was the spot for me to walk. As I strolled through town, gawking at the strange setting, my head swiveled in every direction. A woman passed by me, looked me up and down, then called out: "You are so stupid. Where do you think you are?" To some of the other villagers walking down the street, she cried, "Oh, my goodness. Look at her feet!" She pointed at my feet,