



Hiding in Plain Sight: A Novel

By Nuruddin Farah

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From an acclaimed African writer, a novel about family, freedom, and loyalty.

When Bella learns of the murder of her beloved half brother by political extremists in Mogadiscio, she's in Rome. The two had different fathers but shared a Somali mother, from whom Bella's inherited her freewheeling ways. An internationally known fashion photographer, dazzling but aloof, she comes and goes as she pleases, juggling three lovers. But with her teenage niece and nephew effectively orphaned – their mother abandoned them years ago—she feels an unfamiliar surge of protective feeling. Putting her life on hold, she journeys to Nairobi, where the two are in boarding school, uncertain whether she can—or must—come to their rescue. When their mother resurfaces, reasserting her maternal rights and bringing with her a gale of chaos and confusion that mirror the deepening political instability in the region, Bella has to decide how far she will go to obey the call of sisterly responsibility.

A new departure in theme and setting for “the most important African novelist to emerge in the past twenty-five years” (*The New York Review of Books*) *Hiding in Plain Sight*, is a profound exploration of the tensions between freedom and obligation, the ways gender and sexual preference define us, and the unexpected paths by which the political disrupts the personal.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Hiding in Plain Sight*:

“This novel — Farah's 12th — takes us deep into the domestic life of a sophisticated African family, with great emotional effect... Each of the kids...becomes starkly real in their intelligence, ingenuity, anger, and grief. Even their outrageous mother (and her selfish choices) seems credible ...This family, our families, Africa and Europe and America, have never seemed closer in the way we live now — and this engaging novel, from its explosive beginning to its complex yet uplifting last scenes, shows us why.” —Alan Cheuse, NPR

“Absorbing and provocative... [Farah's] characters are given heft through personal histories and anecdotes, and he writes evocatively about everything from Nairobi traffic to Kenyan game reserves to, importantly, how Somalis are seen not just through the eyes of others, but through their own.” (4 stars) —*USA Today*

“*Hiding in Plain Sight* may begin with a terrorist attack...but this is not a novel about violence...The rewards of reading *Hiding in Plain Sight* lie in Farah's sensitive exploration of grief and his depiction of a family's love for one another...Farah is particularly adept at evoking the way in which the sight of a familiar face or place can trigger painful memories and how comfort can come to us from unexpected sources.” —*New York Times Book Review*

"If [*The Kite Runner*] was up your alley, make sure to give this a go. Farah's 12th novel spans countries, demographics, and histories, and is a pseudo-thriller that is boldly political and far-reaching." -- Martha Stewart.com, Winter Book Club Pick

“[*Hiding in Plain Sight*] ...rattles the cage of conventional thinking about family, gender, and sexuality as they apply to the African context. At once conscientious and demanding, nuanced and aggressive, it is a novel that is sure to be featured in the year-end awards lists.” —*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“Farah...has long been a literary emissary of his native land, which political strife and civil war have turned into a nation of refugees...The whole novel, in fact, might be read as a sort of map of displaced people....[and] the practicalities and mechanics of going on, conducting grief — as much for a lost homeland as for a brother and father — out of hiding and into the plain, often all too general, business of everyday life.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Farah... puts his skilled character development on display in this latest work...[and] does a fine job illustrating the competing societal forces in African culture — from the cosmopolitan nightlife of Nairobi to the pervasive violence and oppression in places like Somalia...an engaging read.” —*The NY Daily News*

“A rich exploration of political and social crises...[and] a sensitive story about living in the shadow of grief, learning to forgive and trying to answer the question, “What does it mean to be Somali in this day and age?” —*Washington Post*

“True to Farah's style, *Hiding in Plain Sight* is strange and haunting... His writing borders on the poetic...Scenes of everyday life...lull us into believing the story could be unfolding anywhere, until we're jolted by mentions of blast-proof windows next to the flatscreen TV or metal detectors at the mall

entrance...[*Hiding in Plain Sight*] adds to an impressive four-decade body of work that has helped illuminate a country and culture that might otherwise have remained hidden behind the fog of war.” —*Toronto Star*

“Somalian writer Nuruddin Farah is known for exploring complex themes and emotions in his books and his 12th novel, "Hiding In Plain Sight" is no exception...[the novel] asks bold questions: What do you do when obligation and desire collide? How far do familial obligations go? How do you move on from a deep tragedy? It also asks questions about what it means to be Somalian today, amidst the chaos...If you are looking to spend [a] rainy weekend curled up with a book that...will ultimately leave you feeling enlightened, you can't go wrong with this one.” —*NY Metro*

"Farah's powerful story of a shattered family makes vivid the human repercussions of political chaos and violence."—BBC.com

“Gracefully pulling together social issues with the seismography of a single family and underscoring it all with hints at the Somali diaspora of the 1990s, Farah once again offers a complex look at the struggle and joy of finding home” —Shelf Awareness

“With delicacy and compassion, Farah...fashions a domestic chamber piece where motives, yearnings and regrets intersect among these complex, volatile personalities against a wider backdrop of religious and cultural conflict, social and political upheaval, and even "family values" in post-millennial Africa An unassuming triumph of straightforward, topical storytelling that both adds to and augments a body of work worthy of a Nobel Prize.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

Praise for *Crossbones*

“Politically courageous and often gripping.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Often reads like a taut, tense thriller . . . a thought-provoking read as well as an absorbing look into a culture and a people in extreme circumstances.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

About the Author

Nuruddin Farah is the author of eleven previous novels, which have been translated into more than twenty languages and have won numerous awards. Born in Baidoa, Somalia, he lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where he is Distinguished Professor of Literature at Bard College.

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PROLOGUE

On his desk in the office, Aar has three photographs, one of each of his two teenage children and a third, the photo of a very beautiful woman, which occupies center stage. Unless he tells them who the woman is, nearly everyone assumes she is his wife, the mother of his children. But if they ask and he tells them that she is his sister, their faces turn sad, as if they are sorry that she is not his woman.

—

In a dream just before dawn, Aar keeps trying to corral a dozen ground squirrels into his apartment. Time and again, he fails miserably. In spite of this, he doesn't give up, and eventually he rounds up quite a few of them. But just as he attempts to shut the door on the last of the lot, he discerns in the hallway the presence of a familiar figure: Valerie, whom he thinks of as his former wife, although they have never actually divorced.

But what on earth is she doing here? And why are the ground squirrels gathering around her, looking eagerly up at her as if she might offer them treats?

Indeed, Valerie is wearing an apron with huge pockets, from which she begins extracting seeds, nuts, dead insects, and other tidbits that she feeds to the rodents. Enraged, he utters a few choice expletives under his breath. Then he resumes his efforts to rally those nearest him, but he feels he hasn't a chance in hell to lure away the ones that are happily feeding around her. He doubts if he will succeed in doing what he has set out to do.

Aar hasn't set eyes on Valerie since she disappeared from his life and that of their children's a decade ago. Why would she make this sudden reappearance here in Mogadiscio, where he is living for only a short while—or, rather, in his dream there? And come to think of it, what have ground squirrels to do with her, or with either of them, for that matter? He watches in bemusement as some of the creatures, having eaten their fill, pirouette for the others, who applaud as squirrels do, rising on their hind legs and touching their palms together. Why is Valerie back in his life at just the point when he no longer misses her?

Aar's heart expands with great sorrow, yet he won't admit defeat. He triples his endeavor to pen in as many squirrels as he can, singling out the sated ones, who surrender more easily to his will. But when no more snacks are forthcoming, they look confused, and some manage to give him the slip while others come and go, entering the room at his behest and departing again at Valerie's insistence. In the ensuing chaos, with neither Valerie nor Aar willing to back down, frenzy sets in, and the poor things begin pushing and shoving one another, looking helpless and lost.

Just then, Aar feels the quiet presence of someone else on the periphery of his vision. A woman, elegantly dressed all in black, is placing a tripod within shooting distance and mounting a compact digital camera on it. Busy attending to the squirrels, Valerie does not take notice of her, but Aar recognizes Bella and wonders how come his sister did not bother to e-mail or phone to alert him to her arrival. How bizarre, and how unlike her! They had last met in Istanbul, when he was on his way to his current posting in Somalia. She had flown in from Brazil and they had spent nearly a week together. But here she is, in her birth city, where she hasn't set foot since 1991, when the two of them fled the fighting in Mogadiscio with their mother, first to Nairobi and then to Rome.

Silent, he watches Bella as she approaches and adjusts the position of her camera, her shadow lengthening, her face widening in a knowing grin as her eyes encounter Aar's. He is relaxed, no longer worried. Bella, more than anyone, gives him comfort. And Bella, more than anyone, discomfits Valerie, because if there is anything Valerie hates, it is having her picture taken when she hasn't prepared for it.

And lo and behold: The minute Valerie's eyes fix on Bella's camera and its attendant paraphernalia, she begins to make ponderous, ungainly movements. Hardly has another moment passed before she beats the undignified retreat of a vanquished rival, slinking away without so much as a word of self-justification or apology.

And Aar herds all the squirrels in.

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Unsettled, his confidence shaken, Aar waits for his breathing to even out. He rubs his eyes until they are sore. For a moment, he has no idea whether it is night and he is still dreaming, or whether it is daytime and he is coming out of a deep reverie. He looks at the ceiling and studies the walls. Then his eyes focus on his feet, and he notices the jagged edges of his badly trimmed toenails. He looks at them as if for instructions as to what to do, as if they might tell him the answers to his many questions.

Aar has been in Mogadiscio for three months, seconded to the UN office in Somalia as logistics officer, charged with the task of facilitating moving the UN's Somalia staff back to Mogadiscio for the first time since Somalia collapsed into civil anarchy. In the interim, UN personnel assigned to Somalia have been operating out of Nairobi, flying up in the morning and returning before nightfall once or twice a month. Not surprisingly, it's been impossible to achieve viable results this way, and yet the staff is resistant to leaving Nairobi, where they and their families feel safe. Even Aar, Somali by birth, is happy to have his children boarding in a school in one of the Nairobi suburbs, and these days he too feels more secure in Nairobi than he does in Mogadiscio.

Yet his home here is a spacious studio apartment with a view of the sea and much of the international airport. At first, Aar lived in a sublet, but when his continued presence became necessary, he rented this apartment in a well-guarded, recently built complex, twenty apartments in all, each with two access points, one serving as a fire exit with steps leading down to a basement shelter in the event of a terrorist attack, the other facing a parking lot. Three-quarters of the occupants of the complex are foreign, and the remainder of them are of Somali descent, albeit with alien passports. A number of the studios accommodate multiple part-time residents who take turns living here. It makes sense to share because the cost of living in a secure place like this comes to an exorbitant two hundred U.S. dollars daily, including breakfast, buffet lunch, and a simple evening meal delivered to one's room. Residents of the larger apartments pay considerably more. And lately the UN and some of the embassies based in neighboring Kenya have taken to paying heavy retainers so they can have rooms, suites, or apartments of their choice available on short lets, sometimes for only half a day, where they can conduct a meeting and leave and not risk an overnight stay.

Hounded by the memory of his dream, Aar feels disconsolately hot one moment, and in the next, despondently cold, as if a life-threatening chill coursed through his blood. His life unfurls before him like a straw mat curling at the edges. But when he tries to smooth it out, his hands shake, and he hears a thunderclap in his head. Aar is a man a little past his midpoint in life and therefore unable to decide in which direction to move. He knows this is what the dream was about.

He makes an attempt to push his worry aside, walling off the nightmare and sidestepping his disorienting sense of dread. But what emerges instead is a memory from the evening before, when one of the UN drivers passed him a sealed envelope as he got out of the car. He'd thought nothing of it at the time, simply accepting it and stuffing it into the back pocket of his jeans. Undoubtedly it contained a request for a loan or a salary advance, he imagined, this being something of a daily occurrence with the workers. Often they ask Aar, as the only Somali of high rank here, to intercede with the Indian moneyman to facilitate these transactions.

But now he is full of anxiety to know the contents of the envelope. He gets out of bed, totteringly eager to satisfy his troubled curiosity. He finds his jeans on the floor where they have fallen and his shaking hand retrieves the envelope, which he tears open with his forefinger. And before he has given it much thought, he is staring at a single word, and a misspelled one at that: DETH!

He doesn't know what to make of the lone word. Did its author mean to write DEBT and misspell it? Or is Aar meant to read it as DEATH with a missing A? Aar is no fool. He is fully aware that among the UN's Somali staff there are Shabaab recruits, hordes of them, who will carry out a threat to kill on behalf of the terrorist organization. They go for soft targets, aiming for a publicity stunt. And nothing works better than killing foreigners—never mind their nationality, so long as they are of the infidel variety—in the name of Islam. On many an occasion, they've killed fellow Muslims, but do they care? The UN is a particular magnet for terrorist groups because of the huge international coverage any damage inflicted generates. Aar remembers when, back in 2003, al-Qaeda operatives used a bomb-laden cement truck to target the Canal Hotel in Baghdad where UN Special Representative Sérgio Vieira de Mello was staying, trapping him in the

rubble for hours before he lost his life, as did twenty-one members of his staff.

He drops the envelope to the floor and, with his knees knocking, manages to pick up his mobile phone and ring Bella. He needs to speak to someone, not necessarily to discuss the letter and its brief but disturbing contents, but just to touch base, to share a moment of amity, evidence that he is still alive. But Bella does not answer.

Aar knows that further action will have to wait until tomorrow. He wonders if the driver who gave him the envelope will be back on duty then. He may already have reported to one of the terrorist cells to share his reconnoitering with Shabaab intelligence, who would most probably assign him to other duties elsewhere now that this part of the mission has been carried out.

Of course, Aar has expected threats from Shabaab to come his way since the day he arrived in Mogadiscio. And in a way, it annoys him that the menacing missive has come just when he is a couple of days from departing for R&R and a celebration of his son's birthday in Nairobi. If he manages to leave, he knows he won't be returning to Mogadiscio soon, maybe ever.

And now that he is deciding what his next step is to be, he feels a surge of further fear. His hands all of a sudden become conscious of each other and the uses to which he can put them. He secures the door and the windows, and he sets the alarm in hope that it will bring help if somebody breaks in. At eight in the morning, he is not sure if he is safer staying at home, where the alarm is now on, or going to work, where there is comfort in knowing that he is not alone. Then the trilling of his mobile phone startles him.

It's Keith Neville, the UN's local chief of security, an Englishman, who wants to call on him. Aar doesn't bother to ask why, and Keith Neville doesn't volunteer an explanation. Does he know about the letter from the driver? As soon as Aar rings off, he is seized by an urge to phone his children, Dahaba and Salif. He dials their numbers, feeling that it is essential for him to hear their voices, and they his. But, like Bella, they do not answer; and so he leaves them messages, in which he informs them that he is coming home to Nairobi a day earlier than previously arranged. He encounters the same worrying silence when he calls the home of the principal of their school and his wife, two generous souls who have been playing host to Dahaba and Salif in Nairobi. Again he leaves messages, telling Mr. and Mrs. Kariuki of his plan to arrive on the morrow.

In his desperate need to reach someone close to him, Aar rings Gunilla Johansson. Mercifully, she answers and, hearing the worry in his voice, wonders aloud if everything in Mogadiscio is well.

Gunilla is a colleague of Aar's back in Nairobi, and the two of them have recently become secret lovers, seeing a lot of each other when Aar is home and his children aren't around. The children have met Gunilla twice, the first time when they camped out together in the Rift Valley and the next on the one time she came to dinner. Undemanding, generous to a fault, Gunilla is the sort who understands Aar's predicament as the father of two teenagers who are difficult to please, immodestly possessive, and given to asking if there is something going on between him and any woman he greets. Still, he is unsure why he's kept the true intimacy of his relationship with her a secret, not only from the children but also from Bella, whom he's often told about his other women. He ascribes this to his general wariness about making a serious commitment after what happened with Valerie.

And yet it was she, not Mahdi or Fatima, his closest Somali friends in Nairobi, whom he took into his confidence on his last visit home, requesting that she store his essential documents, including the notarized photocopies of his passport, his most recent will, and the details of his bank accounts and other assets, in her safe box. She agreed and also insisted that he provide her with Bella's coordinates, just in case, along with those of Valerie and her lover. Bella's details he could readily provide, but as for Valerie, the best he could do was to give his former mother-in-law's e-mail and phone number.

Not only did he do all this, but he also gave her power of attorney over all his assets before he left for Somalia. He did not tell this to either the children or Bella. Perhaps this was because Aar leads a compartmentalized existence, and no one person, not even his sister, has access to the sum of his secrets.

Now Gunilla is asking why he sounds so feverish, on edge. He tells her that his days have been hectic lately and that he's been returning home exhausted. But he doesn't tell her about the letter. Nor does he tell her that he's been so restless that one day last week he woke up to find his feet on his pillow and his head where his feet ought to have been.

She says, "I am glad you're coming to Nairobi. It will be great to see you and for you to see the children."

They chat about this and that, and then he rings off to wait for the chief of security with the serenity of a man awaiting a pizza delivery.

The calmness doesn't last long, however. Keith Neville calls back to advise Aar not to open the door to anyone until he gets another call from Keith, which he should not answer, and then a text message from someone called RatRoute. Aar waits, his heart beating loudly in his ears, especially after the missed call from Keith. He draws gulps of nervous air into his lungs.

When Keith finally arrives, he is accompanied by a man who, like him, is wearing a sky-blue UN uniform and helmet, though the companion has larger feet, which Aar can make out through the peephole. The men carry themselves with a professionalism that sets them apart from the local ragtag soldiery. Aar deliberately keeps them waiting at the door until, growing restless, the other man draws close to Keith to say something. This affords Aar a glimpse of the man's face.

It's Cadde, Keith's deputy, who once served as a bodyguard to a radical religionist who is now a high-ranking Shabaab figure. Not that Cadde will ever admit to having been close to his former boss, now a wanted terrorist. Cadde is advisedly moderate in his ways, never openly condemning the young Somali women who work in the office and move about with their heads uncovered. He is soft-spoken and unusually polite. But Aar won't be humbugged, no sir.

Keith Neville, on the other hand, is a former bodybuilder gone to fat. When Aar opens the door at last, Keith is the first to enter, with the bearing of a great actor asked to do an uninspiring cameo in a bad movie. Face dotted with liver spots, eyes bulging and as red as beetroot, maybe from illicitly acquired beer and liquor, the Englishman has told Aar that he doesn't want to be in Somalia. A former marine and subsequently a mercenary with Ian Smith's Rhodesian army, lately of Blackwater and their ilk, who have employed him in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan, he has done all the dirty work that a dirty man can get away with.

Now he says, "May I look around?"

"Go ahead. Please," says Aar.

The two men move in opposite directions. Keith enters the bedroom and then presumably the bathroom, and Cadde heads for the kitchen and, finding the door to the balcony locked, asks if Aar has a key and can open it for him. Aar is wise to the fact that many a security breach has resulted from an unlocked balcony. In Nairobi, where he has resided for a number of years, balconies often provide access points to burglars. Aar elects to lie, saying that he has no idea where the key is and that he has never opened the balcony door for fear that he might forget to lock it.

Back in the living room, Keith's wandering gaze falls on the photographs of Bella in various poses, and he stands there, staring at them. It is as if the man suddenly has no memory of the business that has brought him

here. Still, Aar refrains from asking why they have come, his self-restraint greater than even his sense of unease. He has no wish to confront his demons now. But when Keith and Cadde join him in the kitchen, at last Aar asks, "Why are you here?"

Keith looks at Aar and then at Cadde and, smiling solicitously, explains, "My office has received intelligence from an unidentified source suggesting that you've been singled out as a terrorist target. And because of this, we've been asked to call round and talk to you."

Aar has no way of knowing whether the two of them are fishing for information or know more than they are letting on. He looks at Cadde for a long minute before he responds. "Does your unidentified source say why I've been singled out and in what way?"

Cadde turns away, avoiding Aar's glance, and Aar is struck with a sudden nausea; in fact, he is so panic-stricken that he thinks his knees may give way, forcing him to collapse to the floor. And because he can't bear the thought of that happening in the presence of these men, he makes his way to the chair closest to him and sits down. There is no point in engaging these men in further talk. He trains his eyes on Cadde, in hope of divining something from the man's body language, but when he fails to do so, he turns to Keith: "Can you say who your unidentified source is or how you know that I've been singled out?"

Keith exchanges a furtive glance with Cadde and then answers that he is not at liberty to share any information. That is the moment when Aar indicates that he wants them to leave. And they do.

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Aar telephones his children again, and again each of their phones rings on and on until at last he gets their voice mail. He leaves them each a second message, his worry gaining in intensity. He paces back and forth as though he were in a cage, which in a sense he is, in this barricaded hotel in his native city, with armed guards roaming inside and outside, and stationed at all entrances.

Until a few hours ago, Aar felt safe here, especially being so close to the airport. All he has to do is pack his one suitcase and leave. And although he hates giving the impression that the mere suggestion of danger in the shape of a threatening letter is enough to make him flee, he is inclined to do just that. After all, he has the children to think of, having been a single parent to them since Valerie vanished.

When he thinks of Valerie, he thinks of their relationship as being like a rug: beautiful when first purchased but gone threadbare over time and then utterly disintegrating. He seldom mentions her in the presence of the children anymore, as he does not know what to tell them, how to explain that their mother evidently valued the love she shared with Padmini over the love she had for them.

The last time he heard from her was when Dahaba, at ten, had her first period. Valerie wrote to him from Pondicherry, where she and Padmini were running a hotel and restaurant, to tell him what to do. As if she could give this sort of advice from such a distance! Or had any right to after failing to remember so many of the children's birthdays with so much as a phone call, let alone a card or a present! When he responded angrily, she wrote back, "As a Muslim man, what do you know about raising a daughter? Your people chop it all off, don't they, and maybe feed it to a waiting cat?" From then on, Aar cut off all communication with her and relayed information only through the children's English grandmother, with whom he has remained on good terms and who gives him the latest about her daughter in return.

The years that have passed have dulled the edges of his rancor, and recently he has begun to pity Valerie, sensing that she may be regretting the choices she made. The children have lost interest in what their mother is up to. In fact, one of the things he would like to talk to them about is who will take care of them in the

event of his death. Given the choice, he would like Bella to have them. Not that he would stand in the way of Valerie making a new bond with her children. After all, she carried them both in her womb for nine months, breast-fed them, cared for them, loved them—until she left. But it won't be easy for Valerie to win them over again, especially if Padmini is still in the picture.

That night, Aar books a flight to Nairobi for the following day. In the morning, he calls in sick—a terrible diarrhea, he says. He learns from his secretary, a Kenyan Somali who has little or no understanding of Mogadiscio's clan-infested politics, that Cadde has not returned to work since he and Keith visited Aar at his apartment, nor has Aar's driver. He tells her he's going to organize a taxi so he can quickly pick up a few documents he needs to work at home.

He leaves his suitcase in the taxi and slips into the office. It isn't files he is after, but a few photos—and not any of Bella's, surprisingly enough. The photos he feels compelled to have are the ones he himself took during that camping trip in the Rift Valley with Gunilla and his children. He is just on his way back out the door with them when Shabaab strikes.

1.

"Like beads unstrung," Bella says to Marcella.

"What a terrible thing death is!" says Marcella to Bella.

They hug for a long time, the elderly Italian woman holding the younger woman, each wailing louder than the other—their lamentation a survivor's threnody expressive of so huge a loss.

The doors of their respective apartments are open. They sob bitterly in the corridor, neither of them battling to hold back their keening. Some of the neighbors come out of their apartments and stand gawking at the women and exchanging questioning glances.

It is Bella's ill luck that she was one of the last to hear of Aar's death. When he was killed, she was finishing up a photo assignment in Bahia for the German magazine GEO. She had just cleared customs at Fiumicino when she came upon the headline in the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. According to witnesses, a suicide bomber blew up a car at the main entrance to the UN compound, then four heavily armed gunmen entered the building and a gun battle lasting more than an hour ensued. In all, twenty people lost their lives, fifteen of them Somalis and five foreigners, Aar among them.

Bella had barely finished the first paragraph when her legs buckled and she collapsed at the feet of a man offering her taxi service. When she came to, a throng of people had crowded around her and a fierce debate had ensued as to what to do with her. The taxi driver, an elderly Sicilian with a broad face sporting at least a week of stubble and a sweet smile showing only a few front teeth, bent down and helped her to sit up. "Signorina, take notice," he said. "You are in Rome, whose proud citizens frown on public weeping." He offered her a pile of paper napkins. "Here, dry your tears."

The taxi driver, a gentleman of rare breeding and charm, led her to his car and they sat together until she came to her senses. Then he drove her home, left his car parked illegally in the street, helped her up the stairway with her luggage, cameras and all, and refused to accept the fare.

On the drive, Bella used her phone to glean further details from the Internet. The attack was remarkable for its ruthlessness, which had attracted intense international attention. The body parts of the dead were found strewn about the outbuildings, so charred and mangled as to be unidentifiable. Aar's head was found far from

where the rest of his body fell, although that was according to some of the unreliable Somali websites, which are given to exaggeration and releasing unverified information. Those body parts that were identifiably Somali were buried in a mass grave, and those of a recognizably paler shade were collected and put in containers to be catalogued later before being passed on to their next of kin.

Now, at the sight of her beloved friend and neighbor, who has been listening for her return, Bella is again undone. Marcella holds her until her sobbing ceases, then they retreat into Bella's apartment, still clinging tightly to each other.

Marcella makes her sit. "I'll make you tea with sugar, the way Somalis like it," Marcella says. Bella stares back at her, as if she doesn't understand the language or can't comprehend why anyone would have sugar in her tea. "Please," she says. Too weak to sit up straight and too jet-lagged to keep her eyes open, too exhausted to sleep and much too disoriented to take in all that has happened, Bella is at the point of losing control over her bodily movements.

Marcella sits down opposite her. The old woman has known Bella literally from birth. She remembers the day in 1981 when Hurdo came to have her second child at Mogadiscio's Digfer Hospital. It was a Muslim holiday and the hospital was short-staffed; Marcella, as head of obstetrics, was putting in a long shift, and it fell to her to perform the delivery. My lucky day, Hurdo always said. Hurdo and her husband, Digaaleh, were colleagues of Marcella's husband on the law faculty, and the two couples knew each other well. Hurdo was a much-adored professor of international law, having gained her higher degree from Bologna in the days when a large number of Somalis pursued their professional training in Italy.

There was an additional layer to the intimacy of Marcella's connection with Bella, in that she was among the few who knew of Hurdo's affair with Giorgio Fiori, a Dante scholar on the faculty of letters, and she suspected that Bella was Giorgio's child even before it was confirmed. So she had a certain proprietary feeling about Bella from the beginning, which was rekindled years later, when Marcella and her husband—who had died recently of lymphoma, poor soul—took on the role of surrogate parents to Bella in Rome, helping her to find her apartment opposite their own and watching after it when photography assignments took her far and wide.

Lately, Marcella has been losing more and more of her recall, fading like a cloth losing the brightness of its original dye. Now she is reaching for the memory of the last time she saw Aar, but it is earlier memories that surface. Aar was twelve years old when Bella was born. From the beginning, he had an older brother's protectiveness and affection for her, buying her toys with his own pocket money and helping with her studies (she was bad at mathematics and science). He'd encouraged her interest in photography; in fact, he bought her first camera and sat for her as she began to master her art. One of Marcella's great joys was to host brother and sister together, delighting in the way they comforted each other, holding hands and hugging at every opportunity. They had a deeper affection for each other than could exist between even the most intimate husband and wife, Marcella thinks. But still she can't retrieve the memory of Aar's last visit.

"When was Aar here last?" she asks.

But the question leads Bella to a dim hall lined with fogged mirrors, where she searches frenziedly for answers and, finding none, weeps some more. Marcella can't think of anything to say that might help, and so she says only, "Let me make the tea."

"Actually, I would prefer coffee," says Bella.

"Black or with milk?"

“A latte if possible.”

Marcella knows how to work Bella’s espresso machine and goes about feeding the grinder with coffee beans, apologizing for the hideous noise. She regrets that since her husband’s death she hasn’t been looking after the young woman’s apartment as before. In the old days, she would often do the tidying herself or hire a Filipino woman to do it, services that Bella would insist on reimbursing with money and favors in return. Now Marcella notices the dishes in the sink; the books lying open, abandoned like orphans; the drawn curtains; the windows unopened for days on end so that the whole apartment emits a musty odor. This is not clean living, she thinks. In an effort to alleviate the dark mood, she parts the curtains to let in the daylight and opens the windows. She sets the coffee to brewing while she begins to clear away the clutter then interrupts herself to froth the milk and pour the latte into a large mug, worried that Bella might spill it in her state of discomposure.

“Here,” she says, handing it to Bella. “This will do you good.”

Bella receives the mug with both hands and murmurs her thanks. But she doesn’t take a sip, not yet; it is too hot. And when she does, she continues to look dazed, her eyes unfocused, her hands trembling as she lifts the mug to her lips and lowers it again, untasted.

Marcella has noticed that the red button of the message machine is blinking. She knows that one of the messages is her own condolence, left earlier in the day, when she was still at work and Bella had not yet returned. But there may be more. She debates whether she should bring the messages to Bella’s attention. After all, one or more may be from Aar, or from his colleagues. But Bella is staring ahead of her, looking at nothing, and Marcella decides not to mention it.

Bella looks up into Marcella’s eyes, finding comfort in their warmth and familiarity. Then, as if remembering something, she tries to stand but nearly loses her balance before she steadies herself with her hands and sits back down, narrowly missing spilling her latte, which she still has not tasted.

“What do you need done? I’ll do it. What?”

Apologetically, Bella says, “Could you please help bring in my camera cases? In my state, I left them outside, in the corridor.”

“Gladly, and you stay put.”

Marcella fetches the bags and asks if she should put them in the spare bedroom, which Bella rightly calls Aar’s room, as it is always ready to receive him—the bed made, clean towels in a neat stack, his pile of reading material (much of it novels bought at airports) at bedside, a spare pair of pajamas and hotel slippers, all of it arranged neatly as he liked things kept. Bella has never allowed anyone else to stay there. So Marcella’s question initially strikes her as almost insensitive, but after a moment of thought, she says, “Yes, in the guest room, please.”

Marcella knows all about homage to the dead. She has only recently finished going through her late husband’s things, getting rid of all but a handful that she left where he last placed them, cautioning the cleaning lady not to shift them. It is the prerogative of survivors to honor their dead and salute them the best way they can, she thinks.

When Marcella has finished moving the camera cases, Bella says, “Come and sit with me, please.” Marcella obliges, settling at the bottom end of the couch where Bella has indicated she should. Soon enough, though, an uneasy silence descends, and with it, a gnawing feeling of despair. Marcella scans the far wall of the

living room, which is lined with Bella's photographs, some of which have made her into one of the fashion industry's most sought-after photographers. Even so, Marcella's favorites are the family portraits, of Aar alone and with Valerie and his children at different ages. Bella has the true artist's knack for showing the ugliness inside those she detests, Marcella thinks, as can be discerned in the photographs she took of Valerie.

In an effort to ease the tension and hardness in Bella, Marcella takes the young woman's feet in her hands and gently massages them until she feels a kind of calmness taking hold both in her own as well as Bella's body. Then she blurts out, "Where is Aar's corpse?"

When Bella does not answer, Marcella persists. "Any idea when and where he will be interred?"

Marcella has always had this tendency to say the unspeakable in public, to ask the unanswerable in private. And before Bella can think what to say, the old woman says, "Will you have time to get there before his burial? I wouldn't go to that dreadful country if I were you—but I can understand if you choose to do so. But I suppose, knowing them, they will not wait for your arrival."

Marcella's questions remind Bella how little even educated Europeans know about Islam, let alone about Somalis and their culture. "He'll have been buried before dark the same day he died," she says.

"Already buried—but where, when? Before dark?" Mercifully, Marcella stops herself before she blunders in deeper, and she stares at Bella in confusion. It is obvious that Marcella is upset with herself for asking inappropriate questions at such an inopportune time, but Bella waits to be certain Marcella is done before she says, "Aar was buried the same day he died."

"What a way to go!" This time not even Bella's expression of palpable distress is enough to keep Marcella from continuing in this vein. "What a way to end the noble life of a man who served everyone with honor, untainted integrity, and purpose."

At last, Bella, wincing, takes her first sip of the latte.

"Has anyone been in touch with you officially?"

Bella looks at the blinking answering machine, and Marcella goes to it and presses the button to play back the messages. A woman speaking in perfect English with a Nordic-sounding voice has made several attempts to leave a message. In the most recent, she scarcely gets past Bella's name before she bursts into tears and hangs up; the second time, she says, "Gunilla here," and then, "There's been terrible, terrible news from Mogadiscio—" She breaks off, then attempts to continue, stuttering, stopping, and weeping copiously before she again hangs up. On the third try, she says her piece, as if she were reading from a script: "Aar lost his life in a terrorist suicide bombing. The Somali authorities have ordered that his corpse and the others will all be interred in a mass grave in Mogadiscio."

Bella utters an Irish curse, wishing the killers hell and worse in the spirit of all the saints of every faith anywhere. This message is followed by several earlier messages from Aar, who sounded desperate to speak with his sister. At the sound of them, Bella breaks down again. Marcella shushes her, tapping her cheeks and then holding her face in her gentle hands until the weeping ends. And for the first time, Marcella allows herself to wonder to whom the responsibility of informing Aar's children and Valerie will fall.

Aloud she says, "Would you like me to call the children or had you rather do it yourself?"

Of course, Bella insists on being the one to tell her nephew and niece about their father's death. As for Valerie, Bella will start by calling her mother, who will know how to locate her if anyone can.

Bella remembers that the Hausa way of informing a relation living far away about the loss of a parent, a sibling, or another intimate is to send an emissary to deliver the news in person. The emissary dispatched on such a delicate mission does not share the sad news, however, until they are in close proximity to a place where a wide community of friends and relatives are on hand to provide support. A pity, Bella thinks, that whoever it was who called and left the news of Aar's death on the answering machine—or whoever turned it into international headline news—did not take a leaf from the Hausa book of etiquette.

Actually, Bella is not certain from whom she learned about this custom. Perhaps it was Marcella, come to think of it. As a former senior obstetrician at a Vatican-run hospital in one of Rome's poor neighborhoods, she had become deeply familiar with corpses and what becomes of them, depending on the faith of the dead and their relatives. She and Bella had often discussed the Irish and their wakes, the Yoruba and their drawn-out rituals, the Muslims, the Jews, the Zoroastrians, the Hindus, and the Catholics, each in their own way confronting the moment of death with a rationale that is unique to their culture and belief systems. But Bella suspects that it was not Marcella but her Malian lover who told her of the Hausa's sensitive handling of news of bereavement. And as much as she wishes she could spare Dahaba and Salif the pain of receiving the news in the same boorish way it came to her, she is aware that this is impossible in the age of the Internet and round-the-clock news channels that jabber on and on, forever upsetting one.

But before she can telephone her nephew and niece, she needs to stop Marcella from yammering away. She asks the old lady to go to her own apartment and call the airlines to buy Bella a business-class ticket to Nairobi on the next flight available. "Use my credit card," she says, offering it.

"Business class at short notice?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It will be prohibitively expensive."

Bella says, "This is a once-in-a-lifetime purchase. Or at least I hope so."

With Marcella gone at last, Bella picks up the telephone to dial her nephew. It has barely begun to ring when her weeping and wailing starts anew. This is no good, she thinks, as the phone rings and rings. She hangs up without waiting for voice mail to kick in. To fortify her resolve, she pours herself a strong drink, which she downs in a single gulp. Thus hardened, she calls Wendy, Valerie's mother. The two women are fond of each other. What is more, Wendy got on very well with Aar and looked upon him with great approval, not only because she saw how devoted a father he was, but also because he gave her as much access to her grandchildren as she wished. For their part, Dahaba and Salif loved their grandmother and looked forward to spending a month a year with her in Leicester when the schools in Kenya closed for the summer.

As soon as she has recognized Bella's voice, Wendy lets out a long whimper and then stammers weepily, "I've been in a state since hearing of it. You know, I loved Aar more than I've cared for my own daughter."

"Where is she?" asks Bella. "Any idea?"

"She is currently in Uganda, with that woman."

Bella knows that there is no love lost between Wendy and Padmini, whom she blames for Valerie's decision to walk out on her marriage. But when Wendy offers to call and break the news of Aar's death to her daughter, Bella is all too glad to accept the offer.

They talk some more, and when Wendy speaks of being overwhelmed by the barbarity of the killings, Bella

silently remembers something Hurdo once said after their country collapsed into anarchy and they fled Mogadiscio: “Death in Somalia seldom bothers to announce its arrival. In fact, death calls with the arrogance of a guest confident of receiving a warm welcome at any time, no questions asked.”

The church bells in Trastevere chime, as if in tribute to Aar. Bella pictures death riding a tide of undulant waves of unheralded emotion—and she weeps again, unable to stop shaking, the hour as dark as a cave.

“And what do they say down in Somalia?” Wendy is asking.

Bella, despite herself, recounts some of the gorier details from one of the Somali websites, which reported without giving any evidence that one of the terrorists who entered the UN building after the suicide bombing held a knife to Aar’s throat and then stood by, waiting and watching, until his blood drained like a goat being made halal.

“Shame on the lot of them,” Wendy curses.

Bella knows that these terrorists aren’t true Muslims. Yes, she is a secularist, no more than culturally Muslim. But with a mother born and raised a Muslim and a father born in Italy to Catholic parents and brought up a Christian, she believed she had the undisputed authority to choose her faith. In her youth, growing up in a Muslim country, she embraced her mother’s faith. But she no longer thinks of herself as a true Muslim.

Wendy is saying, “Death is a given, isn’t it?”

“We have no idea of the time of our dying.”

“Nor of the manner of our dying.”

Bella says, “It is only that Aar’s death adds terror to the idea of death, the idea of dying, because he was unprepared for death and did not deserve to die in that infernal manner.”

“He was a good man,” Wendy affirms.

And they say their good-byes.

—

Unable to reach her niece and nephew on their mobile phones, Bella rings the home of their hosts, the principal of the school and his wife. Surely the attack has been headline news in Kenya as well. Finally, Catherine Kariuki, the wife of the principal, answers the phone. Bella asks if the children have heard the news. Catherine confirms that they have and that they are taking it very badly indeed.

“How do you mean?” asks Bella.

Catherine says that they seem to be traumatized and uncertain how to act. One minute they’re a little weepy, the next minute one or the other of them says, “This was bound to happen, given where Dad was,” and the other one commiserates.

“I would like to talk to them, please.”

Catherine goes to call the children to the phone but soon comes back to say that not only won’t they open the door to Dahaba’s bedroom, where they’ve sequestered themselves, they also won’t even acknowledge her

knocking or her calls to them.

So Bella simply tells Catherine that she will be on a flight to Nairobi on the morrow, and the two of them burst into tears and weep and weep and weep until one or the other of them drops the line, and the next thing Bella knows, she is holding a dead phone in her hand and listening to approaching footsteps. Looking up, she realizes that Marcella has come back with the boarding pass for the plane ticket she has booked.

Bella puts the boarding pass in the external pouch of her shoulder bag and immediately sets about packing. She decides to take along with her a couple of camera cases in addition to the ones she has brought back from Bahia—who knows how long she'll need to stay in Nairobi; perhaps she'll even set up a studio there. She asks Marcella to bring up a couple more from the basement of the building, where Bella stores them. Bella packs her flash leads, hot-shoe-equipped units, and several other essential items. Often, Bella entrusts this job to a young half-Eritrean woman who serves as her assistant, but there isn't time for that. So, as Bella does not like surprises, she packs for all eventualities, such as whether the sun will bless her with its presence or fail to show, like a hurt lover. Bella knows of an Italian photographer who lost much of his work—a month's worth—because he hadn't prepared for the sudden dust storm that swept in after a gorgeous day in Omdurman, Sudan.

Marcella, bless her soul, keeps bringing sandwiches and drinks and asking questions. She expresses surprise at how much equipment and clothing Bella is packing. "Are you staying away for a long time?" she asks.

"What would you have me do instead?" Bella asks.

"Fetch the kids here."

"And then what?"

"Let them go to school here or in England with their grandmother, who would be more than willing to have them stay with her," Marcella says.

"Things seem a lot more complicated than that," Bella says, "what with a dead father and a delinquent mother who may turn up in hopes of having a say in what happens to them. Not to mention that there is the children's opinion to consider. Maybe they are happy where they are."

"So are you relocating back to Africa for good?" Marcella asks. "Is that what you are intending to do, carissima?"

"Aar's death changes all plans," Bella replies.

"Including where you'll live?"

"Everything," Bella affirms.

"And the apartment, what will you do about it?"

"Aar's death has changed everything," Bella says again.

"But you are so young and unfulfilled!" Marcella cries, once again unable to keep from speaking her mind.

Disturbed, Bella sits on the edge of the bed, where the camera cases are still open, and puts her head in her hands. She knows there is no simple way she can explain to Marcella or anyone else what it feels like to lose Aar. And now that death has deprived her of him, how she feels she is answering a call to serve, almost a

religious calling. As a young woman, she saw herself as his appendage, breathing the very oxygen he breathed. She has never married, never committed herself loyally and fully to another person, man or woman, always and forever waiting for the summons, duty-bound, steadfast in her dedication to her beloved brother, like a hound to its master. She has never forgotten the assistance and love he provided to her when she was a young girl growing up. Now it is her turn to give him and his children all the devotion they require, setting aside her own needs and desires.

“Forgive me for being selfish,” Marcella says.

Bella asks, “What are you talking about?”

“I was hoping you would be here when I go.”

“Go where? Where will you go?”

“I meant when I die,” Marcella says.

Bella is at a loss for words. After a pause, she says, “At the moment, Dahaba and Salif are my priority. You will always be there in my mind and my heart; and of course, I will rush to return if there is urgent need.”

The truth is, Bella hasn’t thought further than the next blind corner in a life marked by labyrinthine turns, as full of surprises as the paths that lead into and out of a casbah. The idea of travel, insofar as Bella is concerned, is bound up with the loading of cameras—the genesis of renewal via self-expression in everlasting images. But she feels in no condition to share all her inner tumult of worries and half-formed plans with Marcella.

“To me, you are the daughter I never had,” says Marcella.

“You’ve told me that several times.”

“I had a soft spot for Aar too.”

“I’ve always been aware of that.”

“I am bad at gaining control of my emotions.”

“Don’t give that a thought.”

“And because Aar’s death has shaken me to the marrow of my bones, I’m even more inept than usual.”

Weeping once more, they hug.

Through her tears, Bella looks down at her bare feet. She must trim her toenails before she goes to catch her flight, she thinks, soak them in very hot salt water and trim the ugly lot, as hard as a young calf’s hooves and just as dangerous, with their jagged edges. In Rio, where she visited her Brazilian lover, she hadn’t the proper scissors with which to cut them, the airline having confiscated her last pair.

“What about Valerie?” Marcella asks.

“What about her?”

“Why can’t she be with her children?”

How can Bella tell this bumbling, adorable fool that there is a right time and a wrong time and place to bring Valerie into the conversation. But Bella, though miffed, won't say boo to Marcella or speak ill of Valerie to her.

Marcella continues. "Remember, she is their mother and no one can prevent her from making a legal claim to the children as the only surviving parent."

Bella doesn't tell her the plan that is beginning to take shape in her head if such a thing threatens: fight all the way to the courts to stop it from happening. She instead speaks with long-winded caution, saying, "We haven't communicated, Valerie and I, for a very long time, and I have no idea what her plans will be when she hears of Aar's death."

"She is unbearably self-centered."

Bella wishes she had a quiet moment in which to plumb the depth of her grief alone, to give herself over to an instant of full-blown mourning before she gets a little rest and goes to catch her flight. Then she recalls how Marcella handled the loss of her husband of nearly sixty years: She slept. Bella has never known anyone who slept off her grief, but Marcella fell into a massive depression and slept and slept—not once leaving her bedroom for a whole month, during which time she remained utterly mute. At the end of what a mutual friend would later describe as Marcella's "mourning hibernation," the woman reemerged, and she seemed to think that the world around her was good again. And if you mentioned her husband's name, Marcella would speak of him as though he were out for a brief walk and would be back shortly.

Bella has no such luxury; she doesn't have a whole month in which to mourn. She has a nephew and niece to look after.

2.

With the aircraft doors closed and the plane ready to depart, Bella half listens to the flight attendant giving instructions she must have heard a million times over the years as she crossed oceans, changed continents, exchanged one time zone for another. It starts to dawn on her now that her body time is nowhere near the one her wristwatch is telling her, nor will it match the time it will be when the plane lands in Nairobi tomorrow. She is in her own time zone, much more jet-lagged than she has ever been, her brain little better equipped for thinking than a cabbage in the process of becoming sauerkraut.

Of course, Aar's death has been traumatizing, but it also comes on top of months of nearly nonstop travel. She has been putting together a book meant to document the outward migration of Somalis in pictures and words—nearly three million people in the space of a decade making a move from one of the least developed countries in the world to some of the most advanced. To that end, she has been traveling from Rome to several European countries where Somali refugee populations abound, and then to North America, including the cities of Toronto, Ottawa, Minneapolis, Columbus, and San Diego. From there, she was off to Australia and New Zealand, after which she took the Brazil trip for work and to visit with her lover there.

A life of quality merde mixed with quite a bit of weltschmerz.

Although she and Aar were not refugees, they were among the penultimate wave to leave Somalia, the last before the hemorrhage of a million and a half persons of all ages, classes, and educational backgrounds who quit the country and then the continent, and ended up anywhere that would take them. Two decades after the start of this stampede, some clarity is emerging as to which of these expatriate communities is thriving and which have stayed at the lowest rung of development. It has been Bella's intention to document the successes

and the failures alike. Initially, she wanted to go to Somalia, maybe even visit Aar in Mogadiscio. But now Bella thinks she may shelve the entire project or at least postpone it until Dahaba and Salif are both out of school, their lives settled and their futures on an even keel. A pity, because Bella had been funding the project herself from her meager earnings, against the advice of several friends, who suggested that she seek funding from one of the European foundations or even from the UN's International Labour Organization.

As the plane levels at thirty thousand feet and the flight attendants come around to offer drinks and snacks, Bella reminds herself that Marcella forgot to give back her credit card. She discovered this while waiting in the passenger lounge at the airport, but she realized it was too late to do anything about it. Lucky she has plenty of cash from the unused pile she returned with from Brazil and a couple of other credit cards she always carries with her when she travels, in the event of an emergency.

Instead of worrying needlessly about her credit card, Bella used her time in the lounge to check her messages. Which is how she discovered a strange text informing her that Valerie and Padmini, her Asian-British partner, have spent a night in a lockup in Kampala, Uganda, having been accused of engaging in illicit sex. The sender signed off only as "G," which Bella suspected stood for Gunilla Johansson, the colleague of her brother's in Nairobi who left her the message telling her of his death.

Following her hunch, she tried Gunilla's number and reached her. At the sound of her voice and the mention of Aar's name, the tears were back, this time with Gunilla's accompaniment. The two of them were so hopelessly emotional that Bella forgot to ask about Valerie and the mysterious text, and Gunilla did not manage to give her any information worth remembering. Then just before she boarded the flight, Bella telephoned Mahdi and Fatima, who were among Aar's closest friends in Nairobi and whose children were Dahaba and Salif's schoolmates. When Mahdi offers to meet her flight, Bella thanks him but declines, worried that she may be in an even worse state when she lands.

The business-class flight attendant gives Bella an elaborate menu printed in several languages; Bella takes it with both hands but doesn't bother to open or look at it. The idea of ordering food so soon after Aar's death appalls her. She declines the offer of the meal and closes her eyes, out of a combination of fatigue and the effort to fight the primal urge building up within her to take revenge against those who murdered her brother. When she opens her eyes, she says to the stewardess, her voice faltering, "Actually, I wouldn't mind having a coffee with some Baileys." The stewardess hesitates, looking embarrassed, as if deciding whether or not to tell Bella to wait until after the meals have been served. Then she disappears into the galley and returns with the creamy Irish stuff, as if she were serving at a Dublin wake.

Meanwhile, Bella engages her neighbor, a young Alemannic-speaking woman sporting an ostentatious coiffure, which must have cost her quite a bit, dyed in the colors of exotic birds and arranged in terraces. Her dress, by contrast, is scanty, her tank top bursting at the seams under the pressure of a well-developed chest. The shirt bears a slogan across the front promoting love in all forms, in German and English. Bella hopes that the woman is not on her way to Somalia or any other Muslim land, where she would surely be stoned on sight.

"Where are you headed?" Bella asks the woman.

"Nairobi," the woman replies.

"As a tourist?"

"I am going to marry my lover, who lives there."

Bella is tempted to know the gender of the young woman's betrothed—she can't help thinking of Valerie

evidently languishing in Uganda—but then Kenya, next door, is the capital of gay culture in East Africa, an altogether different proposition. At any rate, she knows this is not her business and so choreographs the conversation in another direction.

“And this,” Bella ventures, indicating the elaborate coiffure, “this is for the occasion?” She thinks of all the sacred texts—of Islam, of Judaism, of Sikhism—in which the growing or covering of hair plays an important part, welcoming this distraction from thinking about Aar’s death.

“More or less.”

“And where are you getting married?”

“In a church in the center of Nairobi.”

She will go this far and no further. But when the plane hits a pocket of turbulence and the young woman, looking frightened, opens and closes her mouth without issuing a word, Bella leans forward and says, “It is all right. I am here, we are here.” And then, surprising herself, she takes the woman’s hand in hers, and they settle effortlessly into a place of mutual comfort, each deriving solace from the contact. Bella drops into a well of exhaustion, thinking ahead to her reunion with Dahaba and Salif, and imagining the hard times ahead for which she must prepare. But by the time the flight attendant comes to collect her cup, she is dead to the world, still holding the hand of the scantily dressed, heavy-chested woman with the fantastic hair with the tenderness of a lover. It isn’t until her seatmate reclaims her hand, with the aim of going to the bathroom, that Bella wakes with a start. For a sleepy moment, she doesn’t remember where she is and what on earth she is doing, and then she stays awake for the next few hours, wary and worried.

As much as she dislikes Valerie, Bella can’t help wondering about the circumstances of her alleged arrest. You can’t be cautious enough in a country that legally forbids same-sex lovemaking; you are bound to lay yourself open to blackmail and arrest if you engage in “inappropriate behavior,” which has recently become synonymous with illegal behavior in a growing roster of places. In Dubai, a British heterosexual couple smooching in the lobby of their five-star hotel had been jailed for a year, for example.

In Bella’s mind, freedoms are a package, so the freedoms denied daily to millions of citizens in Africa or the Middle East are bound up with the lack of democracy in these parts of the world. The choices individuals make in their private lives are just as important as the choices they make at the ballot box. Public displays of affection, whether between a man and a woman or two men or two women, are but expressions of democratic behavior. No one, not even the president of a country, should have the power and the authority to define love—including whom to love. So while Bella hasn’t a kind word to say about Valerie, she is nonetheless sad to learn that she has been a victim of such repression. True, she and Padmini—particularly Padmini, being Uganda-born—should have known better than to visit a country where they might easily fall afoul of the law. The cynic in Bella wonders if unconsciously Valerie was trying to steal Aar’s thunder by any means possible. He has been dead less than a week, after all.

And then she thinks, enough of Valerie, at least until she learns more about her situation from Gunilla. It is time she thought about other topics of greater personal relevance. Her niece and nephew are far more important than a foolish woman who gets herself locked up in a Ugandan jail.

At last she lowers her seat into a narrow bed and, turning and tossing in the confined space, wills herself to sleep.

She wakes when the service trolley rolls over the blanket that has been half covering her feet. She opens her eyes and stares at the flight attendant, waiting for the woman to apologize.

But the stewardess only says, “Breakfast?”

“How much more time until we land?” asks Bella.

“Two hours and a bit.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Melissa Alfonso:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a wander, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open or read a book entitled Hiding in Plain Sight: A Novel? Maybe it is to get best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have additional opinion?

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