

# AMAN

## *The Story of a Somali Girl*

As told to Virginia Lee Barnes  
and Janice Boddy

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# CHAPTER

## 2

MY MOTHER GREW UP IN A TOWN by the sea. She was very pretty and very strong. She was fifteen when her father decided she should get married.

It was in the 1930s, just before the big war started, and the Italians were already fighting in Ethiopia. There was a lot of damage and a lot of killing. Women were getting raped by the white men, who were forcing Somalis to do what they didn't want to do. The men were told: Bring me your daughter, give me your wife. My mother told me that and my grandmama told me that. It was bad for my people then, very bad.

My granddaddy gave my mama away fast, before the Italians could grab her. It was important to get her married so nobody could mess with her. He gave her in marriage to a *sharif*—a descendant of the Prophet. This man also had a big name: a little power, from a good family, and everyone respected him.

When the *sharif* came to ask for my mama, my granddaddy couldn't refuse to let him marry her. But after my mama had

stayed with him for a couple of months she began to feel lonely, because she was young and he was old. She pleaded with him for a divorce. If she had run away from him she would have lost her father's name, and because her husband was a *sharif*, if she had made him angry, he could even have cursed her. So the best thing she could do was beg him for a divorce. And he understood, and gave her a divorce.

Mama went back home to her family after she got her divorce. And then another big man asked for her—an *imaam*—an old man my mother's whole tribe had chosen as leader; a man they listened to and trusted. He was the best man in the whole area, so her father couldn't say no. He was the kind of man her father wanted for his daughter. In those days, they married for the name; they were all selling their names. So her father decided he would have her married to this second old man, and even though she wanted to refuse, she had to say yes. This old man had two other wives. Her first husband had also had two other wives—those big men always had three or four wives... well, at least two or three. We know men want more than one woman... we know that. And under Islam, you can have more than one wife, so you don't have to do the wrong thing. Our religion says don't make love if you're not married to the woman—you have to marry her. This way any child conceived won't be a bastard; the baby will have the father's name and be *halal*—legal. A man can have four wives at one time if he can support all of them equally. It's hard to do, but if you don't you'll get punished, later. After death.

Soon Mama became pregnant, and for that reason too she had to stay with him. She gave birth to a daughter who died as soon as she was born, and after she lost the baby she began to refuse her husband. He couldn't oppose her, because it wouldn't be good for his name. Besides, he didn't want to be enemies

with her father; the two of them were friends and both of them were old and big men from the same tribe. Her husband looked at the situation from both sides and decided to let her go.

She hadn't liked either of these men, and she'd let them know it, slow and nice. No harm done. She decided not to return to her daddy's, now that she had ended two marriages he had arranged. She didn't want her father to become her enemy—and she didn't want to get stuck with another husband he chose. She had a cousin on her father's side who lived in a town, so she went there to visit her cousin and live with his family for a while.

She met a Somali officer in the Italian colonial army, and he wanted to marry her. He was a friend of the cousin she was living with. He had a name and a good family, *and* he was in the military. When he asked her to marry him, she said to herself, Why not? He didn't have any other wives, and he was living in the same town; she needed a change, and she didn't know the area she was living in, so.... She didn't really marry for love—she just wanted to choose a man for herself and see how that was, for a change.

He gave her everything. She was married to him for a long time—four or five years—and during that time she grew up. Her first marriage had been when she was only fifteen, and she had been married for only four months. After she was divorced, she had to stay home for three months to make sure she wasn't pregnant. If she was, in our culture, she would have to stay married to that husband, at least until she had his child. So about seven months after her first marriage, when she was sixteen, she married the second man. When she married the third man, she was only seventeen.

But this time she had married on her own—nobody had given her to this man. It was a happy marriage. She liked him, you understand. It wasn't that she was in love—it was because



he gave her everything. Everything a woman could get, she got: a good house, clothes, everything.

When her husband got transferred, they moved to a town near the Ethiopian border, where they stayed for a couple of years. By this time my mama wanted babies. The man she was married to had been married a lot of times—six or seven times—and he had never had any children, although he was in his forties or fifties. Now, the only thing my mother wanted was children. A woman usually had children by this time in her life—if you got married at fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen, by the time you were sixteen you had to have had your first baby, at least. And my mother loved children. She said she used to suffer a lot, hiding her jealousy from the other ladies who had children. She talked with the older women who lived beside her in the military compound. They told her the same thing: “Look how many times he’s been married. He’s never had children. He never will.” She knew that she could have children, because she had a baby already, so she realized it was time to end this marriage. She said she used to pray to Allah all the time.

One night she had a dream. She had finished her dinner and was lying on the bed. And two very beautiful tall women in long white dresses came down and they spoke to her. They stood at the foot of her bed, one on one side and one on the other, and they called her by name: “Why are you crying all the time? Why don’t you let us sleep? You cry every day, night and day, all the time. Why are you doing this?” She told them, “I want a baby so much. I want a baby.” They told her, “You’re going to have a baby. Tonight, rest and sleep. You need to sleep too, because you have cried so much. Don’t worry so much. Trust in Allah. Be quiet, and trust yourself.” She said, “I will.” One of the women put her hand on my mama’s forehead, and the other put her hand on my mama’s stomach, and they said, “You will have a lot

of babies!" And then they were gone. My mama said her eyes were open, and suddenly nobody was there. She didn't know if it was a dream or if it was real, but she believed it was real. She believed in it because she was a religious person.

About a week from the day that she had this dream, something happened. At that time she had three men, all of them from the military, working for her in her house as servants. One bought the food and prepared the meals; one cleaned the house and washed and ironed the clothes; and the third one was a watchman who worked outside the house, guarding it and letting people in and out of the gate. Besides these three men there was a hired woman who was Mama's companion. She could send her to the shops in town when she wanted something; the woman would go with her when she went out; she was a servant just for Mama, to keep her company.

So what happened was that her watchman got transferred to another town, and another military man came to guard the house. This one was young and handsome. He had to be introduced to her, because she was the lady of the house. When he greeted her, her heart was beating fast. She liked him from the first minute she saw his face. As he was saying "It's nice to meet you," her eyes met his eyes. They both felt a shock, and they looked at each other for about a minute. She had never felt that way before. She explained to him about his job and told him that if he wanted anything to eat or drink he should just ask the cook.

It was hot in the place where they lived, and in the afternoon the watchman used to sprinkle the garden with water to make it cool and to keep down the dust. My mama and her husband used to sit outside in the evening and drink tea. They used to offer their new watchman tea, because he sat right in front of them by the gate. He knew she liked him and she knew he liked her, they knew they liked each other, but there was nothing

they could say to each other. But she began to think about how she could get out of that house—out of that marriage. Finally, she decided to tell her husband the truth. To do anything else—to go home to her family, stay a couple of months, and come back again to the same problem with the same man—didn't make sense. So she told her husband that she wanted a divorce. She was afraid she might get beaten, even though he had never beaten her yet. He was the kind of person who gives you everything, but he was a tough man—that was why the Italians kept promoting him in the army. He was the kind of person who gives you orders and scares you.

When she told her husband she wanted a divorce, he was lying on the bed after they had made love. I guess he wanted to make love, and she had to go along with it—if she was ready to get divorced, I don't think she'd have wanted to make love. After she told him, he got up and walked around. He asked her if she was sure, and she said, "Yes, I'm sure." He said, "You're not happy, are you?" She said, "No, I'm not happy." He asked her why she wanted a divorce, and she told him the reason. He said, "Oh, that! I should have known." He hated her answer, because he knew he couldn't make children. But my mama had told him the truth. She told me, "I stayed with him for a long time, because he was so kind, so nice to me, and respected me so much. But these things wouldn't help me. I wanted a child, and he couldn't give me that. So I said to him, 'Let me go. I'll pray to Allah for you. When I have children, I'll bring my children to you and you can treat them as though they are your children.'" He told her to think about it and said they would talk again in the morning. They went to sleep.

In the morning, he asked her, "Do you still want a divorce?" And she said, "Yes." He was too proud to keep a woman who didn't want him, so he said, "If I divorce you, you won't get any-

thing except the clothes you have on. Do you still want a divorce?" My mother said he couldn't believe she would ever agree to that, because there was so much to lose. She said, "Yes." He said, "Are you sure?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Is that what you want?" She said, "Yes!"

He got up, got dressed, and left the house. He came back at noon with the divorce paper in his hand. In my culture, divorce, like marriage, is pretty easy to do. Your husband could come back from work and say, "You're divorced! Go!" And you'd leave. He has a witness come over to hear him say a *dalqad*: "I divorce thee." If he says it twice, that means there's a chance they'll get back together—it's like a separation. But if he says it three times—that's it!

There's a lot of divorce because there are a lot of reasons to bring a divorce. The husband wants to get married again, and he has too many wives and can't support them all. We feel, if the marriage doesn't work, why stay and suffer? We just get divorced and try the next one. You get divorced, you're not on your own, because you can always go back home. We support each other: brother give, sister give, uncle give, Mama give, cousin give, Daddy give. We all help each other. If you're a year old or a hundred years old, it's the same. You always have your home.

Divorce is easy—for the man. For women, if your father and brother have chosen your husband and you find you can't stay with him, that's a problem. Our religion says a woman can only divorce a man if he comes at you from behind, if he's impotent, or if he chokes you. If it's just that you don't like him, then you have to give him a hard time until *he wants* to divorce you. You run away, you disrespect him, so he gets tired and says, "Hey"—because he knows he can always get another wife. But my mother didn't even need to do that. She said she couldn't believe he would divorce her that easily. And he couldn't believe she



would give up everything she had just because she wanted children. So they ended up divorced, and she left empty-handed. He called a military car with a driver to take her back home to her family, and she didn't take anything with her except the clothes on her back. She was eager to tell the watchman what had happened, because she was really in love with him. But the car and driver were ready to take her home, and her husband was there, so she couldn't say anything to him before she left.

But the watchman was still working at the house and he found out everything, and after a couple of weeks he came to visit her. In our country everyone knows everyone's family by name, and he was able to find her just by asking around. My mama had to stay at home with her family for three months to make sure she wasn't pregnant, but after four months she and the watchman got married. They went back to the same town near the Ethiopian border that she had lived in with her former husband, because her new husband was still the watchman at her former husband's house! The difference was that now she lived in the lower-class section of town, while before she had lived in a walled compound with the military commanders. Now she lived in a one-room mud-and-wattle house that she and her new husband rented, instead of a big fancy stone house provided by the military. She enjoyed it, she said. She didn't miss all those things she had had, because she was in love with this man. Besides, she had brought her younger brother with her from home so that she would have someone from her own family for company. She said she was happy, very happy, even though she didn't have the kind of life she had before. She felt wonderful. And after a couple of months she was pregnant!

Now the British and the Italians were fighting over Ethiopia, and my mama's ex-husband, out of spite, told her new husband that the army needed him to fight, and he would have to move

to where the fighting was. Mama went with her husband to this new town in Ethiopia, and she took her little brother with her. One day there was aerial bombing on the town, and everyone ran. My mama's brother had been at Qur'anic school when the bombs had fallen, and after the air raid was over they couldn't find him. People said he was dead. Mama looked for him all over the place, but she couldn't find him.

Mama told me that somehow she knew her brother was still alive. For weeks she looked and looked for him, but she couldn't find him anywhere. Then she received word from home that her father had suddenly died. Her elder brother had already died, quite some time before, and only her mother and the younger children were left at home. So she went back to take care of her family. Besides, all the military wives and children were being sent home, because the war was getting worse.

When the war slowed down again, her husband sent word to her that she should come back to where he was stationed. But she wouldn't leave her family—her mother was still in mourning, and Mama was supporting her. In our culture, when a woman's husband dies, she has to be in mourning for four months and ten days. She has to wear all white clothes and stay at home; she can't touch a man's hand—Islam forbids it. She can't touch grease, or oil her skin, or take a shower, or wash her hair, except for once or twice a week, and she has to save all her hair combings and nail cuttings. At the end of the time of mourning, you invite several *sheikhs* to your house. *Sheikhs* are men devoted to the Qur'an. Not only when someone dies, but whenever something goes wrong, a *sheikh* helps people. He reads the Qur'an, and explains it. We all try to do what the Qur'an says.

When the mourning ends, several *sheikhs* come with two or three religious women, and the women go into the bathroom with you and wash your body and your hair, and dress you in

new clothes of your favourite colour, with all your gold if you want. Then they go and bury the hair combings and nail cuttings you have been saving. The *sheikhs* pray for you and your dead husband, and read the Qur'an. After that, everyone eats and there is a big celebration, and your mourning is over.

Since my grandmama was in mourning and couldn't go out of the house, my mama wanted to stay with her and help her. She sent word to her husband that she couldn't come and join him. Her father's cousins were coming to take her father's animals, and she had to stay there to protect the property. She said that since he was the one who was alone, he should come and live with them; that they had everything they needed there because her daddy had left it all to them—animals and houses and land—and that they would move to his family's territory as soon as her mother's period of mourning was over. Finally, she said, he was the one in the middle of a European war—why did he want to stay there and die?

But he didn't want to come back to her. He didn't want to leave the military. So he married another woman, who lived in the area where he was stationed. By the time Mama found out, she had already moved herself, her mother, her brother, and most of her father's animals to the place where her husband's family lived. She had also had his baby girl—my elder sister Hawa. She was angry and jealous, and told him he should give her a divorce—so he sent her one.

Mama was happy that she had a little girl, but she was also in pain because she had lost her father, her little brother, and the man she loved. But she had to go on with her life, and anyway, she was still young and beautiful, with a big name from her father, and all the animals—the cows and the camels. Everybody loved that woman—she was beautiful. She had lots of men courting her then—men with big names wanted to meet her.

But she had sworn to herself that she would never again be dependent on a man, never again put all her property together with his, stay in his house, and just wait on him. That is what she used to tell all the men who were courting her, and they were amazed, because she was the only woman they knew who acted like a man.

Anyway, she finally married another man, on her own terms. But after two years they divorced, because even after she had his baby, she refused to move in with him and leave her mother and the rest of her family. This time Allah had given her a boy, and she named him Hassan. She was having a great time with the new baby. Besides the baby, she had her mother and her sister and her brothers. Even though her youngest brother was still missing and everyone said he was dead, she knew he was still alive; she used to pray every day and every night about him.

After that she stayed single for a couple of years, then married another man and had a baby girl who died, and got divorced again. Finally, when her kids were growing up, she met my father.

My father was the son of a chief. When his father died, the people voted for my father to become the chief. He was like a policeman—he went wherever there was trouble. He took care of problems in his tribe or between tribes. He was young—well, not really young. My mother had been through all these marriages and divorces, and she must have been over thirty, and my daddy must have been thirty-seven or thirty-eight—something like that—when they got married. They were comfortably middle-aged, both of them. My daddy was handsome—a tall man, dark—not too dark, like chocolate. He was a slim man, with high cheekbones like me. Very beautiful features he had—a nice smile, nice eyes—everything was nice about my father. He was very intelligent. Even before he became the chief he had children and wives, because his father had started him marrying when he



was young. When he married my mama, he already had sons and daughters who were around twenty years old. He liked pretty women, and Mama was beautiful. She had light-brown eyes and brown hair. And so they got married. He had two other wives, a house in a village, and a lot of places in the interior, where he kept his wives and children, with cows and goats and sheep and fields of maize and beans; and he had many camels that his eldest son and his younger brothers were herding in the interior, because camels can't stay in the wetter areas near the cows and fields. They were a big, rich family, compared to other people. My mama's family had enough to be comfortable too.

Now, my daddy was the kind of man who, when he married a woman, took her into his house and she stayed there. If he got tired of her he would divorce her, and she would go back to her family. The woman had no power. Like I told you, my mama had decided when her father died and the man she loved divorced her that she wasn't going to be dependent on men any more. She had her property, and her husband had his; if she got married, her husband would come to her house, because that was the way she wanted it. She didn't want to leave her family, because she was the only strong person in the household—Grandmama had asthma and was sick all the time, and was too sweet a person to defend herself and the children and keep the relatives from taking their property. Besides, if she went to live with her husband, she would have to cook and keep house for him and take care of the children of the wives he had divorced, plus all his animals, plus the farming. But if she spent all her time looking after his children, who would take care of her mother? So Mama refused to live with him. She had everything she wanted—her mother and brother and sister and her two small children, and all the property her father had left—and she was trying to take care of it all, as her father would have done.

People respected her because she had a rich name and was powerful. She wasn't about to give up all that for a man, because the love she had in her own family was bigger than the love of just one person.

Daddy understood why she wanted arrangements the way she did when my mama explained to him that she had lost her father and her brother, and all her husbands had divorced her, and her mother was from another tribe, and she had a younger brother to look after. But after they had been married for a while, he really wanted her to come and live in his house. Mama said no again. My daddy told her she could bring her children with her to his house. But she still said no, because Grandmama wouldn't have been able to take care of everything; my mama was the strong one, and she wanted to stay in charge of the household.

So my mama flatly refused to move in with my daddy. At first he couldn't believe it, but he let her stay at her place for a few months. After four months she became pregnant, but still she didn't want to move in with him. Then he knew she really meant it. And he said, "Unh-unh." Even though he loved her, he wanted a woman in his house. So he married another, younger, woman. Mama became a bit jealous, because when a man gets a new wife, his old one becomes less important—it's like she's no good all of a sudden. She told him she wanted a divorce because she knew he was going to spend more time with his new wife anyway. He didn't want to divorce her, but to satisfy her and make her hold her peace, he agreed. All she would ever say to him in her loud, strong voice was "Give me a divorce. Give me a divorce." So he said, "You've got one!" He didn't really divorce her, but my mama thought she was divorced. She moved her household and set up house with some people farther away so she wouldn't have to see his face—she was that angry with him. By that time she was already pregnant with me.

# CHAPTER

## 5

WE MOVED WITHIN MANGO VILLAGE a couple of times. The third place we lived was the same house that Mama had sold when we went to Mogadishu, because she really liked that place. Mango Village, that's where paradise is: water and trees and grass and oh, it was good to be back there. Outside it was dirty, dusty, and hot, but inside the houses it was always cool. We painted flour sacks white, red, blue—whatever colours we liked—and we put them under the zinc roof to keep out the heat. We painted animals, flowers, and trees on the walls and it made our house look really pretty. We would lean over the fence and talk to our neighbours: "Do you have any sugar?" and they would call back, "Sure," and hand us some. We didn't need to go to the store; if we needed something, we'd just ask a neighbour.

One of my aunts on my father's side and her children were living in the group of houses we moved back to. She had three daughters—one was about my age, one was younger, and one was older. Her two younger daughters hadn't been circumcised

yet. So my aunt and another aunt were planning their circumcision, and they asked my mama if she wanted to have me circumcised on the same day. But my mama said no, because she didn't have enough money or time. You have to invite a lot of people and cook a lot of food for them, so you have to have money, even though the people you invite bring you money too. My mother didn't want to take money from anyone—she wanted to do it with her own money, invite people to eat, have the party, and let them leave without giving her money. She was a religious person, and our religion doesn't allow you to take money because it would be as though you were selling your food, and that's no good. So she told my two aunts that they should go ahead and do it just for my two cousins.

But my aunts said to themselves, "No, that's not fair. We're leaving Aman out by doing the other two. It's not good for our name—our brother's name. And besides, she's the oldest and it's shameful to do the younger ones and not her." So they decided to do me too, without letting my mother know. They knew that Mama had to go milk our cows before sunrise and that she wouldn't be back until midmorning. When they do circumcisions, they do them early in the morning, before it gets hot and before your blood gets hot and begins to run—early in the morning, as soon as you wake up.

They invited *everybody*. They killed one bull, two goats, and a sheep, and cooked the whole night. The next morning my mama left to go and milk the cows. My aunts and their friends had spent the night over at our houses, and they had to get up early in the morning to cook tea and coffee and a big breakfast for all the people who would be coming. That's when they woke me up. They were giving a shower to my two cousins, and they told me to go take a shower too. I asked them why, and they asked me if I wanted to be circumcised as well. I told them yes,



I wanted to—all the girls my age wanted to because it's shame not to—but I was afraid, and besides, my mama didn't want me circumcised today.

They talked to me nicely and let me know that they were going to do it whether I liked it or not, so I should be good and take a shower and come back. I went with my cousins, and when the three of us were finished with our showers they wrapped us in the old scarves that women wear around their shoulders, and we each had a new piece of cloth—they cut us each a big piece. They shaved our hair, and two *sheikhs* read the Qur'an over us. They told us that there was no pain and that we had to be good, and that they were going to give us a lot of gold and a lot of money, and the one who was the best would get the most. You know, they were deceiving us children. They were mainly telling me, because I was going to be the first one, because I was nine—the eldest. So I told them, "All right." Outside, the women and children were already singing and dancing. They do the circumcisions outside, with a lot of clapping and singing so people won't hear you cry. They were going "Lululululululu" and singing my father's name and my lineage's name, saying that they were the best. I was so proud when I heard all this. I said, Yes, why not? to myself. They put gold on me everywhere, and money everywhere, and they took me outside under one of the tall trees in the yard.

There was a big woman there who holds the girls while they are being circumcised—a strong woman. They gave her a low four-legged stool. There was another tall, skinny, black woman named Fatima to do the circumcision. The big one grabbed me by the hand and held me. I told her, "You don't have to grab me hard, I'm not going to run." She said, "Oh, you're a good girl! I've never met one like you before. You're a big little girl, aren't you?" I said "Yes!" She said, "Are you sure you're not going to

run away?" I said, "No, and I'm not going to cry either. And you're not going to tie me," because I knew they usually tied the girl's legs. And she said, "Good. I like that." She made me sit on the ground, on some dry grass that she had laid down. She told me to take off the piece of cloth I had on. The way she did it was, she sat on the stool and spread her legs and put me on the ground with my back to her, with my legs next to her legs. Usually she would tie the child's legs to her legs and then spread her legs wide and the child's legs with them, and she would also hold the child's arms so she couldn't move. But I told her, "You don't have to tie me," because I wanted everybody to be proud of me. If she had tied me, it would have seemed as though I was frightened, and I didn't want to do it that way. She said, "All right." She trusted me, she really did; she didn't tie me, but she wrapped her legs around mine and held me that way, in case I jumped. I sat there, and she told me what was going to happen. She said, "It's not a big thing, it's not that painful." She told me to be strong the way I had said I would be: "Don't let your family down. Don't let yourself down. The children will laugh at you tomorrow if you cry today." I told her I wouldn't cry—I was going to be strong. And I was.

She put a small white container with charcoal ashes in front of me, between my legs. And now the other woman, Fatima—she was a beautiful woman—came towards me. She told me her name, and told me how calm she was. She talked to me nicely so I wouldn't feel pain. She said that if I was bad she could be bad—and while she was talking to me like that, she was getting out her knives and all the other equipment and wiping them to make them clean. Then she took some of the charcoal powder between her thumb and forefinger and started playing with my clitoris, pulling on it so that it would become bigger as she kept on talking, and I was talking to her too, asking her questions—

when was she going to do it?—and she answered me, even though she was lying. After she got everything ready, that was the time she told me to close my eyes. I asked her, “Is this it?” She said, “This is it. This is it. It won’t take a second. Close your eyes. When you open them, the pain and your clitoris will be gone.” I told her, “All right!”

This time, she even pulled out the knife—a little knife, shiny and sharp, with a little hook on it. Now she pulled harder on my clitoris, and this time I turned my face away and told the other woman, “Hold me tight,” and gritted my teeth. And then my God, Rahima, everything happened. My body was gone in a second, just as they had said. I could hear *shuuu*...like the sound when they are slicing meat—just like that was the way she sliced my body. She cut everything—she didn’t cut the big lips, but she sliced off my clitoris and the two black little lips, which were *baram*—impure—all that she sliced off like meat. Oh, Rahima, I thought I was going to die. I opened my eyes and looked down at myself, and the blood was coming out. Part of me was bleeding heavily, and in the part where she had peeled the flesh off, the meat was white.

Rahima, my God, it had only just started. I asked her if she was finished, and she said no, she was going to do it again. Again she said, “It won’t take a minute,” and I believed her. And everybody who was watching began putting gold and more money on me—on my head, on my legs—and they were singing. Every time I wanted to cry, I looked around to see if someone would help, but I just saw smiling faces, and I felt shy again and I opened my mouth and pretended I was laughing, but I was dying inside. She sliced the top off my big lips, and then she took thorns like needles and put them in crossways, across my vagina, to close it up. She put in seven thorns, and each time she put one in she tightened them together with string. When she

was finished, she put on some black paste to stop the bleeding and make the wound dry up fast, and then some egg yolk to make it feel cool. Then she took some cloth and wrapped it around my legs, from my ankles to my hips. And they wrapped me up in my cloth again and carried me inside to the room they had ready for us. And that's what they did to the other girls.

Afterwards I was sick and had a fever. And when I peed, it felt as though it would kill me. It felt like fire! Or like alcohol when you put it on an open wound. It was hot, that pee, and I cried. They had to cover me up and my teeth were chattering and I was shaking all over my whole body when my mother came back. She was angry. She didn't say anything though, because a lot of people were there. They were giving me some soup when she came in. She was furious, but she went out for a while and came back after she had calmed down. She was trying to control herself, but she was really angry, because they hadn't respected her wishes. They had let her down and treated her as if she was nothing, and she hated that. I think everybody was a bit afraid of Mama, but they all stayed calm and nobody said anything. And she controlled her anger.

I talked to her. I knew she was angry, but I was proud, so I told her to be happy for me. I said, "They did it because they love me. Why didn't you want me to have it done with the other girls? I don't want you to have a fight with them, because you're both my family. I love them, and I love you." She understood how I felt, but she was still angry.

I kept the thorns in for three days. Then the woman who did the circumcision came back and took them out. All that time your legs are tied, even when you pee. You don't drink much so you won't have to pee much. You don't eat a lot so you don't have to doo-doo—they give you only a little soup, with vegetables in it, and dry bread, because they want your body to get dry



fast. The more liquids you drink, the more you pee and the more that place gets wet, and they don't want that. Every time you pee it stings, so they pour warm water with salt in it over your genitals while you are peeing. The salt is a disinfectant, and the warm water eases the pain. After you pee, they dry you off and take you outside. Out in the *daash*, they have dug a hole in the ground and put in some lighted charcoal covered with ash. They put incense on it. They have you sit over the hole, still with your legs tied, leaning against a woman sitting on a stool. Smoke from the fire with the incense makes you smell good and the heat makes your wound dry. After three days of doing that every morning and every evening and every time you pee, you heal up fast when you are a little girl.

After the woman who circumcises you comes back to take out the thorns, she examines your circumcision to see if your hole is small or big. She uses a stick about the size of a round toothpick and puts it into the hole. If your hole is much bigger than a toothpick—maybe because you peed too fast—she puts in another stitch with a thorn to close you up again. If not, if your hole is all right, you just rest for seven days with your legs tied together a little more loosely. They give you a walking stick, and you walk slowly and sit slowly and lie on your side with your legs tied together. And in six or seven days, you're all right, and you can go where you want.

I was all right in seven days, but one of the girls who was circumcised with me—the one who was nearly my age—she had to be circumcised all over again, because when she first peed after her circumcision she felt the pain, and then she didn't pee at all for three days. So when the woman came to take the stitches out, she shat and peed at the same time, and opened her hole up wide. Fatima had to stitch her again—the girl had more pain and had to stay in the house almost a month.

The reason they do that extra stitch is so that when you get married, your husband will know you are a virgin. If he sees you have a little bit bigger hole, he'll think you played around. So the women—your mother and the woman who circumcised you—have to make sure your hole is the right size. That's why they do all this stitching and sewing. The other kind of circumcision is *sunna*. They don't cut anything off and they don't sew anything, they only make a little cut or just a pinprick so blood will come—a little blood. It doesn't even feel like a pinch. These days a few people say, "Don't cut it. Make it *sunna*." But then, people preferred it the old way, to make sure their daughter didn't play around, and the husband preferred it so he could make sure his wife is a virgin. Many people still prefer the old way.

A girl who is sewn won't play around, because she is scared of the pain, and she's scared her family will be able to tell when they check her every week. When one door is closed and one door is open, which one is easy to get into? A thief doesn't go to a locked door.

The people your parents invite to your circumcision arrive around two or three in the afternoon. The party is only for women and children, with a couple of *sheikhs* to read the Qur'an. You take all the furniture out of two or three rooms and lay mats and cushions on the floor. Before people go in, they take off their shoes. They come in groups of relatives or friends, and they usually sit together with the people they came with. You bring two bowls of warm water, one with soap in it and one without, for them to wash their hands before they eat. Then you bring the food. Each group has a big plate of rice, meat, and salad, and fruit that you bring on another plate. After they eat, you bring them the bowls of warm water again, and they wash their hands again because they've eaten with their hands. You bring them a cloth to dry their hands with, and perfume to

take away the smell of the food. After that, they drink coffee, and have sweets and dates and tea and soft drinks. You bring incense for everyone to smoke their hair with, and then strong perfume for their hair, and after that they have to go, because other people are waiting to sit down and eat in their place. People are waiting outside, singing and dancing, because you may have only two houses, and one house is taken up with the *sheikhs* reading the Qur'an and with a couple of young boys waiting on them, who ask them if they want coffee or tea.

Before each group of women leaves, the women who have been serving the food collect the money. Each woman gives some, no matter how much. And the serving woman has to remember how much each person gave so that she can tell the woman who is giving the circumcising party. Because if you bring five shillings, next time when I go to your place I have to give at least five shillings, or more. It's a payback system—I don't know what to call it exactly, but it's a good system. The only other time they do this is when a woman marries. You collect all the money, the women leave, you clean the room, and another group comes and sits until eleven o'clock at night. At the end of the night, you wash dishes and clean up, and count the money—you know what you spent for the party, and you know what you made afterwards—and then the circumcision party is over.