

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Raised as a nomad in Somalia, at the age of nine or eight (no one knows the exact year I was born) I surprised my mother at eight o'clock one morning, when I stood right in front of her and told her that I was tired of herding sheep and goats.

Fast forward to several years later in Harlem, New York: a relative of mine dumped two dozen books on my lap and said, "Here, you seem to have a lot of free time in your hands. Why don't you do some reading?" I was a high school dropout, my country was sitting on a hissing volcano that later exploded in the form of a civil war, and I was the only one in my family who escaped the nomadic life to the U.S.A. But I was hopelessly lost!

Embarrassed that I had never read a whole book even in Somali, I collected the books, "a challenge," from my relative's hands, realizing that I couldn't say aloud, "I have never read a book in my life!" Among the books was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, which I picked for no particular purpose whatsoever. It took me two weeks to finish it but I must have absorbed it all, for I know that book changed my life and I am forever grateful!

This book later led me to the door steps of Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut, where an academic advisor with a mission to teach and the will to match forced me to take an English class (my worst nightmare now) with a professor who, despite the maze of confusion in me, guided me and infused me with the love of writing.

I forever owe a debt of gratitude to these three then: my relative, Abdikadir J. Dualeh, PhD; my academic advisor and professor, Diane Zannoni; Denise Best; Louis Fisher; and my professor, my late friend Fred Pfeil.

Sincerely,

Ahmed I. Yusuf





The Lion's Binding Oath

Hassan was in a math class at Jamal Abdinasir High School in Mogadishu in 1990 when RPG firearms began to crackle in the distance. Most of his classmates pretended to ignore it but Hassan wondered whether a rebel army that his mother had been talking about had arrived from the north. In minutes, the sound intensified and grew closer and closer.

Suddenly from the next room came another teacher who whispered something to his teacher. As though in agreement, Hassan's teacher nodded and watched the other leave, closing the door behind him. His teacher leaned back on the board, paused, looked down, lifted his gaze and said, "We aren't exactly sure what is going on out there but I suggest that we call it a day. Go home, guys, and please be careful."

Students rushed out of the class and onto the streets but Hassan lingered a bit longer. He wondered what his teacher was being told. And why didn't he share it with the class? Now that everybody was out though, Hassan decided to do the same. About a mile from home, he watched smoke rise here and there from the northeast, drifting west. It occurred to him that the RPG firearms were crackling louder, spreading east. He was running now as fast as he could but the distance between his school and house seemed to increase.

Panting and out of breath, he made it to the gate of his house. Once inside, his mother and two of his sisters rushed to him. His two sisters cried tears of relief when they saw him safe but his mother was stoically poised. She held his hand,



pulled him to the side, and said, "Thank God, you came home in one piece. I am not sure what is going on but we aren't going to be safe here, it sounds."

"What are we going to do?" asked Hassan.

"I am not sure about that either, but we need to stay together. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Hooyo."

"You are the oldest and the only man in this house. I want you to know that your sisters need you more than ever."

"I know, Hooyo, I know."

Still holding on to his hand, the mother turned to her girls and motioned them to a group-hug. Then she lifted her head, led them into the house, and locked the door behind them.

A throng of Somali refugees had walked hundreds of miles to reach sanctuary in camps just across the Kenyan border. Within it, one particular mother with two adolescent daughters drew the attention of the western humanitarians rushing about in frantic attempts to bring order and supplies to the camps. The mother was crying inconsolably and refusing food, medical treatment, and even water, despite her obvious dehydration. Sounds that would have been hard to comprehend in any language fell constantly from her mouth.

After 20 years of a dictatorial regime's oppression, the capital city of Somalia, Mogadishu, had exploded into a bloody civil war, spitting mobs of violence onto the streets and onto its citizens. Hassan's family and neighbors found themselves fleeing the remnants of an army loyal to a dictator who was about to fall and the armed rebel fighters trying to oust him. Moving in concert, the refugees formed an ant-like line stretching deep into the horizon. Every possible means of transportation was used though the majority trusted nothing



but their feet to carry them to safety. Those who had cheated death now could not avert the hunger and exhaustion that was claiming them, as nights became indistinguishable from days. All the while rain poured down on them.

As the day drew to a close, a disoriented Hassan veered with exhaustion from the rest of the group and collapsed in sleep. Alas, he awoke in the middle of the night—alone, scared, and starving. As he tried to find his way back, he accidentally walked east, away from his fleeing countrymen, ever increasing the distance between them.

Unbeknownst to him, the group had camped for the night on the other side of the hilltop just above the tree line of the jungle that was hindering his hearing and view. In urgent haste, Hassan tried to make sense out of this aimless world that seemed devoid of human decency. He could only hear the alien chants of unknown crickets, and howling coyotes in the distance, but not a single human hum. As he scanned the dense darkness, he could not make out a single mark of civilization, not even a flickering light, a throttling engine, or even a neighing mare.

With no sense of direction, Hassan moved on, increasing the miles between himself and the herd. Realizing that he was nowhere near to humankind, he fell into despair. He yearned to cry out, yet was fearful of attracting predators. Wearily, he leaned back onto the trunk of a fig tree for both heat and support, falling asleep again. The next morning, he awoke, cold and shivering, to find that he was still alone in the middle of a jungle. All he could do was weep. And although Hassan seemed to be appropriately dressed for the lackluster East African weather (jeans, turtle neck shirt, tennis shoes and garment to pull over himself), it had not been enough to provide warmth and comfort during the night.



When there were no more tears to be shed, Hassan sat under the tree and watched the tropical leaves dangle lazily while he waited for the worst. The bush was so thick that he couldn't see farther than a few yards. If a leopard, lion, or any other predator made a move on him, Hassan would have been pounced on like a wounded buffalo, with neither the space nor the time to dodge.

Tired of feeling sorry for himself, Hassan decided to try his feet. He walked aimlessly for hours and hours. Eventually, the forest thinned out a little, and he discovered an unused overgrown footpath. Who could guess when the last human feet had set themselves down on this unknown land in the middle of this torrential rain forest? There was no way to tell of course, especially now with the rain.

If there's no trace of other humans for the naked eye to see, Hassan thought fearfully, there probably aren't other human scents for predators to choose from, aside from my own.

Throwing caution to the wind, Hassan shouted: "God, please help me out here! You said you would deliver your children from harm's way wherever they were, and that you would hear them whenever they are in need. So OK, God, I'm gonna give you five minutes—no, thirty. No, no, I will give you, oh, I don't know, God. But if you don't give me a sign that you are at least watching, I'm doomed."

Hassan maintained his pace but his stomach growled with a gnawing hunger. For a long while, various chants of different birds were the only sounds of solace. But then in a split second, there it was: the deadliest creature of all. The king of the jungle, the "God of death," was prowling toward him on the same path.

Hassan froze as his eyes locked with the lion's. Neither dodging nor charging, the lion himself stood as though he too



was baffled, it seemed, just a leap or two away. Hassan was terrified to see those powerful jaws, the piercing eyes, and the spear-like whiskers. How long would it be, he wondered, before he was going to be a lifeless slab of lunch for this lion?

It seemed an eternity before the lion turned on his side, emitted a soft growl, and marked the ground three and three: three with his left hind leg and three with his right. He then sat back on his hindquarters as though he were provoking Hassan to unravel the inscrutable puzzle.

Confused, Hassan remained motionless as he searched his mind for a suitable reply. Suddenly, he recalled a legend told by his uncle about how lions could entertain an oath with men: if a lion marks three and three parallel lines with his hind legs on the ground, one has to follow suit by doing the same. So in order to simulate the ritual, a human being has to lower himself to the ground on all fours and respond in kind. The legend says that the purpose of this significant ritual was to communicate to men that the lion was entering an oath of intent to harm no one. He would, in fact, protect human beings who enter an oath with him as he would his own cubs. In return, the lion would expect the person on oath to maintain a contract of secrecy. The person must never reveal the whereabouts of any lion, even if or when it kills livestock. If the pledge is breached, the lion is obligated to abandon it all for revenge.

If the legend were true, it was now or never. So Hassan followed the same steps, repeating the lion's ritual, grasping at the hope that the lion would let him live another day.

Hassan took a few steps to the side, giving the lion a little more room to pass but placing himself behind a huge canopy's truck on the edge the footpath just in case. The lion took the offer, passed him by, then stopped in a few yards, turned around, started walking, stopped, turned around, started



walking, repeating the ritual long enough for Hassan to guess that he was signaling for him to follow. When Hassan still didn't make a move, the lion sat back on his hind parts and softly roared.

In disbelief that he was still in one piece, Hassan began to think that the lion was not considering him as his next meal, yet he could not help but wonder whether the oath had any bearing. And if it did, how binding and how long was it going to last?

"Well," Hassan said to himself, "I shall have to wait and see."

Again, the lion stood up, looked away as though he were ready to resume a journey, but then noticed that Hassan was still not following. He grunted softly and sat back. Hassan stood still. The lion repeated the ritual four times more. Finally, the lion moved westward, as he possibly had come to the conclusion that he had offered Hassan enough opportunity.

Hassan looked on as the lion disappeared into the forest. He listened but soon the gentle crunch beneath the lion's bare feet faded into the distance. Lingering silence seemed to follow when suddenly, the chirping and twittering of a great number of birds seethed through the air with disquieting calls. Was it a warning to tell all that the king of danger had arrived? Or was it simply a fair greeting from his fellow habitat-mates? Hassan could not tell. All he knew was that the tumult increased to a decibel level that disturbed his mind. And when he thought it could not get worse, the world around him awoke with even more wails. Baboons began to yowl, chipmunks and squirrels bluffed with alarming "eeks," and countless other cries he could not name Trepidation took hold of him. What was the lion up to? Was he coming back to waste him now? But where? Was the lion behind him, waiting to pounce? Did he go just to gather friends, planning to beat him dead? Hassan



was a mess.

Looking around and about, he spotted a baobab tree and, not fully aware of his intent, he clambered close to the top. At 20 feet, Hassan found a sizeable seat where the boughs departed the trunk. Relieved that he was safe, he rested there. Minutes passed before calm returned all at once. The chaotic choir ceased with an uncertain hush punctuated by the branches' involuntary sway, and an occasional flirting pair of birds that fluttered by. Hassan balanced his body against the base of the boughs.

He mulled over his reality but solutions refused to emerge from his agony. The day proceeded and hunger began to harass him. Time was moving ever so slightly yet shadows thickened, followed by dissonant songs that the forest inhabitants saw fit to sing.

The day moved slowly. Hassan was fully cognizant that when nighttime arrived, it would not come with bouquet and banquet to please him.

Suddenly, the lion emerged from the entangled bush with a no-sound-to-disturb-a-soul saunter. Not a note of the earlier alarms were set off this time. He approached the tree Hassan was in, lifted his gaze, looked up, grunted three times, turned lazily, and walked away. In a few steps he slowed down, stopped, grunted three times again, then sat down.

Hassan, talking to himself, said, "I have no idea what this lion is up to but if I want to survive, I have to trust the oath. Besides, he has to eat sometime. So he is eventually going to lead me to where he can find a meal, which means, perhaps, that there are domesticated animals and human beings somewhere nearby. I have to follow him."

He dismounted from the tree, took three steps towards the lion, stopped and looked.



The lion stood up and grunted three times.

Hassan walked towards him tentatively. As he took a few more steps, the lion proceeded on his way. A few feet back, Hassan paced after him. Soon he began to feel a bit more secure about his company. As they went on, the lion intermittently stopped to rest in the shade of the trees. Soon Hassan thought that he was enjoying the leisure as much as the lion.

He relaxed as he sensed that the lion himself was collected and calm. In fact, he thought the two had built a bit of an invisible bond.

Finally, although they were still in the forest, they felt a warm, helpful wind on their faces. At that moment, the lion made an abrupt turn towards a tree. Wondering what had caused the sudden change in direction, Hassan followed. As they got closer, Hassan could make out ripe berries festooned on the branches, a bounty of berries lying on the ground. The lion yawned, took his position in the shadow of the tree and, shaking his mane at Hassan, signaled to him. Hassan understood this to mean, "Come on, Hassan. It's all yours!"

Hassan squatted cautiously, keeping an eye on the lion. He picked a berry and felt its sweetness burst ecstatically in his mouth. Frantic, he began to gather as many berries as his hands could hold. The lion unfolded his forelegs and laid his head down on them as though he were saying, "Take your time, kid, please. We are in no hurry."

Despite his apprehension, Hassan grabbed the fallen fruits and threw them down his gullet. Then, while the lion watched, Hassan climbed up into the tree and began grazing on one bundle of berries after the other.

At last he was satisfied, and not only had his hunger dissipated but miraculously his anxiety had vanished as well and his loneliness abated. He forgot his predicament. He came



down from the tree at peace with himself, faced the lion, and started chattering.

“Oh my God, I’m not dead! And I’m not starving anymore! I could just kiss you!”

The lion hitched his head a little, his yellow-green eyes darting about.

“Hey,” Hassan said in a worried voice, “I hope I didn’t offend you. But you should know that you are the first lion friend that I have had. Well, so far you seem to be a friend, and I hope you will not change. Oops, please allow me to correct myself. You are the first friend from the animal kingdom that I have ever had, period. And listen, I would have you know that it was not my fault at all. Not having a friend wasn’t my fault, I mean, you understand?”

He realized that the lion was paying no attention to him whatsoever.

The lion turned his head a little to the right, then to the left, gazing off into the jungle.

“What?” said Hassan. “Are you saying that my lack of friendship and familiarity with your tribe is discriminatory? Hey, be fair, because I was going to say that myself, OK. I am ashamed that I’ve never had a lion friend before, too. Yet again, you must understand that we human beings think that you are a threat to us. All members of the cat family are. To be honest, I really didn’t think but...?”

Now the lion raised his head and laid it back on his shoulder.

“You think I am lying, don’t you?” said Hassan. He babbled on: “Well, you got me. I am lying through my teeth. Yes, yes, I thought so too. I was really scared of you. I thought that you were a threat to all mankind and to me. You would not blame me for that, would you? Well, what you should



know is that I have never met anyone like you, since I have spent all my time with those ferocious machine-gun toting Homo sapiens. Had I known what I know now, I swear to you, I would have been a totally different person. By the way, you must sincerely believe me when I swear. You know that in my religion, and speaking of religion, what is your take on that? Well, please don't answer that. Anyway, what I was trying to say was that, in my religion, one never swears to God in vain."

The lion lifted his head and jerked his ears back and forth.

"What? You don't believe me, do you?"

The lion grunted, and shook his mane.

"Wow! I just realized that humans are not the only tribe who are bound by an oath. You have also shown your integrity by honoring your oath," Hassan said.

The lion growled, put his head on the ground, and closed his eyes.

"Are you telling me that I talk too much, Mr. Lion?"

The lion sleepily opened his eyes and blinked twice.

"I can't believe you're saying yes to that. Is it really that bad, sir? Well, my own mother told me long ago that I talk too much, but I am sure your mother said that to you, too. My friend, the problem is even if that is true, I can't do anything about it. I just talk and talk!"

The lion straightened his head and pointed both his ears towards Hassan.

"All right, all right. I'll try to improve. But can I at least air my opinion in moderation?"

The lion blinked his eyes once and once more again.

"Wow, was that a yes? And another, all right!" Hassan chanted. "What a deal, what a democratic joy it is to live amongst you guys! Hey, Mr. Lion, let me ask you another question, sir."



Hassan looked at the lion and saw that his eyes were shut. “Are you sleeping? Anyway, I bet that you aren’t asleep yet even if you are trying, so I will go on. Are your friends, I mean the rest of the lion kingdom, as nice as you, sir?”

The lion waved his tail, menacing.

“Oh, you are kidding me! They aren’t? What the heck! Well, I have you on my side and that is all that matters to me,” Hassan boasted. “But, hey, Friend, do you know that you have not told me your name yet?”

The lion raised his head, and again shook it a bit.

“You think having a name is silly, right? Well, I think so too. But that is what people do where I am from, giving everything a name, OK. So my friend, in sickness and health, let us unite for the sake of names. Since I already have one, let me tell you that mine is Hassan. From now on yours will be Kamal. By the way, in case you are wondering, Kamal means ‘complete’ or ‘sufficient’ in Arabic. I am not sure whether it matters much to you but I am a Somali. My native tongue is Somali too. Very strange, right? My point is, I would have preferred to call you a Somali name, yet right as we speak I don’t feel like it. Well, honestly, I cannot think of one in Somali now. So let us have Kamal as your rightful name, OK?”

“Now, Kamal, I am really thirsty. I guess what I am asking is if you, by any chance, happen to know any place around here where we can get a drink. And please keep in mind that we are both tired. Frankly, if you aren’t, I am. So let’s not walk too far, OK?”

It seemed that Kamal had been following everything Hassan had been saying all along, because he abruptly stood up, stretched his legs, and began to move on.

“Wow, you are serious, Kamal, aren’t you?” chattered Hassan. “Well, I can tell that you are ready to carry on, but



frankly, I'm a little apprehensive about leaving all this fruit behind. Can we at least take some with us? You may not care much for it but I do."

The lion kept on moving.

"Oh. Just like that, Kamal, hah? You are going to move on without me, right? You aren't going to wait for me? OK, fine then. I am going to climb back up and collect some fruit in my robe and I will catch up with you in no time, you will see."

Hassan darted back to the tree, scaled it, and using his over-all-garment as a bucket, gathered the half-ripened berries. While he was in the tree, he kept his eyes on Kamal, who seemed to be patiently waiting a few feet away.

Hassan gingerly climbed down with his loot and walked over to Kamal, eventually coming closer to him than ever before. Kamal rose to his feet, gave a wide yawn, and, nonchalant, moved south, pausing every so often to sniff the air and survey the pathway.

