

# **A Sort of Pleading**

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**Here is Abdi, working the soccer ball among his friends in the** evening half-light. Dust clouds surround him as he feints and spins, cradling the ball past Farro and Isael. He sees the goalie rush him, abandoning the beat-up sneakers they use as goal posts, and Abdi flips the ball into the air, leaping to head it once, twice. He flicks his neck to the side, sending the ball up and over this final defender. The clay feels cool and soft under his feet as he darts around the stunned boy, shouldering him away and receiving his own pass on the arch of his right foot. His body snaps straight like a whip and sends the ball into the goal. His teammates surround him, cheering. They toss animal bones to the right side of the field, changing the score. Abdi feels a swell inside his chest that lifts and separates him from the soil, the camp, the other boys. On the soccer field he is free.

As the winner of the game he gets to keep the ball until the following evening—a great honor. He walks along the outskirts of the camp. Ribbons of shadow from the barbed wire and linked chain fence fall across his dark skin and the flat expanse of red clay. Rows of white tents turn golden in the fading light. They stretch out before him, each white dome smaller than the last. Near the horizon they blur together—a sea of shimmering fabric. The ball dances between Abdi's feet and legs—the leather is cool against his skin and eruptions of soil mark his agile footfalls. Dust lingers in the air behind him, drifting in the slanted light. Beyond the perimeter fence feral dogs eye the ball cautiously through coils of razor-wire, heads low—eyes full of suspicion. He makes noise like a hyena to scare them into the low bushes nearby, thumping his chest.

Abdi works the ball past a row of dented steel barrels containing human waste and breathes in clean air once clear of the smell. From the corner of his eye he sees a pair of girls his age peek from behind a tent-flap, giggling. He scowls, flipping the ball into the air

and catching it. Childish things have no place in a man, he tells himself. He walks purposefully toward home.

Earlier this afternoon, before the game, his friend, Nurta, had come to the clinic—her face a mask of swollen bruises: black and red. Abdi knew the man who gave them to her: Mohammed Ali Osman—the same man who gave bruises to other women in his part of camp. Nurta was ten years older than Abdi, but they were close—survivors of the same raid on their village, north of Kismaayo, in Somalia. Nurta's parents were killed by al-Shabaab the day before his family fled. Abdi hadn't seen it happen, but from his family's living space he heard Nurta scream as her mother was beheaded by the small group of armed men. Nurta's father was bound, forced to watch his wife's final moments of terror. Afterward his penis was removed with the blade that killed his wife and the three men stuffed it into his mouth, laughing and pouring beer on his head before he too was separated into two parts.

In the silence that followed there had been the sound of skin on skin as Nurta was hit, and one man with an ugly voice told her to wait for him. He called her his dessert. It was quiet for a moment, Nurta let out a yelp, and then there was more laughter.

In his home Abdi stood in the doorway to his parent's bedroom and watched his father, Salah, wait for the al-Shabaab men to come, hiding behind the door with a heavy piece of driftwood in each hand. Salah had instructed Abdi to stand in view and to look the men in the eye—a distraction. As the footsteps grew louder, Abdi heard his mother quiet his sisters, Fahmi and Sara, in the darkness behind him. He was scared, but he stood straight, and set his feet wide. The door opened and the men who entered lowered their weapons when they saw Abdi's small frame. Each wore a white and red checked shemagh around his head and the man in front had smudges across his forehead where he had wiped blood away. Abdi could see splotches of crimson soaked into the fabric stretching over his mouth and ear. This tall man pointed at Abdi and called him a puppy, laughing with the others.

Salah leapt upon the al-Shabaab men as they cleared the door, shrieking, his voice high and unrestrained. In the dim light of their living space he unfurled: transforming from gentle fisherman, loving father into a savage creature Abdi couldn't recognize. The two men closest to Salah dropped as one—the heavy driftwood clubs striking them squarely. The tall, blood-covered man in the front lifted his gun and opened fire as he turned, but Salah was upon him and knocked the gun wide. His hand snaked around the al-Shabaab man's skull and Abdi watched his father pull the last man forward, driving his fishing knife through the checkered shemagh and into his throat. Abdi's father pulled his knife free and let the body fall, turning to finish the others. Salah's breath was quick and unsteady. Air hissed from between his teeth as he stood over each unconscious man and drew the blade across his neck.

After all three men were dead, Abdi watched his father drag their bodies outside, swallowed by the night. The scuffed dirt of the floor was dark with blood.

**At the West-Six crossroad, near the woman from Jawhar who makes good bread,** Abdi slows, gripping the soccer ball. The sun is an open wound on the horizon: leaking shades of red across the street, bleeding into the darkening sky. The throb of the busy intersection dulls as he remembers the way that his father softly joked with Nurta's young brothers before hoisting them one by one into Ahmed's van the morning after the attack. Thinking of his father, Abdi feels a hot swell of pressure behind his eyes, tightness in his chest, and ducks into an alley. He crouches and pretends to clean the ball, biting back tears. There were things a man didn't do in public.

It has been five and a half years since Abdi felt his father fall across him as that van barreled toward the Kenyan border. His sisters lay flat on the van's floor while his mother—head down, whispering—held their faces to her breast. Nurta lay with them, her hands over her ears. Salah had been shouting for Ahmed to accelerate, shielding Abdi and Nurta's brothers with his large frame as a

group of rebels at a roadblock outside Qooqani fired on the vehicle. What Abdi remembers is the sound of wind leaving his father's body and the weight as he slumped forward—dampness hot and sudden on Abdi's shirt where Salah's torso pressed upon him. His father's large, rough hand slid across Abdi's cheek and into his lap. Somewhere there was a buzzing, indistinct, as the volume of everything around him faded. With his right hand Abdi gripped his father's long fingers. He closed his eyes. The van slowed after a few kilometers and he heard his mother's voice lift and break—a distant sound getting closer. It was the sound he had heard Nurta make the night before. He let his father's fingers drop and sat up. He touched his mother's shoulder and saw the wet cheeks of his sisters. Nurta's palms fell into her lap and she looked through the window at the sky—a kind of question. Fahmi and Sara reached for their father, but Abdi took their hands and squeezed, pressing them to his chest, wet with his father's blood. And then there was no sound, only the slow, desperate movements of the people around him and the awareness of air entering and exiting his body that, all his life, Abdi had taken for granted.

Later, after digging a hole in the roadside clay with a flat stone he'd found in a riverbed, Abdi wrapped his mother and sisters in his small arms by the edge of the grave and, in a hoarse voice that was not his own, he told them that he would provide for them in Kenya. Abdi was eight when he became a father to his sisters.

In the thick heat that hung over Dadaab in the years that followed, Abdi found work in the center of the refugee camp as an assistant for a British medical team. He drew medication from vials, watching the fluid spurt and fill syringes as he pulled the plunger back. He taught himself to read some English. He knew *patient* meant sick. He knew *vaccinated* meant the person would survive. He knew *prescribed rest* meant the person would be dead within a week.

It was to this clinic that Nurta had come that afternoon, one eye swollen to the point it seemed her head might burst. She was now

twenty four and married to a mouse-y crippled man named Siad. Siad had a kind smile—he taught English to Somali orphans at a mission established by Italian nuns.

“Can you hide it so Siad doesn’t know?” Nurta asked, seated in a shady corner of the tent.

Abdi was thinking of Mohammed, the man who had done this. Mohammed came from a different Somali coastal village, farther north, beyond Mogadishu, and there was a story that he had offered two of his wives to al-Shabaab so that he could pass to Kenya.

“Siad should know,” Abdi said. “He is your husband.”

Nurta lowered her head. Rations in the camp were based upon the number of adults in a family and Nurta had two young brothers to provide for when she arrived in Dadaab. Marriage had been a necessity. Siad was a good man, but he was nearing sixty and he could not stand.

“Siad’s pain will change nothing, Abdi,” Nurta said.

Abdi admired her for wanting to protect him.

With his fingertips, Abdi touched her jaw and raised it. The swelling around her left eye made him swallow. He feathered a moist cotton swab around the broken corner of her eyelid, erasing a maze of dehydrated blood. In a different world—their former life—he had recognized Nurta as beautiful. This feeling came to him again, though he was just fourteen and she was married. It hurt him to see her like this.

Across the tent, beyond Nurta’s face, a child stared at Abdi. His arms were thin and stunted and one of his hands was missing. The child held a shiny foil packet of processed vegetables and pressed it between his palm and the smooth, rounded end of the arm where his other hand wasn’t.

There was something about these eyes, the child’s slow, indifferent chewing, that caught and held Abdi—buoyed him in a silent eddy, immune to the current of human bodies that moved around them. The swirl of patients, the swift mechanical movements of

the staff—all of this merged and faded beyond the hardness of this child’s hollow gaze.

Abdi’s eyes returned to Nurta and he worked the cotton across her battered jawline. She needed stitching. Abdi thought about the high, savage pitch of his father’s voice as Salah leapt upon those raiders years before. “I will do what I can,” he said.

**Lifting the soccer ball, Abdi dusts clay from his knees and** changes directions—heading toward a small knoll dotted with scrub brush and tents a kilometer from his home. The sun slips over the horizon and darkness takes the camp. In the absence of light the rows of shelters seem to rise from the earth and glow, unnatural islands of white—floating. Some of these tents are lit dimly from within, the fabric moving as thousands of displaced bodies brush the walls of their small homes. This sight is new to Abdi, for he is not allowed out after dark. As punishment he will be beaten later by his mother, but this does not deter him. He will confront Mohammed tonight.

Looking up at the stars, the camp falls away and he is back in his father’s fishing boat, watching as Salah cast his net into the waves. His father had been a great fisherman in their small village, known by name in Kismaayo and respected, even by those who looked down on Bantu. He brought in giant Somali catfish as big as Abdi and sharks which Abdi’s mother prepared—the meat so fresh it dissolved on his tongue, flaking apart and swirling within his mouth.

His father had only taken Abdi in the boat once because he was young for the dangerous work, but Abdi remembers sitting in the bow of the skiff and studying his father’s movements. In the stillness that came after casting his net, Salah ran his hand over Abdi’s head and pulled him close in the thin light. He told his son that when Abdi was older he would show him how to set lines; that they would troll the Jubba River together for catfish.

Later, as Salah pulled his net into the boat, Abdi was surrounded by a wriggling mass of fresh mullet, bellies silvered by the moon. The

fish's separate bodies merged—the floor of the boat alive: a single, iridescent blanket. Abdi marveled at how his father could create this magic, pull this beauty from the ocean. One day all this would be his.

Kneeling in the skiff, his father invited Abdi to watch as he scooped up a fat, wriggling mullet and slipped his knife into its belly. The blood came black in the night—leaking over his father's hand as he efficiently filleted the small fish, chopping its head and tail off, tossing the pieces into the water. This was repeated until the water swirled around the boat—boiling with small fish, then medium and soon, with fair-sized sharks thrashing in the surf, glutting themselves. Abdi remembers the fear that came as the narrow boat rocked in the open water, the tight grip on his father's rough hand, but also—and this most precisely—a feeling of weightlessness and peace as he floated above the roiling chaos that surrounded them in the dark.

**A blade of light from a loose tent flap stabs dark earth. Abdi**

hears the family within speak about their day in muted voices as he passes. There is little privacy in the camp—one dwelling stacked upon the next, and the fabric is durable but paper-thin. The narrow street he travels is cluttered, littered with scraps of fabric, trash and dirty clothing. Half-empty clay pitchers and gnarly pieces of metal are strewn near the mouths of several dwellings. Plastic bags and bits of thin fabric flutter in the ragged branches of stunted trees and scrub brush. On the hill near the far edge of camp he sees light from Mohammed's bonfire and hears men laughing. Abdi slips his hand into his pocket and feels the smooth white handle of his father's knife, its leather sheath guarding his leg. His other hand drifts to his neck where a rawhide strap holds the shark-tooth necklace. These were the only items he stripped from his father before he covered Salah with thick roadside clay. The graceful curve of the knife's handle is still too large for Abdi's hand.

At a small junction at the base of the hill, a shrunken man in the doorway of a tent lets out a high pitched giggle and reaches for



Abdi's bare leg. Abdi steps toward the man and shows his teeth, hissing. The figure scrambles, retreating to the shadows of his tent. Abdi squeezes the white handle in his pocket and walks faster.

Mohammed's bonfire pushes the stars from view. Abdi enters the sphere of light and the world beyond is swallowed by darkness. Mohammed sits uphill on the far side of the burn and when he sees Abdi he stands. Light catches in the green glass bottle in his right hand and the grade of the soil makes him loom more than two feet above Abdi. The front and sides of his soiled tank-top have rips and rust-colored stains. Abdi knows that some of these are from Nurta. Mohammed's skin is smooth and impossibly dark. His shoulders are broad where Abdi's are narrow.

"You are lost," Mohammed says, and it is not a question. The men around the fire quiet. There are six of them—lean figures that Abdi doesn't recognize. Since Abdi arrived, the camp has ballooned to a number too large to count—an ocean of strangers. Through the fire, Abdi sees the entrance to Mohammed's tent. It is large, several white domes spliced together with wire stolen from the perimeter. Dark fabric hangs over the center joint, draped in strips, shielding the doorway. Inside, Abdi can make out the shape of a woman, curled and still. Several of the men looking on have overbites and their white teeth glare at Abdi in the firelight, lower jaws slack and waiting. Thin wisps of smoke twist the air between Abdi and Mohammed.

"I came to give you a message," Abdi says. Now that he is here he is frightened, but he digs his heels into the soil and looks Mohammed in the eye.

Mohammed's lips curl in a broad smile. He takes a drink, raises his arms toward Abdi. "The little messenger!" he says.

"I am from West Six." Abdi says. He winces at the shrillness of his voice. He clears his throat. "You must leave Nurta alone. Don't touch her again."

"Nurta..." Mohammed says, tapping a thick finger to his lips. He smiles at Abdi through the smoke and leans forward. "Was

your Bantu woman unfaithful?" Several of the men around the fire snicker.

Abdi swallows and grips the knife in his pocket. He speaks louder. "If you touch this woman I will come back and I will kill you."

There is quiet and then Mohammed laughs—slow, rolling laughter that boils up from deep within. The men surrounding the fire chuckle with him, softly at first and then slapping one another, bending. Abdi becomes aware of the soccer ball in his left arm. He had forgotten it. He drops it to the ground, stills it with his foot and steps forward, crossing his arms over his thin chest. This makes the men laugh harder. A lanky, light-skinned man with a shaved head stands and crosses his arms, mocking Abdi. Mohammed and the other men roar. Abdi pictures his mother in the dark, a kilometer away, standing by the mouth of their tent, wondering where he is, furious that he has missed his curfew. He is aware of his age, his size, how his shrill voice is eclipsed by these men. His gaze drops.

"Run away, Mushunguli," Mohammed says. His voice is thunder. He flicks his wrists as one might shoo a rodent. "I take what I want and your Bantu bitch was tight around me." To the men: "I will visit her until she loosens."

Abdi closes his eyes and sees the swelling of Nurta's face. He opens them to the twisted shape inside Mohammed's tent. He is not a fool. He knows the refugee camp is a place without room for chivalry or love. Every day at the clinic he sees injuries. He knows what happens when women are whittled away month by month, year by year. He knows the creatures people become. Abdi understands the business of men like Mohammed, that there are too many of them to stop. He made a mistake in coming here, in thinking that he could help. Every part of him is heavy.

But as Abdi turns to retrieve his ball and leave he is back outside Qooqani, years before, shifting the weight of his dead father to the side. Here is Nurta: eighteen, looking out the blood stained window of the van. Her eyes wash over Abdi like a great wave and

he feels some small gears turn within his chest. He is not so distant from his village that he can't remember the rush of pride he felt when he watched his father transform, killing the al-Shabaab raiders. Salah had been outnumbered the night of the raid, and at the edge of the bonfire's light, alone and surrounded by the laughter of men bigger and stronger than he might ever be, Abdi feels he understands his father—how Salah was filled with a power and violence unique to men protecting what they love. Abdi believes that this is something he too has earned.

“No.” Abdi's voice is loud and full and the men grow quiet as he turns to face them. His eyes meet Mohammed's and Abdi pulls his father's knife from its sheath in his pocket. The firelight catches the blade and it burns like a flame in his hand. “Your time with Nurta, with all of the women in West-Six has finished. I am young, and I am small, but I am not afraid to fight you. I am not afraid to spill your blood here, on this ground, on this night, in front of these men.”

Mohammed frowns at the knife. The other men watch to see what he will do.

The large man thinks a moment, takes a drink, and then moves around the fire and steps toward Abdi and the knife. Abdi sets his jaw, coils his body like a spring, and waits for Mohammed to come. When he draws near, Abdi lets out a wild cry and leaps high into the air, his father's knife aimed at Mohammed's throat. He feels a strange elation, a peace—envisioning the knife slipping into this man, dark blood spilling over his hand the way it had when his father sliced into the helpless mullet. The future unfolds before him—his mother's nod, Nurta's smile, the gentle grasp of Siad as he reaches up from his chair to squeeze Abdi on the shoulder. All of this is possible.

Instead there is a sharp pain in his forearm as Mohammed bats the blow wide. The knife slips from Abdi's hand and falls to the ground. Mohammed follows with his bottle, smashing it into Abdi's ear—the blow so hard that it feels as if he has been struck by a boulder. The bottle shatters and jagged edges of glass scrape across

his temple in a hot burn. Abdi hits the ground, crumples in a heap by the older man's feet. The men around the fire cheer and Mohammed tosses what remains of his bottle into the burn, lifts the knife from the soil, and stands over the boy.

"Fool." Mohammed's voice is soft and savage. He spits on Abdi. "No wonder your people were our slaves."

Abdi scrambles back on his hands and knees. He feels warm blood run from his ear. Thick, smoke-filled air presses in and the perimeter of grim white tents tightens like a noose. He makes a dash for the space between two bushes, but with one step Mohammed cuts him off and wraps a hand around Abdi's neck, lifting him into the air. Abdi twists, his right foot lashes out to kick the larger man, but his feet flail without contact. Abdi thinks again of his mother, looking out into the darkness over the sea of opaque, glowing shelters and knows that she will never think of this as bravery. She will think him foolish and hate him for leaving her to care for Fahmi and Sara on her own. Without his earnings at the clinic, his mother will need to take another husband. Fahmi and Sara will marry before the year is out—twelve and eleven years old. Air slips away from Abdi and he begins to see explosions of pink and white as he claws at Mohammed's hand, clamped around his throat. The laughter of the men, the light of the fire blur and spike as Mohammed turns him in the air above his bonfire, dancing with the helpless boy. This, Abdi thinks, this is how it feels to die.

Then he is on the ground, and feels a snap around his neck. Broken, Abdi thinks, my neck has been broken. But as he sucks air and regains his senses he realizes that he is alive, that his neck is intact. He looks up at Mohammed who holds his father's broken necklace bunched in the fist that grips the white-handled knife. Abdi watches as the large man steps across the open soil and lifts the soccer ball. He holds it toward the boy and Abdi sees flames reflected in the smooth surface—the valleys between each facet of perfect leather are deep and straight. He recalls the feeling of his foot connecting, the ball an extension of his will. The knife arcs and Mohammed

stabs it to howls from the men. Abdi cries out as air gushes from the ball and Mohammed stabs it two, three more times, raking the blade through. When he is finished, Mohammed throws its ragged carcass at Abdi, flicking his wrists again, shooing the boy away.

**As Abdi limps home, cradling what is left of the ball, he weeps.**

He does not attempt to hide his tears. He knows that he will never see his father's knife or shark-tooth necklace again. That Nurta will suffer a brutal vengeance at the hands of Mohammed. That Mohammed will certainly kill her after he has used her up. To the east, Abdi can see the edge of the sky turn gray as the earth rotates on its axis—the large events of space and time indifferent to his struggle. He understands that he might never see the ocean again; that this new world might be all there is for him.

Near the soccer field Abdi throws the ragged leather into the air and watches it catch in barbed wire atop the fence. A thin brown dog on the opposite side of the linked chain peers up at the tattered, hollow shell. It sniffs the air and then trots off in the opposite direction.

In the half-light of dawn, Abdi enters his tent and accepts the beating from his mother. He strips off his shirt at her request, raises his arms and welcomes the switch she keeps for such occasions. It flashes across the soft skin of his back in a searing burn—dark welts rising across his shoulder blades. Abdi usually takes his beatings stoically, refusing to let his sisters or neighbors hear him cry out, but this time Abdi's cries rise and swirl: soaring above the camp—a high, lonesome, desperate sound; a sort of pleading—that reaches into the night and tells the story of a thousand silent voices.

In the morning stillness, at the far reaches of the camp, men and women lift their heads and listen to the distant, anguished cry. As quickly as it comes it passes and the sound is soon forgotten, swept away by a steady wind that hurries over Dadaab.

