

## Extract from "Close Sesame"<sup>1</sup>

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THE YOUNG SUN had cast a net and Deeriye felt caught in it. His squint was slight, his focus a little altered (he had just re-emerged from the tunnel his catnap had led him to), his mind elsewhere: this put him oddly in mind of the days when he too was young as the sun, when he could stand erect and straight-backed, look anything or anybody in the eye: just like the sun at noon. Apparently, catnaps were nowadays becoming a familiar feature of his existence. Why, he had found out now for instance while he had been enjoying his brief catnap, somebody had come in, brought in a warm cup of tea, tiptoed out — and he did not wake up. He asked himself if he could remember his last thought just before the latest catnap? Yes. Khaliif: the madman who strode out of dawn's greyness, with half his face painted white and the other half dark. Dawn's veil of darkness had been light like a coat of fading paint, transparent like silk soaking in clear water. And Khaliif had come into view, with no grain of dust stirred: he had come like memory; he had come like the allergic pain of a disorder. He stalked the neighbourhood, scoured the area: there was hardly anybody walking about that time of morning, there was no audience to hear him proclaim himself, no crowd to cheer him on, no sympathetic listener to act as the *sug-giretore* if the well of this man's mad imagination had dried up. Saying nothing, shouting no messages, speaking not a word: he looked a madman stalking his haunt; he moved, he behaved like a murderer in search of the evidence of his own deed returning to find out if his secret has been discovered. Yes, he looked a madman: his approach suspicious, his gaze like a numerist's whose lips are a shiver with the counting, his gait stealthy. One would

conclude that he did not belong in the world of the sane. But neither did he belong in the world of the insane for he did not always behave as though he were mad. To Deeriye and many others, Khaliif was a burial mound one suspected was empty but which, out of good breeding, one was never mad enough to dig open. Khaliif, someone used to say, was the mystery no one was ready to solve; and such a wonderful mystery too. For mysteries are material for speculation. And Khaliif was.

Once a highly placed government civil servant, respected by all, a family man, four daughters, a son and a job that could have got him or his survivors and dependents a fat pension if . . . ! If what? It was here where everything became shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew what happened to him between one evening and the following morning: his wife and children saw him leave as he always had done in his car, his mood *piu o memo* jovial, his destination unknown to them. The following morning: he was mad. The house and the whole neighbourhood awoke to his madman's screams, his profanities. No one could make him keep his clothes on long enough for he would begin unbuttoning his shirt or unzipping his trousers or undo the sarong's knots the instant the helper's hands relaxed. The doctors who were consulted did not know what to suggest; one daredevil of a psychoanalyst spoke of the dangers of haloperidol treatments and left it at that. Had Khaliif been given the treatment? No one could tell. His wife, children and the relations did what tradition prescribed: he was tied to a bed, several sheiks were summoned and were handsomely paid to read the blessed word over him. Now Khaliif's overnight madness might never have been a mystery in itself were he not prone to making weird statements such as "Nights plot conspiracies daylight never reveals"; also his family and friends might never have questioned the hand of Providence were it not for the fact that during his lucid intervals, he mentioned names, responsible names, in particular one name. But was he *majnuun*? The Arabic word *majnuun* which informs the Somali term *Waallii* suggests in its derivation a divine hand in these affairs: the Arabic, which in turn informs the Islamic concept, definite hints of an *otherness*, a jinn-of-a-presence in matters regarding madness. In the Somali term *Waallii*, there is a point-

ing in the direction of a saintliness although of a lowly kind. Somalia is populated with men of distinct characteristics, men who are said, in the local jargon, to "have hit it, after all," either on account of a love unreturned or as a result of their incapability to withstand other pressures: but these men and women are not committed to institutions nor are they kept in isolation but are left to graze, peaceful, loved, and teased, among ordinary people in an ordinary way, along with the other beastly beings, although they are subjected to torturous naughtiness by children beating tin-drums when they are sighted — but no more. An unaggressive madman or madwoman is said to serve as a constant reminder of divine presence. Love unreturned, love unaccepted, the suffering of the person who is spoken of as *majnuun of Leila*, those in whom dwell the jinn: the literature and lore of the country is filled with this *follia*! But there was nothing of the kind in Kha-liif. You could say he was insane (using the term in its general sense), that he was a man who, while walking up and down the streets of Mogadiscio ugly a sight as anyone had ever seen, spoke a language whose discourse was grammatical although not all the time logical; a language of one working towards self-sufficiency; a language which was not, in any manner of speaking, disjointed but whose inferential and referential senses could be questioned: and therefore a madman. Although if you got anywhere near him, you would sense that he had washed, that his body would not give a sordid smell very like a bedpan's odour; neither would you associate him with the down-trodden among the urban populace who woke up before the first cock-crow to attack the garbage cans in the hope that there could be a morsel worth salvaging from the tropical decay of waste. A mystery: where did he sleep? Where did he wash? One further mystery still unsolved. Why was it that he could grind out the names and titles of those men in high government offices who were suspected of being responsible for his insanity and go unharmed? He would do this in public: the man was beyond fear. Did he believe nothing more could be done to him? He would say he would take revenge and kill. Kill whom? Was he really mad?

Some people believed he was not. And they would lay sufficient proof before one if one was interested. They would ask one these:

Why did he always choose to deliver his messages of condemnation before a crowd? Why did he always choose his victims well? Why did he always choose to make his cursory remarks in the presence of or within hearing distance of the new *privilgentsia*? In Mogadiscio, there were many madmen and madwomen. Some were famous and had even entered the annals of national politics. The names of others had become figures as renowned as the class they represented. Yet others had enriched the language as a new idiom might. Cities and towns are made more habitable if there are characters with outstanding stories and likeable characters with mysterious backgrounds. However, Khaliif was a mystery half-revealed in so far as Deeriye was concerned. The charm, the charisma, the voice which made everybody stop and listen, these told his story well, these made revelant his speaking of that which others were afraid to speak of; or reaching regions of thoughts others feared to tread. Men and women, wherever he went, assembled round him and heard him speak *for* them, they listened to him speak on their behalf and say what they could not have said. One could see every now and then some young man or young woman who would make a stealthy approach with a view to putting into Khaliif's mouth words the young man or the young woman would never dare say — for this young man or this young woman was not mad enough to speak their sane thoughts; and the young man or the young woman would be thrown into jail if these words were attributed to him or her. But Khaliif never borrowed words from anybody; he never directly spoke somebody's else's lines; never — to the best of anybody's knowledge. Question: did anybody know any of his activities or contacts after he had gone mad? How much of his mysteries had been so far revealed?

It seemed Khaliif mistrusted everybody: he moved away the moment anyone came near him, man or woman, child or adult; and he would search for and find a corner, wedge himself in where the walls encountered so that he would launch his proclamations from there, using the space he had made for himself as a pulpit. He shunned human contact: he showed intense dislike for any violence, loathed the city's urchins because they sometimes pelted him with pebble-stones; he also avoided any contact with

enthusiasts whose sympathies turned into pity and who arrived with gifts in the form of food or clothing or both. He broke plates when presented, like a beggar, with the day's left-over; he kicked at them, spilled their contents; he screamed, and ran off when anyone as much as touched him. Now, sitting in the net the sun's brightness had caught him in, Deeriye started: he could hear Khaliif's magical voice, he could hear it complement, like a chorus, a modicum of welcoming remarks from a small crowd that had already gathered to listen to him. Deeriye craned forward. Lo and behold: Khaliif was there. When he studied him, Khaliif did not suggest a broken man on the fringes of society; nor as an alienated man whose mind buzzed with disjointed mysterious messages so far undeciphered; nor a man invalidated by or overburdened with guilt. No: he was a man whose demeanour forestalled everyone's fear, prediction or worry: he sold to everybody the very thing no one was prepared to buy; and bought from everybody the very thing no one was ready to sell.

Silence.

And the silence activated Deeriye's nerves, his ears unhearing, his eyes unseeing: he himself had crossed the known and tactile world; crossed into one which was lifeless, memoryless and also Khaliifless. Fortunately, this lasted only fifty or so seconds. And when he retraced his steps back into the world of which Khaliif was still an integral and visible part, he could hear him saying, his discourse clear, grammatical and sanely logical: "There are wicked houses and in them live wicked men and wicked women. Truth must be owned up. We are God's children; the wicked of whom I speak are satan's off-spring. And nights plot conspiracies daylight never reveals." And he held his hands together in a *namastee*, clowned a bit, entertained the younger members of the audience by doing the sommersault, the karate ghost-dance and then returned to his peaceful corner: and fell quiet. An applause. He curtsied: grinning, grateful and graceful.

A number of people had come out of their houses and among them, Deeriye could see, was his own son Mursal. Others craned their necks through their windows, just like he. Most of those who came out to see or hear him were dressed informally: some in colourful pyjamas; others in house-garments, *guntinos*, or in

things they threw over their bodies in place of a quick shower — their hair in disarray, head uncombed, teeth unbrushed. There were, in addition to these, a couple of women who had cut, in the middle, their breast-feeding a child or sifting grain. These looked madder than Khaliif. For he was donned, not as Deeriye had seen him when dawn had the colour of cured hide and Khaliif a face half painted white, the other black. No: he was decently arrayed in a priestly tradition (the hems of the attire a little stained from sommersaulting and indulging in playful activities when entertaining the younger members of his audience), he was robed all in white, his movements suggestive as a Sheikh's, his voice rich, like a prophecy, with its own cadences, his proclamations saintly. Now he was silent and was facing Cigaal's house: and when the crowd turned to look in that direction, there was standing in the doorway, Cigaal's grandson Yassin who made as though he would pelt Khaliif with a pebble-stone for he had picked one from the ground. Was it Cigaal's the wicked house of which he spoke? The members of the audience thought so and somebody provided further notes to Khaliif's broad references. And was that why Yassin was threatening him with violence? But they wondered (as did Deeriye who had seen him earlier when he had been in semi-rags) why it was that he put on a Sheikh's outfit? He said "*Mahad Alla leh*": then he made voluntary ejaculations and invocations of Allah's names, the names of the Prophet and the major saints. He added, "Wicked, wicked, wicked. No respect, none whatsoever. No respect for any form of divination or divinity. The word, it appears, has not reached their ears or if it has they seem not to have heard it. *Acuudu billaahi minash shaytaanir rajimi!* Nothing is holy in their houses. They upturn traditions and know not how to create anything of harmony except something in which the devil may dwell for ever and ever. May He upset the vessel of their future; may He upturn the pitcher out of which they drink; may He break in two the containers out of which they eat: these who are *gadaal ka soo gaar!* Upstarts of the worst kind, upstarts who have upturned our sacred traditions and have begun worshipping *him* . . . would you believe it . . . worshipping *him* . . . a mortal and a fool at that in place of Him: *subxaanallaah! Fanaka cuudu billaah!*"

Without a moment's hesitation, without losing the balance of mind and logic of the sane, he flitted out of the habitat of the priestly tradition into that of the actor-clown; he played the harlequin, he clowned, sommersaulted half revealing his underpants: he put his hands to his mouth, pretended he was a modest little girl, moved his head to the sides and was silent. Then a young woman singled herself out of the crowd and she went into another corner and in a bold, loud voice told the now familiar story of the African dictator who, touring the country chanced upon deciding to visit a hospital for the mentally ill. The patients were hurriedly assembled and those who refused to go and hear him were frog-marched into the hall. The dictator spoke to the assembly of madmen and madwomen; no applauding, no jeering, no booing: his speech was two hours long, was listened to very attentively and he was pleased with himself. When he finished, the director of the institution called upon them to sing the praise-names of their beloved benefactor: they all sang, save one man. The dictator noticed the man's sulky silence, he saw the man's defiant smile and thought he could even hear a slight chuckle every now and then as the others sang loudest to appease his and the director's humour. But not this man. Prior to his leaving the hall, the dictator asked the director who *the madman* was. The director as though he were dealing with the most ordinary of questions answered it thus: "Forgive me for I've clean forgotten to introduce him to you. The man you've referred to as *the madman* was actually certified sane this very morning," and added, his voice speaking as though in a tandem of tension and light-heartedness: "You might say he was the only one in the room who had a certificate that he was sane." The director laughed at his own joke. The dictator feigned he enjoyed it too. Then with sudden aggressiveness: "You are mad yourself," declared the dictator. To his men: "Strait-jacket him, quick," he gave the order and left. The director of the institution of the mentally ill became the newest member of the community of madmen.

There was a sigh of grief from the crowd. From Khaliif this: "Now who is mad? Down with those who kill, who humiliate and who torture! Down with those who make use of unjustified methods of rule." And he burst into a guffaw of a laughter which

made everybody raise eyebrows of querying and scarcely had everyone relaxed than he startled them with "Don't the Arabs say: Pinch the wisdom, oh people, out of the mouths of madmen." Then a silence.

Suddenly, however, there *occurred* the first popping thud of a shower of pebbles and stones: Yassin, the ten-year-old grandson of Cigaal whose house Khaliif had described earlier as wicked, was collecting more pebbles and stones with a given virtuosity, indicating, with great relish, that he would pelt him with more stones if he said another word. Yassin stared stonily at all those inimical gazes which were trained on him. A moment later, there came his support in the person of his mother and his aunt, both, it appeared, ready to out-shout anyone, mad or sane, ready to out-shout anyone, mad or sane, ready to protect their Yassin. Someone in the crowd said the women and the little boy were mad. Was this as far as they would go? Or would someone tell the young rascal not to hurt him? Mursal's voice, prompt, firm and sonorous: "You will not throw any more stones, Yassin. You will drop the ones you have collected and you will behave yourself." A pause. And a little later, at the behest of his aunt and mother, Yassin dropped the stones he had gathered. "Now who is mad?" chanted Khaliif. "Tell me who is mad and I will tell you who is not."

Khaliif then put his hands together as a sign of resignation; he exchanged knowing smiles with those nearest him and nodded in the direction of Mursal; then he walked away shunning any contact with violence which, he believed, would emanate from the same source as that which had robbed him of his own sanity.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Close Sesame* is a novel-in-progress. This episode dramatizes the erosion of the strength and virility of traditional elements in Somalian society.