“The Land of my Memories”
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It has been said before that life is just like a wave. Sometimes it takes us above the lines of success and sometimes it brings us below the threshold of pain. The interesting truth about life isn’t the fact that sometimes we suffer, but the unpredictable patterns of living. One can live the same lifestyle for years, but can never predict how high or low the tides of subsistence will go the next day.

In a country filled with people who share the same religion, language, color and the same definition of ultimate purpose, the tides of normality were about to skip the promise of delivering yet another blissful memory, for the residents of a country that struggled to maintain sovereignty.

Promised once before the joy of witnessing a waving flag contrasting with the blue sky, Somalia, the country of once upon a time tales of hope changed its expected cycle of subsistence to bring about nightmares that would merge into the dreams of unsuspecting innocence.

Before bullets became the rain of the nation, before bees took their sweet honey to neighboring countries, before the wildlife gave up the right to own the wildest habitat, before religion became a scapegoat, there was a moon and a sun that raced to reach the horizon of a blessed country. There were honey bees buzzing with the delight of sharing their remedies with the peaceful land. There were women and men of knowledge carrying books and pens, guarding the code of life. There were mosques that said, “Smile more because it’s a form of charity.”

There were mothers who looked into the eyes of their children and smiled with the mystery their children carried for the future. There was understanding and meaning, but now, the only hope of the hopeful citizen is smashed against rocks hardened by broken promises. The right to claim one’s rightful crown as a citizen is blocked by fences of ignorance and mischievous endeavors.

All the world sees today when it gapes at the sight of this country is a nation that failed its citizens. All the world sees is a place to abandon as long as it lacks the proper definition of freedom.

I left this country. I left the sight of familiarity. I left my childhood to allow my future years to take the peaceful course of existence. Sometimes I look outside the windows of my new home and I wonder how life would have been in Somalia. I wonder how the arid grounds of playgrounds changed their color, I wonder if the faces of my childhood friends are still smiling and happy. I wonder every day. I wonder through the opaque images of my memories whether I will ever be the same again. I constantly have to remind myself that I survived, that I am ok, that the war didn’t label me a tragic victim.

“You will get used to it in time,” my mom tells me on Fridays when I am too tired to go school. “How can I go to school when it’s Friday?” I ask knowing that the question has no answer. On Fridays I used to sleep late and wake up to the sound of children playing in the morning. Now, I try to do that on Saturdays, the days when my body wakes me up before the sun rises, thinking it’s a school day. A lot has changed. I have changed.

I was a kid the last time I breathed the air of my native land, the air that my lungs still recognize through my memories.

The sagacious words of my parents and the infallible description of their sacrifices remind me to find that feeling again: the feeling of being home, of being where I belong. It’s hard to equate this new land to the land of my memories, but I hope to call it my own home in time.
I am saddened by the conditions of the land of my memories, but now through inexorable persistence I want to plant the seeds of my ambitions in my new home. I am not betraying the land of my memories; it let me go before I was born.

The thought of change is daunting to me; it reminds me of my journey to America. I remember when I went on the plane to come to America. The plane was filled with different people, the food was unfamiliar, and the journey ahead was a tumultuous spark that gave me headaches.

I stepped on American soil and I told myself to cope with the changes. I told myself to smile away the challenges and to speak as if I was born an American. I fulfilled my supposed responsibility, till I realized I didn’t have to do more than I had to.

I made up expectations in my head, fulfilling each of them while exhausting my tenacity. I meticulously pioneered my way through high school. Continuing my studies as a sophomore in Lewiston High School, I took on more work than was expected. I tried to do more work, hoping to be noticed for what I felt was my safety net. I was always careful, watching my words and carefully selecting my course of actions. I abandoned my culture; trying to assume the identity I thought would serve me better.

I joined the soccer team without trying out because the try outs had ended in the summer and I arrived in early fall. I joined the team after impressing the coach with a two month old American accent. “Never saw a new comer talk like that,” he said as he allowed me to be on the team.

I started wearing very short Hijabs, sometimes showing my hair. I convinced my parents to help me change my wardrobe and in few months, I felt like a new person.

The perplexity of my new norm never ceased to amaze. I became the figment of an ingenuous character that found taste in an insipid persona. I didn’t realize how much I betrayed my true identity, till I met an old lady from Somalia one afternoon.

It was raining and I was walking with some friends from school. We were all from Somalia and we took pride in our unaccented English and our “American” ways of socializing. She was walking with a cane and the rain was ruthless to her fragile body. When I first noticed her, I felt sorry for her. She was walking very slowly and when we walked beside her, she looked at me with kind relenting eyes. I felt very sad as I thought about her condition.

My friends started walking faster than the old lady and I, I started to walk faster and the lady walked steadily behind me. I felt bad for her and I went back, adjusting to her pace and occasionally smiling at her.

Then she started to move her lips very gently to form the softest words I have ever heard. She said something; I couldn’t understand what she was saying. I leaned to listen closely, but the words sounded foreign to me. I kept asking her to repeat, but she finally gave up. Then she asked me a question that I have asked myself since that day. She asked me in the most sheer and invariable manner if I was a Somali. I looked at her with offended eyes, gazing at her with my eyebrows raised and scrutinizing her demeanor.

I breathed heavily, uttering faintly “What?” through my breath. Then I spontaneously said, “Of course I am a Somali, what kind of a question is that?” I suddenly felt a sense of dislike for the old lady. It took me minutes before I realized I answered in English.

I took a deep breath and searched for the right words in Somali to translate what I said. She then smiled and asked me to forgive her. She told me that she wanted to see my answer. She said that if I had said no, it would mean that I was trying to be something I wasn’t. Little did I know that my culture was synonymous with my principles.

I went home that day and punished myself for the ridiculous mistakes I made. No one expected me to change; I misled myself and became unrecognizable to my own culture.
The next day I wore the longest Hijab I could find and I went to school. I was surprised to see everyone treating me the same way. I finally learnt that I didn’t have to change my true identity in order to assimilate or to even become part of the norm. I learnt to celebrate my differences and to invite others to explore my culture. I learnt with time that if I weren’t different I wouldn’t have pride in my attributes to this new society I so dearly want to call my home.