



Chapter 6

Shiamsa in Shadows

*Until I die I shall not give up my song of love,
Oh, God, forgive me my weakness.
(Traditional Somali folk song)*

I knew the bitter bile of Shiamsa's fear stained brow, her softness cut by witching straps clutched tight in her father's grasp. That was the last time I ever caught a glimpse of her.

The first time we met had been so charmed. I paid a call on David, the burly construction Peace Corps volunteer, in the hopes of straightening out who all the foreigners were in Baidoa. I remember so vividly the shy, sassy smile that peeked around the corner of the kitchen, the eyes that told me I was beautiful too.

I never learned what Shiamsa's nickname was. I am sure she had one. Everyone had a nickname, even Molly and me. "Molly" and "Moriah" weren't in the Arabic lexicon, so we both got dubbed "Miriam". But they had to tell us apart, so we got nicknames. They called me "*Miriam Yahr*", "Little Miriam". They called Molly "*Miriam Weyn*", "Big Miriam". I wore my "*Miriam Yahr*" with pride, even smugness. Molly hated her nickname and tried to convince me it was only because she was older that she was considered "Big." I just nodded knowingly.

Our servant's real name was "Hasan", but we always called him Tifu. "Tifu" meant "skinny", like a twig. Tifu may have been skinny when he was born, but he was a strong man when I met him. Tifu must have swallowed a lot of pride in his thirty-plus years with a nickname like "Tifu", which may explain how he managed to work for two women, a less than honorable position.

I don't know Shiamsa's nickname. She tried to tell me once, but I didn't know the Somali word, and she didn't know how to tell me in English. We agreed that I would just call her Shiamsa. It was such a lovely name, and she was a lovely young woman, probably three or four years younger than my twenty four years. The question "How old are you?" was a non-question in Somalia. Time was simply gauged differently. There was "the time of the big floods" or "the time of the clan gathering", but there were no dates as in our Gregorian calendar.

While each family could trace its heritage back to the Prophet Mohammed, there was woefully little history, written or oral, prior to that. We do know that in ancient times Somalia was a huge exporter of exotic spices and woods, the very finest aromatic frankincense and myrrh, meerschaum, and cattle and crops that were prized in the Mediterranean world. We know this because in the 15th century b.c., Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt sponsored an expedition to the horn of Africa, modern Somalia, then called the Land of Punt. When the expedition returned to Egypt with boatloads of treasure, the Queen had magnificent murals painted on the walls of her palace in the Valley of the Kings depicting the treasures found, and the brotherly peoples found there, depicting, as Queen Hatshepsut put it, "The kindest and most generous people I have ever met." Those murals exist to this day. So far the archeologists who have studied these murals have been mostly male, but I am hoping that a woman's educated eye will soon view them and tell us even more about the women of early Somalia. This Land of Punt is likely where the Magi found the frankincense and myrrh to take to the Christ child. This truly was a treasured land.

Early visitors to Somalia were enthralled with the treasures there, and didn't try to inflict their rule on these people. There were small skirmishes, of course, but combat was hand-to-hand with swords and knives, and Somalis with their strength and valor stood their ground. In the 15th century Portugal was the

first of many European nations that wanted to rule Africa, including Somalia, for purely political and economic reasons, introducing firearms and massive massacres that wiped out whole villages in a single day. This treasured land – Somalia -- became a killing ground. By the 20th century, Great Britain, France and Italy had carved up Somalia and claimed it as their own.

Throughout their history, Somalis did not enslave people, so being a servant was a very respectable profession. Shiamsa was a servant like Tifu, but was higher ranking than Tifu. She was David's "boyessa", his housekeeper and cook. David had directed the construction of the four room schoolhouse that Molly and I taught at, as well as four elementary schools in the district. He had arrived a year before us, and, with a six foot muscular frame, he was taller and stronger than most of the Somalis he worked with. His physical prowess and strong leadership earned him exceptional respect from those he worked with. There were rumors that Shiamsa was David's whore, although David swore that he never touched her. He readily admitted to hiring other local prostitutes, but not Shiamsa.

Whether Shiamsa was David's mistress or not, she clearly enjoyed a position that servants rarely reach. She actually teased him about how tall he was and about the size of his shirts, and sometimes she even sat and had tea with us when I visited. She indeed struck me as a spunky, sharp young woman, and a very pretty one too. She had the mocha brown complexion and huge black eyes of many Somali women, coupled with a natural grace to her every move.

When I received the invitation from the Peace Corps to go to Somalia, I rushed to the local library and looked up "Somalia" in the encyclopedia. There was one column, and one image, that of a group of young warriors with huge Afro hairstyles, the ones I came to know as the powerful young Rahanweyn warriors. That was it. There were no books at all about Somalia. With just that one encyclopedia entry, I knew that this was a people that I yearned to know. It called to me like the mythical Bali Hai.

I hadn't seen images of Somali women until Peace Corps training, an intensive three month course held at Columbia University in New York. The images we saw at training had been taken by male staff members, and since it was forbidden by the Moslem religion to have one's image captured on film, the women we saw in those pictures were not the women I met later. The women in these photos were likely sophisticated city women from Mogadishu, and they were posing for a photographer with a western eye, with chins lowered and a demure look. These women were Somali, but they were far more westernized than the women of Baidoa. The women of Baidoa were much more beautiful, their beauty reflected through their internal strength, with the power of their heads held high above strong backs, with a pride in their stride and steadfast gaze. It was a strength, a power, that affirmed, "Go ahead, make me bear children in pain; I will thrive. Go ahead, take away four out of every five babes that I bear; I will but care for those who survive even more. Go ahead, bring drought to my family; I will find ways to make them live." It was a defiance, an inner strength, a complete trust in Allah that was absolutely uncompromising. Like Steinbeck's women in "The Grapes of Wrath," Somali women were unquestionably the core of the family, hence the core of Somali society, and they wore that responsibility with dignity.

This is not what I expected in a country where young girls were routinely mutilated with clitorectomies. But that is how it was.

Shiamsa was promised in marriage to Abdullahi, a young man in a neighboring town. They had met at a wedding dance in Baidoa about two years previously, and Abdullahi had courted Shiamsa through clandestine meetings at the springs and along paths at the edge of town. Arranged marriages were only slowly being replaced by love matches, so they knew they had to be careful. When they were certain of their love, Abdullahi spoke with his parents who in turn went to speak with Shiamsa's family. Over many meetings and more cups of tea they negotiated the bride price and began exchanging gifts between the families. Abdullahi didn't yet have enough money for the bride price, nor enough to support

a family, so Shiamsa was waiting until he was ready, and in the interim they had the joy of seeing each other from time to time.

There were no old maids in Somalia. In a land where a man could have as many as four wives if he could support them, women were in demand, usually through an arrangement made by the girl's parents. That happened with Fatuma, Shiamsa's older sister. When Fatuma was likely in her late teens, word was put out that the family was looking for a good husband for her. An older man in a nearby village came to call, and the marriage was arranged, without Fatuma ever having seen her future husband. Everyone said it was a good marriage, joining two equally strong families, and Shiamsa assured me that Fatuma was indeed very happy in her new life, and had already had their first child.

Our friendship was so serendipitous, the one between Shiamsa and me. Here, in the midst of thorn bush country, I found someone very special. Shiamsa once discovered a small blue flower in a bitter dry season and presented it to me with a shyness that conveyed that she knew how much it meant to me ... how much she meant to me. I taught Shiamsa how to make a chocolate cake for David with a recipe from my Fannie Farmer cookbook, a staple in any Peace Corps trunk. Shiamsa couldn't read or write, but like all Somalis she had an incredible memory and remembered the whole process with just one showing. We had a tin gasoline can that we had converted into our oven. We placed it over hot coals and piled more hot coals on top, creating an oven-like temperature. I made some spectacular cookies and cakes in that contraption.

Somalis did bake sometimes, in a round clay sort of oven. During the Italian occupation after World War II they learned to bake a kind of small loaf of bread which the Italians ate with the local spaghetti. The bread was hard, and the spaghetti tasteless, but it kept them – and us --alive. Still our tin can was unique. Shiamsa loved learning how to use it, and I had one made especially for her.

Shiamsa taught me how to negotiate with the local merchants, although I never got very good at it. It seemed to me that the prices were so low to begin with that I felt guilty arguing about making them even lower. Shiamsa laughed at me when we went to market. Shiamsa also taught me how to make the aromatic black Arabic tea brewed with lots of sugar and laced with cardamom and cinnamon, something that Tifu would never have shown me. Somalis drank that sticky sweet tea morning and night.

One afternoon Shiamsa and I sat drinking the sweet cardamom tea, alone at my house. The Catholic orphanage where I taught in the afternoons had a holiday that day, Molly was out teaching at the Police station, and Tifu had left for the day.

Shiamsa told me about a cousin who was visiting from the north. No one knew him, but according to Somali custom, he was welcomed. He had spent the last evening telling tales of the merchants in Hargeisa and how the northern Somali nomads were dealing with the heavy rains that year. Shiamsa had obviously practiced this little story so she could tell it to me in perfect English, which she nearly managed to do. Her effort pleased me so.

Shiamsa was wearing a new dress, at least one I hadn't seen before, and I commented on how lovely it was. Yellow flowers libbety-skittered over a bright tangerine background, with bursts of burgundy and evergreen.

"Is that a new dress?" I asked. "It really is pretty."

Shiamsa always wore the traditional draped dress of east African women, most often her rose pink and deep lavender flowered fabric. It was tied on one shoulder, then draped around her twice and tied again in front at the waist, probably three to four yards of fabric altogether. With a bright blue head scarf that covered every wisp of hair, and a gold flowered shawl for cool evenings, Shiamsa always looked very colorful. Somali women made no attempt at matching the head scarf or shawl, so the whole ensemble was a riot of flowers beyond anything in their own landscape. Even the desert when it bloomed

each year for just a few days did not remotely compare to the cacophony of colors in the Somali draped gowns, as if the women's spirits cried out for something beautiful. Whenever we went to the marketplace, the colorful flowered fabrics favored by Somali women, the ones imported from India, Egypt and China, absolutely burst with energy. Like most Somali women, Shiamsa had very few dresses, wearing each dress for years, often even when it took on the brown tones of Somali soil and eventually fell apart. New fabrics crinkled and folded with a will of their own, but as the fabric became accustomed to a woman's body, it flowed and accented the woman's natural curves. I knew well that Shiamsa's natural curves whispered a fantasy. I knew her every nuance by watching the flow of her dresses.

Today Shiamsa wore the new dress with golds and greens and magentas.

"Yes, it is new," Shiamsa said. "I am happy you like it. You. Me." Her finger moved back and forth between us. I knew she wanted us to switch clothes, and she began to untie the knot at her waist.

"Oh, no," I protested. "I don't even know how."

Shiamsa quickly closed the shutters in the living room, leaving the only light creeping in from the kitchen window. She smiled playfully, so pleased that she could show me something new. She deftly untied the knot at her waist and unwound the fabric from her body, then untied the knot at her shoulder. She stepped out of the length of cloth, leaving the yellow flowers tumbled on the floor. She wore no undergarments. Her deep amber skin played with the shafts of sunlight; her flawless breasts and thighs threw me on a runaway roller coaster ride—light-headed, my gut lurching at the danger as we careened around sharp curves.

Even when Shiamsa draped her gossamer shawl over her shoulder, her beauty only glowed stronger. Her skin glistened in the afternoon heat, from her tiny toes peeking out from a printed hibiscus to her gently rounded tummy and womanly nipples begging for attention. I ached to bury my lips in her softness.

I stood glued to my spot, terrified of what I might do. After months of intolerable isolation in Baidoa, Shiamsa stood naked in front of me, only a few inches away. She and I had never touched, never held hands, or hugged on meeting. That simply was not done. Ever. Part of me wanted to reach for her, and relish every inch of her radiance. Part of me chilled at the danger.

Before I could regain my senses, Shiamsa had unbuttoned the three buttons on my blouse and untied the bow on my loose wrap-around skirt, setting the blouse and skirt gently on the back of the chair.

Shiamsa reached down and gathered up the yellow flowers from the floor. It was an image worthy of Frida Kahlo. Golds and russets and greens tumbled over her arms as she found the fabric corner she was looking for. As she reached to drape the flowered fabric over my shoulder, her hand brushed my breast, ever so softly and, I thought, paused just a fraction of a second.

"Oh my heavens," I thought. "Could she hear my heart screaming?"

I reached for her hand, wanting so desperately to hold it tight to my breast, for just a moment. But a burst of sunlight flooded the room. The front door was shoved wide open, and Tifu stood, outlined by the brilliance of the setting sun.

"AAIII !!"

"AAIII !!"

"AAIII !!"

I'm not sure which of us screamed the loudest – Shiamsa, Tifu or me. Tifu dropped the parcel he was carrying, turned and ran.

I lunged at the door, slamming it shut. There was no locking it. It simply had no lock. I slipped on the broken eggs that Tifu had dropped on the cement floor. By the time I got up, Shiamsa had her own dress back on, and was trying to get my clothes back on me.

"Bismelahi Bismilahi." Shiamsa kept repeating that phrase, or something like it, and some others that I didn't know at all. I was too stunned to say anything.

I didn't realize until much later that Shiamsa wasn't apologizing for anything that might – or might not – have happened between us; I think perhaps that fantasy was mine alone. Although homosexuality was punishable by death according to Sharia law, I wasn't at all certain that the concept applied to women, nor did I have the courage to ask. No, I believe Shiamsa was mortified because a man – a servant – had seen us naked. Shiamsa was a virgin, and being seen by any man, let alone a lowly one, was strictly forbidden in the Moslem tradition. She was stunned. Because Tifu had seen me too, she assumed my reaction was the same, and she was right. Having my male servant catch me at that moment was horrifying enough, but I was terrified too that something truly dreadful would happen to Shiamsa. I didn't know what might happen, but I knew that this was a very unusual experience. I chastised myself for allowing it to happen, and for weeks I couldn't even look at a Somali woman, fearful that their eyes would bore into my innermost thoughts, telling me what a fool I was for harming one of their own. And they were right.

From then on, I made a point of checking with David every few days to reassure myself that Shiamsa was still working for him, and that she was okay.

Shiamsa and I never again shared a cup of tea. I don't think either of us knew how to continue the conversation, and I hadn't a clue how to make it right.

Shiamsa and I did meet again, very unexpectedly, a few months later. Shiamsa darted in front of me as I left the adult night class that I taught in the village. It was dark by then and I nearly collided with her.

"Come," Shiamsa instructed. She turned and headed down the path, over the soccer field area now grown tall with scratchy grasses, the same path I took home every night that I taught school. Here is where school boys played soccer most afternoons, where I had been drafted as a referee although I knew woefully little about soccer. This was my home turf. As we reached the edge of the grassy area Shiamsa put her right hand under her shawl and began almost shouting in Somali. I heard a mumbling from somewhere as the grasses swayed and jumbled.

"What's happening?" I whispered furtively.

"I talk, my knife. I talk, my brothers watch," Shiamsa explained. Pointing to the edge of the field she stated, "My brothers are there, and there."

"Who?" It seemed such an absurd question. "Talk to who?"

"They kill you."

It felt like hours before we reached the far end of the field. Omar Chicago came running out of the compound, obviously frantic. He and Shiamsa exchanged a few brisk sentences, then Shiamsa left with Omar's eldest son beside her. Omar told me to get inside.

"What's going on?" I felt like I missed something.

Omar briskly explained. "Men kill you. Shiamsa take you home."

"But couldn't Shiamsa's brothers have just walked me home?" It seemed so simple to me.

"Brothers in Mogadishu," said Omar.

I went inside, sat and cried, chills running down my spine. I knew there were strong anti-American sentiments in Somalia, in spite of the efforts of President Shermake, the president of Somalia at that time. Shermake's goal was to ease tensions on all fronts, and it was a slow process. I often felt a chill when I

went into town, but this was the first time I felt a direct threat. Molly was already asleep when I got home. I closed all the shutters and once again I regretted that the door didn't have a lock. I needn't have worried. When I peeked out the door a few minutes later, Omar's son had returned and was stationed securely in front of our door, a very long knife at his side, held fast by the leather crafted sheath and belt. After that I noticed that often when I walked home at night there was someone – or something -- along the edge of the field, watching. But it wasn't a menacing presence at all. It may have been one of Omar's sons, just keeping me safe, or perhaps Shiamsa's brothers, or Shiamsa herself. Or perhaps it was the presence of a Goddess I had never met.

So life in Baidoa returned to normal, if indeed there was such a thing.

Sometimes when I stopped at David's place, I saw Shiamsa's shadow tossed against the kitchen wall. That was as close as I got to her. I wanted so desperately to tell her how grateful I was for her risking her life to save mine, if indeed I could find the words to say so. But she didn't wish to be seen.

I did have one thing that I thought I could safely give her, a slim gold filigree bracelet that I had purchased in Mogadishu shortly after we arrived. I had stumbled upon the old Arabic quarter where goldsmith shops snuggled together in the shadows of narrow alleyways, perhaps a dozen or so shops, one after the other. Here were Arabian goldsmiths who used only 22 karat gold, the very purest gold used in jewelry, creating treasures with techniques perfected over millennia. I watched as they melted the gold, and pulled out threads thin as the strands in a spider's web, then wound the strands around and around creating a delicate lace design in bracelets, brooches and earrings. The pieces were sold by weight, not by intricacy, so I simply picked out a piece I liked, a slim gold filigree bracelet, and had it weighed. It only cost about twenty dollars, and likely would have been less if I had known how to bargain. So I tucked that lovely gold bracelet into my suitcase, knowing I would be able to wear it somewhere. I hadn't worn it at all in Baidoa, so it seemed the ideal gift for Shiamsa.

I asked David if he would give the gold filigree bracelet to Shiamsa for me, and soon after that David left for the States. His two year tour was up. David told me that he found Shiamsa a very good job with a government family, and that he left her a nice bonus for all her hard work.

I saw her just one more time.

I had wandered into a part of the village that I had never seen before. Each round adobe hut looked identical to me, but the naked children running around seemed to know which one was theirs. Women tended the fires in the courtyards. A few looked up and acknowledged me, most ignored me, simply tossing scraps to chickens and goats, or grinding sorghum into flour with mortar and pestle.

I heard a scream, a low suppressed scream in a woman's voice, like a lamb bleating. Everything stopped. Then I saw a circle of men with a woman, her gold and magenta flowered dress trailing in the dust, dancing in the middle of the circle while the men stomped and clapped. One man wielded a leather strap that he used to lash out at the woman every time she faltered. And I saw a glint of gold on her arm. I knew that woman. Here was the tender, beautiful, loving woman who had saved my life. Welts scarred her arms and legs. I had heard of this barbaric custom. It was a *lumbi* ritual, a brutal custom of the Benadiri tribe, designed to drive out evil spirits from the body of the possessed. I recalled that Shiamsa told me she was of the Benadiri tribe, a tribe centered in Mogadishu, but I was horrified to see her so brutalized.

Shiamsa saw me. Our eyes locked for but an instant, and she pleadingly, gently shook her head "No." Whatever was happening, I couldn't be part of it. I was petrified, afraid that even my presence would make it worse, so I backed away as softly and as rapidly as possible.

When I saw Omar Chicago that afternoon I asked him about Shiamsa.

"What has happened to Shiamsa?" I pleaded for an answer, some acknowledgement that she was okay.

Omar spat on the ground. "Gone" was all he said. He was clearly angry with me, and he clearly did not want to talk about it.

I was bitterly angry with myself. David was gone; he couldn't protect her any more. Nor could I. All I had done was bring her misery.

I was bitterly angry with Tifu too. What had he told people that could have turned them against her so? In truth, it might not have been Tifu who told tales. Perhaps someone visiting Omar's compound saw or heard something. Perhaps Shiamsa herself had said something to someone, although I doubted it. Perhaps it erupted from something totally unrelated to our misadventure. I would never know.

Shiamsa was simply "gone". I searched the sky, hoping beyond hope that she might appear.

I cried out for the Somali Goddess Arawello, for any Goddess who might hear my plea. "Please protect this beautiful young woman. Please."

I needed to talk with someone. Who? Not a single soul came to mind. David was the only one who would understand how very special Shiamsa was, and he too was gone. Bereft of Bibles and Torahs, I took out my slim volume of Emily Dickinson poems. Here I stood beneath the bursting Milky Way reading Emily by starlight, a magical spot where few were blessed to be. I didn't feel blessed at all; I felt cursed, a Cassandra dumping misery on those I loved.

*"Hope is the thing with feathers on –
that perches on the soul."*

Emily wrote that long ago. I knew that Hope ... that Dream ... that Chill that wafted o'er me so.

*"And sings the tune without the words
And never stops – at all –"*

[end of this sample chapter]

Selection is from THE MYSTICAL LAND OF MYRRH by MaryAnn Shank

Get a copy of this book in **paperback, Kindle, or audio** at Amazon. Just follow this link: https://www.amazon.com/Mystical-Land-Myrrh-MaryAnn-Shank/dp/1733581901/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=mystical+land+of+myrrh&qid=1579826329&sr=8-1

or simply search “The Mystical Land of Myrrh” in the search box. It is also available at Barnes & Nobel and other major book outlets.

We have been blessed with some wonderful early reviews, like these:

“What I love most is the way you brought Islam into this. There is such a stigma against Islam in the West, I think the delicate and peaceful way (Islam = peace) that this was deliberately added to the text is very captivating, and alluring. I LOVE it!

“I am horrified just reading about it ("The Ritual"). Horrified because your description is so vivid....This has evoked such deep emotion in me; I am so proud of you for putting pen to paper so eloquently and doing this Ritual justice in all of its darkness.

“I feel so connected to you on so many levels for your sharing this with me, and for wanting me to read it. Your emotions feel like mine; I feel a Oneness with you in this, I have never felt this with ANYONE before, because so few people have been there and can understand.”

Heather C. Cumming, Executive Director and Founder, SSAAP

Simwatachela Sustainable Agricultural and Arts Program, providing an extensive network of human relief programs throughout East Africa

“It is a captivating read and shows a unique perspective. Nicely done!”

Barb Dickinson, We Moonager, We Moon Date Book: Gaia Rhythms for

Womyn, the premier date book for earth conscious women throughout the world

“I read through several chapters this morning and am anxious to read the rest later. Your experience, of course, was very different [from mine], but is fascinating. Your writing is very descriptive and informative.”

Mary Gehman, a Mennonite teacher in Somalia for 23 years, and author of ABDI AND THE ELEPHANTS.

“Powerful, painful finale!”

MaryBeth

“Boring? Never! It is a window into a world I do not know. Well written, evocative, stirring.”

Madrone

“[M]esmerizing and fascinating ... an important work. I have forgotten most of the other books that I've read, but your story goes with me on walks in the woods.”

Patricia Duggan, International Fashion Designer

What a memorable recap of a Peace Corps Volunteer experience and one I would have been too scared to endure in my own 20's. The descriptive style and obvious research by the author leaves me wanting more details about Somalia and its surrounding countries.

What we forget about foreign countries are that the people have personalities and life experiences sometimes not so different from our own. The main character, Moira, helped us grow to love those friendships in her chapters. There are so many stories, and it's hard to believe the perceptive details from the late 60's are still in the author's mind. I felt like I was right there with her. The book took me a couple of chapters to get into it, but once I did, I couldn't put it down.

Nancita

***** MaryAnn Shank captures precisely the sense of being a Peace Corps Volunteer in Somalia. While I, as a male, cannot comment on her personal experiences as a woman, the interactions with all sorts of people she describes and the experiences she lived through--idealistic, naive, frustrating, frightening, rich, foreign, and so on.--are spot-on in accuracy. I know, because I was there, too. The book provides a wonderfully insightful and respectful view of a land and culture most people will not have the good fortune to appreciate in their own life adventures.

Tom Lederer, former Peace Corps Volunteer in Somalia

***** THE MYSTICAL LAND OF MYRRH by MaryAnn Shank is a most welcome addition to literature on living in harmony with diversity in this fractured world. Moriah yearns to do a good job as a United State Peace Corp volunteer teacher in Somalia in 1969. She stumbles often in dealing with an alien culture, but she soon questions her own values and learns to love and admire the Somali people. Many parts of the novel are thrilling, shocking -- and touching too. I especially remember Moriah joining Somali women at a water hole as they sang and washed clothes together. This novel affords new insights into a very different culture, a culture that has been nearly wiped off the map. I have forgotten most of the books I've read, but this one goes with me as I walk in the woods; it is simply captivating. It is highly readable, and I recommend it highly.

Patty

I would indeed welcome your adding your review to Amazon, or to the readers' site of your choice. These reviews help potential readers find just the right works for themselves, and they help the author refine her work so you get even better books in the future.