

New Memoir: Call Me American by Abdi Nor Iftin



CALL ME AMERICAN / Abdi Nor Iftin

Excerpted from Chapter Five: Arabic to English

By December of 1992, the world could no longer sit back and watch the starvation in Somalia. Humanitarian aid had been coming in for months but the warlords grabbed all the food and medicine for themselves and gave none to the people. The situation got worse until finally the United Nations decided to take action. Led by the U.S., twenty-eight countries organized a military task force called Operation Restore Hope. The goal was to supervise the distribution of food and supplies.

In Somalia we call Americans *Mareekan*. When I heard these *Mareekan* were coming to Mogadishu, I asked my mom who they were. I didn't know the people in the action movies were *Mareekan*. "They are huge, strong, white people," she said. "They eat pork, drink wine, and have dogs in their houses."

This sounded like the people I had seen in the movies. Whoever they were, the militias looked worried about their arrival. Many rebels started burying their guns; some fled Mogadishu. There was confusion and tension everywhere. I couldn't wait to see *Mareekans* land in Mogadishu! Hopefully they would look like actors in the movies and would spray bullets all over the militias.

And so at midnight on December 9, the thunderous roar of Cobra helicopters and AC-130 gunships filled the air. From the ocean came the buzz of hovercrafts, unloading tanks and Marines onto

the beach. Our house was close to the airport and the sea, so all these sounds woke me up right away. Through the bullet holes in our roof I could see the gleaming lights of the planes, accompanied by the roar of tanks along the roads. My mother, Hassan and Khadija were all up, even Nima.

I was eager to see the troops and the helicopters in the morning. At dawn Hassan and I, holding hands, walked down to the airport past streets that used to have sniper nests. There were lots of Somalis in the street, all of them headed the same way, towards the airport. As we got closer, the sounds of the Cobra attack helicopters became deafening. We joined a group of other excited Somalis, some standing on the walls, others on top of roofs, watching as big Chinook heavy-lift copters took off and landed. We could see warships in the distance on the blue ocean; everywhere around the airport, Marines in camouflage were taking positions and setting up gun posts.

Someone said the *Mareekans* had rounded up the rebels who were controlling the airport and seaport. The crowd got bigger and bigger, we shouted, laughed and cheered in excitement. Security perimeters had already set up, blocking entrances to the airport. The *Mareekan* flag was waving, stars and stripes. That's when it hit me: *I had seen that flag in movies!* These *Mareekans* were the movie people, and this was a real movie happening in front of us!

Commando must be here, I thought. This is it. This is the moment I had been waiting for, to meet Commando and watch him blow away all the militias! Helicopters dropped a shower of leaflets with photos and information about the troops. I picked up several of them. "United Nations forces are here to assist in the international relief effort for the Somali people," it said in Somali. "We are prepared to use force to protect the relief operation and our soldiers. We will not allow interference with food distribution or with our activities. We are here to help you." Because not so many

Somalis could read, the leaflets also showed an illustration like a comic book of a U.S. soldier shaking hands with a Somali man under a palm tree, as a helicopter flew past. I couldn't wait to shake hands with Commando.

Everything was moving so quickly—the tanks, the soldiers, the planes. We jostled for positions to watch the movie that was happening in front of us. Except there was no gunfire. I kept waiting for the battle to start, I wanted the Chinooks and Cobras to blast away at the rebels. But everything was peaceful. Then I remembered it's always like this in the movies. First you see all the heavy machines and helicopters gearing up for action, then the battle comes later. I wanted to see the militias face these troops, but the rebels I had known since we returned to Mogadishu were now walking around unarmed, acting like regular people. They didn't dare to face Commando.

I watched all day as the Marines took positions, more and more of them coming. Two men in uniform waved to let us cross the airport runway up to the sand dunes, so we could watch as the hovercrafts brought more and more Marines from the sea. Humvees and tanks roamed noisily but never fired a shot. I was getting impatient for the battle to start. We watched as the troops pulled out their stuck Humvees from the sand dunes. Hassan and I grew bolder and edged close to the troops. I stood there with my mouth open, watching them drink from a water bottle and smile at us. I made a sign asking for water, and the white guy in uniform went into the Humvee and handed me a plastic bottle. Then we made eating signs with our hands to our mouths, and they handed us tasty marmalade, bread and butter. The Commando lookalikes even spoke to us in Somali, but all they could say was "*Somali Siko!*" Somali move back!

One of the Marines threw a chocolate candy to me. I grabbed it and swallowed the whole thing. When I got home and told Mom, she gave me a hard slap.

"You must not eat pork!" she said.

I told her I didn't think it was pork, it was sweet, but she didn't believe me. How would she know what pork tastes like?

Night came again, and Mogadishu was noisier than I had ever heard it. But for the first time in two years, there was no sound of explosions and gunfire. We were surprised how the Marines lit up the airport. Lights came from everywhere, helicopters, tents, cars. It looked like daytime in the middle of the night. We were not allowed to get too close to the airport at night—"Somali Siko!" the Marines yelled over and over. But for the first time my friends, my brother and I could go out on the dusty streets after dark and play games, laugh and talk. We counted the helicopters as they flew over, and the big gunships that circled over the city. Falis's movie theater could now stay open at night, but we did not go. For the first time in years, outside was even more exciting than the movies.

The year had changed to 1993, my ninth year of life. The U.S. troops and the star-spangled banner were now accompanied by blue UN helmets and flags of countries from all over Asia, Africa and Europe. Many non-military people also came to the city to help. We would see them jogging, and swimming in the green waters off the beach. One woman, some kind of aid worker, jogged every morning near our house. She was white, had long hair, and she smiled and remembered my name. I made sure to get up every morning and say hi to her when she passed. I watched her listening to music on her headphones and stretching. Sometimes she would sit and play games with me, my brother and Nima. She always brought us snacks like peanuts, candies and cookies, and she also brought painkillers, antibiotics and other medicine. We had never seen pills, so she explained what they were for, and how to take them. I think I fell in love with this woman; it wasn't romantic but I

just wanted to stay close to her. If I knew her name today, maybe I could find her in America, but I only called her what we called all non-Muslims, *gaalo* or infidel. One day she came to the *madrassa*, just to visit and say hi. Macalin Basbaas refused to shake her hand. Then one day we stopped seeing her. Soon we realized no one was jogging anymore.

The warlords were getting restless, they wanted the city back. Aidid had a radio station and was telling Somalis on the air that they should fight the "occupation" of Mogadishu. On June 5, UN forces went to the radio station to seize weapons. Aidid thought they were trying to shut down the broadcasts and he ambushed the troops, killing twenty-four Pakistani soldiers. That's when things got bad. On July 12 the Americans sent Cobras over a house in Mogadishu where they thought Aidid was hiding and blasted it into rubble. He wasn't there, but dozens of other people were killed. Aidid claimed the Americans had killed women and children, and he started to whip up Somalis against the infidel "invaders." The Americans said only Aidid's soldiers had been in the house, but the seed of resentment against the foreigners had been planted. Aidid wasted no time, planting roadside bombs in August that killed four American soldiers and wounded seven others. The Battle of Mogadishu had begun.

I had been waiting so long for this moment! I wanted to see the American troops in action and how they fight. Hassan and I were so excited for war, we ran toward whatever corner of the city we heard explosions or gunshots. Soon Cobras and Black Hawks were swooping down everywhere, hovering over buildings where militias were hiding. I looked up and cheered whenever the helicopters shot at a building, to me it seemed like the greatest movie. I stood on the streets and watched militias yell at each other, jumping from house to house and hiding in narrow alleys. We watched them take positions as helicopters hovered over them.

I thought the airplanes and helicopters would scare the

militias away, but instead the huge, strong American men of the movies were being chased by Somali rebels on the streets. It was not what I expected. Soon everything had changed. We were no longer welcome near the Marines, there were no more candies or cookies. For the first time the Marines were aiming their guns at Somalis and pushing them around, even us kids. They looked nervous.

It is hard to explain why so many Mogadishans turned against the Marines and cheered the militias. The rebels had been killing us for four years, stealing our food and shitting in our houses. The Americans had been so kind. For sure it was partly the U.S. attack on the house that killed so many civilians. And at this point we were so familiar with death and destruction that this new battle seemed like a basketball game or a soccer match, it wasn't even real life. People filled the streets, rooting for their home team. I too fell in with the crowd. I yelled out to the militias to let them know which side the helicopter was coming from. I threw rocks at helicopters. I ran with the crowd, repeating their cheers: "Up with Aidid! Down with America!"

The battle continued for weeks. The foreign troops slowly withdrew to the airport. Militias loyal to Aidid ruled the ground, but the foreign troops ruled the skies with their helicopters. At night it was hard for the Somali militias to see, but the helicopters with their infrared lasers were able to fire at their targets. Every night from our house I watched militias changing positions, shooting at helicopters. For a few minutes it would be dead quiet, then the helicopter would swoop down again and fire back. I believed my mother's prayers saved us from the helicopter cannons but now I think it was the pilots' precision.

On Sunday October 3, Aidid's forces shot down two Black Hawk helicopters with Russian RPG bazookas. I heard the booming explosions and columns of smoke rising about a mile from our house. Naturally, I ran as fast as I could to watch this new

action unfold. Everything was so dusty I could not see much or get very close. A crowd was dragging the bodies of dead Americans, and people said others were still alive, trapped. The rescue operation lasted until the next day. Sixteen Americans died and more than three hundred Somalis. A few days later I was playing hide and seek in the remains of one of the Black Hawks.

Five months later the Americans left Mogadishu. It was March 1994, my tenth year. The skinny rebels with their ugly brown teeth had beaten back the movie-star Marines. The Americans and the UN troops left so fast they didn't even take their stuff. They left behind malfunctioning helicopters and vehicles, boots and uniforms. I joined a crowd that went to the same spot where the *Mareekans* had first invited us to watch them land on the beach in hovercrafts. This time we were looting the stuff they left behind, even the boxes of medicines, tablets, discarded syringes. We stuck the syringes into our hands for fun. We ate the tablets. Was it looting if they just left it?

The same militias whom we had cheered against the foreigners would soon turn on us again—stealing our food and shooting at us for sport. I felt shame that I had cheered against the Americans, the people who came to help us from the country of my dreams. But I now realize that I was lost—a nine-year-old boy caught between the teachings of Macalin Basbaas, my mother and her view on infidels, the American troops and their kindness and food, my love for my brave father and the glorious Somali basketball team, and the American movies I loved.

I stood on the beach, picking through the discarded camouflage uniforms with the American names sewn above the pockets. I held them up, hoping one would fit my skinny little body. My friends Mohammed, Bashi and Bocow laughed. I looked at them and scowled.

"I'm not Somali," I said. "I am *Mareekan*. I was left behind by the Marines. And they will come for me soon."

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