

## PART III Refuge

**A Visit, 2011**

Jama and I arrive for a visit at Abdiya's new apartment in the public housing complex on the edge of town, where she has recently relocated from her horrible downtown tenement, with its screaming tenants in the apartment above her, domestic violence incidents next door, and racist hostilities from other neighbors. Abdiya couldn't wait to qualify for the public housing complex.

At her front door we are met by one, no, two, no, three, no . . . four little kids running into the entry from the adjacent room. No adults in sight. As we call for Abdiya, we hear footsteps on the second floor, then the stairs, and finally thirteen-year-old Nur appears. He has been left home with all the little kids, who we can now see number seven. Abdiya is on her way home from running errands with her husband and grown daughter, Nunnay, so while we wait I ask Nur about school. He tells me he loves English and has been working on expository writing and persuasive essays, and track, admitting, with a sheepish smile, "I'm slow." "Well, you're only a freshman," I offer. "Yes," he grins. I tell him I'll look for him next year at the track and maybe he'll even recognize me, referencing our interaction this past spring at a track meet when he was flustered by my greeting, unable to recognize me in the unexpected context.

Nur is one of the most soft-spoken boys I know. I recall his reaction when I gave him photographs of his father, whom he does not remember, and grandfather, whom he never knew. As he studied the photographs, he gently ran his fingers over his ears, forehead, eyes, nose, and chin, tracing his facial contours while comparing his features with theirs. His grandfather died in 1988 during our stay in the village; his father went crazy in the refugee camp and never made it to America.

Nur's middle school years were punctuated by suspensions for a variety of supposed infractions, some so unlikely that at one point an exasperated social worker intervened with school authorities on his behalf. Abdiya had returned over and over again to the school to advocate for her son, finally throwing up her hands and telling me, "I can't wait to get him out of there!" I noted with relief that he seemed to be adjusting well to high school.

Abdiya and her crew arrive in two vans, emerging with another baby, more little kids, her husband, and her adult daughter Nunnay. Because polygyny (marriage between one man and more than one woman) is illegal in the United States, Abdiya was initially resettled separately from her husband and cowife until they all relocated to live near each other again in Lewiston, where Abdiya babysits her cowife's kids while the cowife attends school. Abdiya and Nunnay settle onto the rug, which is covered in potato scraps and lots of small broken pieces of plastic, while Abdiya's husband makes himself comfortable on the huge U-shaped velour couch, as do Jama and I. The kids, who now number perhaps a dozen, play between the two rooms that together constitute the apartment's first floor, cuddling in laps and then dashing off, giggling and reaching for the photos Abdiya wants to share with me.

Abdiya and Jama have just come back from their first return visit to the Kenyan refugee camp, where Abdiya's son, Abdullahi, the baby she had when we knew her in Banta as a young divorcée, still lives since being rejected for resettlement. She had to leave him behind when she came to the United States with her younger children. The photos show a handsome young man standing in front of the small shop and tailor operation that he runs with the money she sends to support him. She recounts the wonderful visit they had, but also her shock at how much money she spent because everyone there is so desperate for help. Nearly frantic to find a way to make more money so she can send more to her son, Abdiya attends every job-training program she can find and applies for jobs everywhere but has not been able to find steady work. Her English is spotty; she lacks formal education; and she cannot replace the front teeth she lost in a car accident because she has no money for a dentist. I suspect employers reject her for these reasons, without bothering to recognize her intelligence and competence.

Jama tells me that something is terribly wrong with Nunnay. When Jama and Abdiya were in Kenya, Nunnay, who was home taking care of all the kids, had a breakdown. The older kids and other relatives repeatedly phoned them to report Nunnay's problems: she couldn't take care of the kids, was unable to control herself, was constantly breaking down in crying fits, leaving the apartment, wandering off, running away. "How many kids does Nunnay have?" I ask. This is the first time I've met her because she moved to Lewiston shortly before Abdiya left for her visit to Kenya. She looks so young—she can't be more than twenty-four, twenty-five at the most. "She has seven kids and a husband but he's not . . . supportive," Jama delicately chooses the word. "He's a bad husband?" I ask, bluntly. Yes, Jama nods, he's a bad husband. Keeping things together for a bad husband, five little brothers and sisters, and seven little kids of her own was just too much.

It quickly becomes apparent that Nunnay is really a mess. She was hospitalized for a month after Abdiya's return while mental health professionals tried to stabilize her. Many refugees are uncertain about whether Western therapy can help with Somali problems, like jinn and possessing spirits, but some try anyhow when things get really desperate. As we look through Abdiya's photographs from her trip, a photo appears of Abdiya shaking the hand of an older man. It is the father of Abdullahi and Nunnay, whom Abdiya encountered in the refugee camp for the first time in almost two decades. Abdiya starts laughing, describing his formality at shaking her hand, but Nunnay bursts into tears. Jama says this happens all the time now, and they cannot figure out how to make her better. Abdiya had told me that after her husband in the camps went crazy, he beat her so badly that as a consequence she is partially blind in one eye, and I cannot help but wonder about Nunnay's childhood in the camps, living with a brute. As Nunnay sobs, life continues around her. Abdiya tends to the little kids, who are now hungry, settling a few of them into sleeping positions in the middle of the rug for an afternoon nap after their snack. A few won't quiet down, and she silences them with a rapid, threatening hand motion. Jama says quietly to me, "She is managing a lot. She takes care of everyone—all her kids, all her daughter's kids, her mentally ill daughter, her cowife's kids, her husband." On top of her stressful life in Lewiston, she scrapes together money from occasional jobs and babysitting to support her son and his family in the camps. The burden seems unmanageable.

Once all the kids are more or less quietly resting, our conversation shifts to Abdiya's citizenship test. She spent months studying. When I dropped by her apartment several months earlier to quiz her, I saw how carefully she was preparing by writing out all the answers over and over again in scrawling long-hand to commit them to memory. To gain citizenship, refugees must be able to answer all the questions in English, which means that to prepare for the test Abdiya learned how to write in English and memorize all one hundred possible questions in English. I know that her desire for a job and to be able to visit her son fueled her determined approach to gaining citizenship. Resettled refugees are not allowed to leave the United States until they pass their citizenship test, which they can attempt only after living here for five years. Everyone I know is studying to gain citizenship so they can travel to the camps to visit relatives left behind.

Abdiya reports that the citizenship interviewer asked her six questions, which she gleefully and robotically repeats: "The Louisiana Purchase!" I have no idea what that means, but Jama intervenes to explain: "It's the answer to the question: what did the U.S. buy from France?" Abdiya continues to list the other questions, still committed to memory months after she passed the test:

“Who is the current president? What is the ocean to the east of the U.S.? John Roberts!” which Jama translates as, “Who is the justice of the Supreme Court?” The final question is “Who is the father of our nation?,” which I ask her to repeat, astonished at the patriarchal framing.

Abdiya and Jama report that life in Kenya and Somalia is now worse than ever because of the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, which has taken control of southern Somalia.<sup>1</sup> Al-Shabaab soldiers do not want anyone to leave Somalia and threaten those they catch on the road from the Jubba Valley to Kenya with beheadings. “They are cutting off people’s heads, like animals!” Jama says, in outrage. “Cutting off hands, legs, cutting out eyeballs. Why? It isn’t the religion. I know I’m not a mullah, but I know it’s not the religion.” A few days previously, when I was visiting Sadiq, his brother phoned to say he was recently arrested and briefly incarcerated by an Al-Shabaab member who disliked his cell phone’s ringtone. He was trying to figure out how to flee, as was Sadiq’s mother. She had tried to escape to Kenya but was caught and held by an Al-Shabaab member for three days. Her captor told her that if she tried to escape again he would behead her. Al-Shabaab is trying to use the local civilian population as shields and threatens everyone with beheadings if they try to escape.

Jama says those trying to escape now have to go north, nearly to the Ethiopian border, before heading west to get to Kenya since Al-Shabaab men started to heavily patrol the route from Banta. “I can’t understand why the rest of the world just lets this happen!” he says. “Somalia has so few people, just a few million. So many women and children are being hurt. Why doesn’t the rest of the world just step in and stop the madness?” Abdiya nods her head emphatically. I try to give a serious answer, mumbling something about the lesson from *Black Hawk Down* and how the United States does not want to intervene anymore. But, he protests, there were united opposition forces fighting then. There were armies then. Now it is just a bunch of kids with guns. They could stop it, easily. As the napping kids start to stir and we gather our things to leave, Nunnay is still sobbing.

The visit captures several dimensions of the lives of Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston: the difficulty finding a job; the enormous challenges for women struggling to care for many children and husbands who do not contribute to domestic chores; the worries about children repeatedly suspended from school; the debilitating burden of traumatic memories; the overwhelming need to come up with enough money to support large families in Lewiston and beloved family members in the camps; the desire for citizenship in order to be mobile; the ongoing worry about relatives in the land of Al-Shabaab kids with

guns; the great care and effort that people exert to support each other, such as Jama for his relative and close friend Abdiya, Abdiya for her married daughter's mental health and her son's financial health in the camps, Nunnay for Abdiya's desire to spend a month with her son in Kenya, Abdiya for her cowife so she can attend school. Worry pervades home life and distracts already distracted parents, some of whom retreat into depression and withdraw from their children. Parental distraction means some boys gain greater freedom to slip out of the house and lose themselves in the street, and some daughters become overburdened with the domestic chores abandoned by their exhausted mothers. Marriages fray under the pressures of new chores, new expectations for gender roles, poverty, and new structures of family life. For someone like Abdiya, what do self-sufficiency and integration look like? How do Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston define these two tenets of the U.S. refugee resettlement program?

### **Making Refuge**

The Somali and Somali Bantu refugees appear in the previous three chapters as either unexpected, needy problems to be managed and accommodated with as little disruption to the host community as possible (chapter 4), as illegitimate welfare beneficiaries and security threats who do not belong (chapter 5), or as fellow community members to be supported as the face of Lewiston's future (chapter 6). A central question weaving through these different versions is whether their presence is welcome or detrimental. During my interviews and fieldwork, I was struck by how rarely those whose voices are recorded in part II acknowledged the ways in which the refugees themselves were organizing community-based initiatives, advocating for themselves, and defining what self-sufficiency and integration should look like. This is not a critique of those who worked to assist resettlement or in the helping professions; rather, it is a suggestion that non-Somalis and Somalis remained distinct groups, although internally divided, with very narrow points of engagement during the first decade of resettlement.

In 2009, a city administrator told me, "It's about time one of the refugee groups stepped up and started helping people. . . . It's really needed." Somali immigrants had in fact established several NGOs in the early years of the decade, mostly focused on business interests and professional networking. But the Somali Bantus, because of their greater rates of illiteracy and lower rates of English competency and education, desired different forms of advocacy during their first years in Lewiston. This section shifts our focus to the ways in which Somali Bantus (like the Somalis before them) worked to make their own refuge. In their version of Lewiston's story, Somali Bantus challenged racism and discrimination, learned to advocate for things they wanted, and figured

out how to gain a foothold in American civic life while attempting to protect community values and cultural integrity.

Alongside efforts to take charge of their own affairs and narrate their own story, the Somali Bantu community in Lewiston is wrestling with internal debates about new cultural values and practices made accessible by the move to America, especially regarding family dynamics. When I ask friends from Banta what they most remember from their cultural orientation classes in Kakuma refugee camp, they quickly list a common set of lessons, startling in their focus on reconfigured family relationships and responsibilities: No polygyny. No arranged marriages. No marriage before age sixteen. No hitting your spouse. No swatting your kids for discipline. No female circumcision. No traditional healing practices (which often rely on the involvement of family members to cure the ill). There is a reason why these were the lessons most seared into people's consciousness: they were learning that many of their normal practices for managing marriage, family, and domestic life would be wrong and illegal in their new country.

Village life in prewar Somalia was based largely on relationships within families and kin groups and with neighbors, governed by clear lines of authority that assigned more power to elders than youths, made parental authority unquestionable, and gave older men power over community politics and married women power in the realms of domestic life, parenting, and some forms of spiritual healing. People's identities were constituted through their relationships to other people in their extended family and kin group: as mothers, sisters, wives, husbands, fathers, daughters, sons, and so forth. Each role carried particular collectively understood responsibilities, expectations, and obligations, and village life afforded little room for contesting the parameters of expectations for people whose subjectivities were defined by their social embeddedness.

Extended families often lived together in compounds of several huts encircling an open space for eating, working, and relaxing, and family life was quite public because most people spent the majority of time outdoors, either in their fields or in the open areas of their compounds. I remember retreating into my tiny hut on occasions when I felt ill or overwhelmed, and within the hour my door would fly open to admit neighbors who settled onto the floor mats to chat, concerned that I was alone inside, suffering. In a rural village like Banta, neighbors overheard your conversations and commented on your cooking, your children's antics, your appearance, your heaps of stored corn or containers of sesame oil, your treatment of your spouse, and much more. Overheard conversations were repeated from compound to compound, and

anyone who wished could see where everyone else was and what they were doing. Villages held communal rituals for healing and worship and treated marriage and raising children as a collective responsibility. Privacy, individual autonomy, and individualism were not popular concepts.

In Banta, children played freely throughout the entire village during their early childhood, supervised if necessary by any nearby adults, before taking greater responsibilities on family farms and with domestic chores as they grew up. Parents expected obedience to their commands, but otherwise demanded little of their children. Childhood in Somali Bantu families was not an orchestrated, structured experience with intimate parental involvement; to the contrary, children were often left to play on their own with little to no parental attention. Visiting Somali Bantu friends in their apartments in Lewiston or hosting them at my house, I see how the open approach to childhood that Somali Bantu parents held in prewar Somalia has persisted. One day when Idris and his family were coming to lunch at my house, he phoned in the morning to say that another cousin and his family wanted to come too. When the vans pulled up in our driveway, fifteen people poured out, including ten children under the age of five who occupied themselves during lunch playing our musical instruments, drawing pictures, doing puzzles, dancing, and running while the five adults ate and talked. During lunch, Idris mentioned the high volume as the kids banged, squealed, giggled, shrieked, played video games, and ran from room to room. When I asked if it was too noisy for them, they all laughed at the absurd question, responding, “Not for us! We were worried about you!” Lots of children energetically playing, occupying themselves as parents attend to other matters, is a staple feature of Somali Bantu home life.

In Banta, boys were circumcised at birth; girls at the age of eight or nine, when they began to take on the domestic tasks expected of women. Arranged marriages negotiated through extended family networks married girls at the age of fourteen and boys before they turned twenty. Newlyweds often lived with one of the couple’s parents, ensuring lots of child care as grandmothers took over child-rearing responsibilities. As a family grew in size and gained greater access to farmland, a man might marry another wife or two. Jealousy and antagonism sometimes erupted between cowives who chose to live separately, but often cowives lived together, sharing child care and domestic responsibilities, sometimes having closer relationships with each other than with their husband. A swift slap on the bottom with an open hand or a thin stick constituted the most extensive sort of physical parental discipline I witnessed during my residence in Banta, and over the course of that year I knew of three incidents of spousal violence—two by husbands against wives and one by a



wife against her husband. Neighbors quickly intervened in all three cases, which were mediated by local religious authorities who levied fines against the perpetrators. Local midwives, healers, and religious specialists handled illnesses, using a range of techniques that included burning small holes in the skin to cure pain, cupping, medicinal herbs, amulets, prayer, and spirit possession and exorcism ceremonies.

But in America, many basic dimensions of Somali Bantu family life and rituals of cohesion, community, solidarity, and support are defined as pathologies that are either criminal (female circumcision, arranged early marriages, polygyny, healing practices like burning, socially controlled physical violence to maintain discipline and authority); negligent (low parental supervision of children, curing through prayer or exorcism); or unhealthy (eating from communal bowls, eating with hands rather than utensils, sleeping and sitting on the floor rather than on furniture). As Somali Bantu families whose lives were upended in the war attempt to rebuild their fractured community in Lewiston, they face the enormous challenge of doing so according to totally new and barely understood rules for social life.

The following chapters show how they are attempting to navigate the twin expectations of self-sufficiency and integration in their new home. For people who prioritize community life and social networks over individualism, self-sufficiency means community independence rather than individual economic autonomy, and integration does not mean abandoning their values in a bid to become American. Their first decade in Lewiston brought massive challenges as Somali Bantu refugees tried to prioritize mutual social responsibility and strong diasporic connections to loved ones left behind in Africa while living in the land of individual autonomy and making a home in the particular locality of Lewiston, all while adjusting to living in extreme poverty in the land of plenty and as black people in a white society.

They began by contesting the presumption that they were objects of policy rather than architects and that their integration was to be effected through the efforts of local institutions and the helpers who managed their engagements with mainstream society. Instead, Somali Bantu refugees created their own bodies of political and civic activity to manage internal community matters and relationships between community members and other city residents, bodies through which refugee immigrants sought to define new collective norms and internal support structures relevant in the United States. It has been a fraught, painful, challenging process as gender roles, parental authority, and youth culture opened for debate under the influence of American values, popular culture, and the pressures of racism. Their story, of course, is still unfolding, but their experiences during their first decade in Lewiston show

how indigent refugees work to make their own refuge with spare assistance, how assimilation goes both ways by changing not only immigrants but also the cities to which they move, and how transnational and diasporic connections intersect with the particular places where resettled refugees make new homes.