

The basic details of Layla's life...

Born August 2, 1980 in Mogadishu

I lived in Mogadishu with my mother and father for the first 3 years of my life. My father, during this time was still traveling back and forth to work at the military base that he was in charge of. The military base was located several hundred miles away in Heelwaayna.

One of my first memories was moving out to the military base at Heelwaayna. This was a decision my parents made so that the family could be close to one another. The commute was too far and my parents were spending too little time together. My father was only able to come home for the weekends at best while we were living in Mogadishu.

This was a really tough decision for my mother. Life was good for her in the city. Life was easy. Her only responsibility in the city was to take care of me and my younger brother. In Heelwaayna things were much, much different. It was farm country, and my father had set up farm-style living for us before we arrived. He had purchased farm land with cows, and my mother was busy, busy – working hard to keep up with all the farm responsibilities from the moment we arrived. The workload was quite a burden. Plus she had two young children and another on the way.

From the moment we arrived I became my mother's helper. Even at the age of 3 I recognized all the work that my mom needed to get done without help from anyone else. I was the oldest sibling, and we became a team. So much work was needed. We had to clean, work in the fields growing mostly corn, beans, and a starchy root vegetable similar to a potato that we ate almost daily. We also worked in a neighborly orchard growing mangoes, papayas, tomatoes, and bananas. And then there were of course the cows, which we had to take many miles to graze and milk twice daily. We also had goats and sheep which we milked as well. There were lots of chickens to take care of also. The whole situation required so much work and constant care. It never ended. We didn't have modern appliances like a stove either, or electricity, so firewood which was very scarce had to be gathered and carried for miles.

Even as a young child I really felt compelled to help my mother with her burden. At age 4 my primary responsibility was to take out the cows. Every day I had to travel with the cows for up to 15 miles round trip, even at such a young age. I would drift far from home and often got very lost, having to spend the night out and depend on others to help me find my way back. On top of that I had to gather wood along the way for cooking upon my return. I got lost often. I got separated from the cows dozens of times, which would always find their way onto someone else's land, eating up their precious crops which they depended on to scarcely feed their families. Seeing the damage would often bring them to tears. It made me feel horrible. All I could do was my best. After all, I was 4 years old walking 15 miles a day, trying to keep up with cows in a landscape filled with lions and hyenas and rivers filled with crocodiles.

My mother was from a different tribe than my father, and the racial animosity was intense. Although other children were able to go about their normal chores without harassment because of their ethnic ties to certain tribal lineage, my life was anything but. Due to intense racial prejudice, I was a target.

I was first raped at the age of only four, only my second week of taking the cows out to graze. Word spread quickly that I was of a different tribe than the others in the community there. Everyone knew it. My tribe in particular was the most hated amongst the community. Although our closest neighbors were families of the military base, from various tribes, and generally friendly, I had to go well beyond that zone on my daily ventures into areas that had much less compassion and understanding. Every day was a nightmare.

Teenage boys would spot me and gather around me, throwing me to the ground, punching and kicking me for fun to the point where I would vomit. Other times I'd be challenged to fight older girls for sheer entertainment of others. Other times I would get raped, mostly by boys between the ages of say, 14-21, sometimes by themselves, often in groups taking turns. This happened 4-5 days a week. Often I'd be beaten to the point of losing consciousness, waking hours later in darkness. I even awoke in the night surrounded by hyenas sniffing me, investigating me as a potential source of food. The misery was beyond what most people can even imagine.

I was detached. I was suicidal. I walked with one foot in front of other, day after day, not really concerned about death, hoping for it in fact. It was so terrifying that I had problems falling asleep at night thinking about the terrors that the next day would bring. I have no idea why or how I continued on, day after day, but I had no choice. When I cried and tried to refuse my next day's work my mother would force me to go on, trying to send me out with some other people for protection. "Just stick with them and they'll protect you" she said. But that obviously never happened. Every day was the same old story.

I did have a vision for my future though that kept me going. At age 5, while at the actual military base some American soldiers were there on a mission, and they had left some magazines lying around. In one of these magazines I saw a woman – a model, laying in the grass in a green dress. I flipped through the pages and saw all kinds of beautiful images, houses, cities, things I had never seen before. Although it sounds silly, this was really one of the defining moments of my life. I was completely taken over with joy. I was running around back and forth jumping in elation. I asked some of the nurses there where this place was, and they told me, "that's America." My undying mission to travel there began at that moment, to be a model, to be like the woman in the green dress, lying in the grass. It was the idea that there was a world and a reality beyond what I had experienced that fueled a burning desire. This allowed me to keep moving through life with a hope to reach this place – this heaven in my mind that was so elegantly portrayed in the magazine.

I still have much anger towards my mother for allowing me to endure such torture, but they were really desperate times. Food was becoming ever scarcer. Rations provided by the military that we relied upon when living in the city were becoming ever more scant as the war between Somalia and Ethiopia escalated. Boys over the age of 12 were being drafted. If they refused they were shot. The entire situation was incredibly intense from any vantage point. Everyone did what they had to do to survive. The survival instinct in me kept me going I guess. It went on for 6 straight years until I was 10 years old. It wasn't until my mother gathered us up to finally leave for Mogadishu, leaving my father behind against his controlling wishes for us, that I got a reprieve.

This all transpired, at the core, because of my father's control over my mother, typical of a husband-wife situation in Somalia, especially with my father, who was quite wealthy and well-respected. He owned properties and houses in several communities. He had many women surrounding him, something I sometimes witnessed on my occasional visits to the military base. But the wealth was not shared with us. He abandoned us and only came by to see us once every so often by the end of our stint at the military base. He had many means to help us, but he did not. The irony is that he was a hero of legend amongst the community for his tireless charitable work. He was so selfless at times that songs were created and sung to honor him.

At age 7-8 my life took a dramatic turn. My mother was sick of being practically enslaved by her husband, working to the point of exhaustion every day while watching her daughter be repeatedly beaten and abused. For years she had bombarded him with pleas to leave, to return to the city, but he voiced very strong opposition to this idea time and time again. In desperation, she fled, leaving us all behind. My father of course was not living with us most of the time, and with my mother gone it was only the five of us – me and my two brothers and two sisters (ages 1,2, 5, and 6). My 6-year old brother had to take care of my 1-year old sister while it was up to me to provide food and do the cooking. No one was there to look after and protect us. My father came by every once awhile, but only to drop off a few supplies – bags of rice, oil, and sugar.

After an entire year, my mother finally returned. Things had gotten worse without her around. People were coming by the house to beat and harass us. My siblings were becoming ill, perhaps with scurvy as it was no longer fruit season and I was unable to take very good care of the farm.

My mother's return was so exciting. She was very apologetic, but even in our youth we understood. We were too happy that she was back to be angry. She did not mean to be gone so long, but she had to travel back by foot and it took months.

We spent two more long years at the military base. Times got more and more bleak as each day passed. My dad was obviously very angry with my mother for her sudden departure against his will. He showed his discontent by going months at a time without dropping by with supplies. Plus the farm was in bad shape and wasn't recovering very quickly.

My mother began plotting our escape from the military base. Behind my father's back she tried to orchestrate our transport via military vehicle back to Mogadishu. My father heard of her plan and intervened on the day that we planned to leave. At the last minute he showed up to stop us. We were already in the car and ready to leave. He of course was extremely angry at both my mother for her defiance and his military colleagues for not getting his specific consent for issuing the car for transport.

The next day; however, my mother managed to get enough wood that we had stored away to barter our way to Mogadishu. It was so exciting my body was numb. It was surreal. It was the most exciting day of my life. That day was just as exciting as the day I left for the United States many years later.

Once in Mogadishu my life became like a dream. It was so great I was in disbelief. We lived in one of my father's houses that my aunts had been taking care of for many years. It was a great house. It was large, like a very large-sized apartment. My father was very angry of course, but for some reason he just finally let it go. So there we lived, in a wonderful house with big mango and papaya trees out on the lawn, with running water and all, right across the street from the local school which I started attending with much enthusiasm.

My responsibilities at home were now minimal. I helped my mother with some of the cooking and cleaning, but she demanded that I learn as fast as possible, learn to read and write and begin to catch up with the other kids my age who had been in school for years. I was so happy for the opportunity, as I had never gone to a proper school. I learned so fast. I learned to read and write in Somali in just nine months. This was significant, as it provided me with opportunities down the line that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

But my time in school and the wonderful new life in the city that I lavished would soon come to an end. We had arrived in Mogadishu around March of 1990. By December, the Hawie tribe had obtained weapons illegally from Ethiopia, and organized an effort to overthrow the standing government. Overnight, there was a new government in charge – a government with a mission to ethnically cleanse the country of Somalia of all tribes other than the Hawie. We were happily living one day, the next we were running for our lives, homeless, helpless, without food, without shelter, nothing. Running scared – me and my mother, my 5 brothers and sisters – the fifth just born 3 months prior, and my two cousins. We only had time to grab a couple changes of clothes and a little bit of cash – which was stolen the first day we fled, leaving us penniless and on the run.

Our greatest challenges, even after all we had been through, were yet to come.

Today, July 8, 2008, I live in Maui, HI. I woke up this morning at around 7:30 in my 2 bedroom apartment by the ocean. I was a little tired – I stayed up until 2am the night before rehearsing a song for an A&E channel audition. But not too tired to go on a two-hour run in the hot Maui midday sun, running through the streets of my new hometown, one where police officers stopped traffic at a 4-way intersection and let me pass, smiling and waving at me as I ran through as if I were some kind of local celebrity. Today I also

spent time getting my home ready for my two children, Mohammed and Hana, who are finally being released from CPS to come and live with their mother. I'm so excited, as are they. My day concluded with a wonderful walk along the beach at sunset. How did a little Somali girl living in poverty, being beaten day after day end up living in the paradise of the Pacific, working as a professional model, with a house and a car and two beautiful young children? As you can imagine, it's a very, very long story. Not one for the faint-hearted.

When war broke out in December of 1990, my family and I were catapulted into an intense, heart-pounding survivalist situation. Penniless we ran, heading North to escape the surge of the genocide-seeking Hawie, along with everyone else. What we lived through in the first six months seems superhuman in retrospect. Every single day we were on the move, walking both day and night. We slept for only 20 minutes at a time, then the gunshots of the pursuing Hawie would get louder and louder, prompting us to get up and keep moving. For food we had little besides some powdered milk that my mom cleverly had stashed away, which we mixed with water and drank. Once out of the city the landscape is very dry. We went days without even water at times. It was brutal, but somehow our adrenaline got us through it.

There was never time to relax. Many times bombs would be exploding all around us as we ran. To the left and right were dead bodies. I watched bombs explode people in midstride close by. Lions and hyenas feasted on dead bodies all around us. We were all so hungry that dead and dying bodies became a source of food for humans as well. Although I never saw someone actually eating the flesh of another, it was well understood that it was being done. I remember putting my fingers in my ears and running every time the rumors were being passed about it. More common was seeing people run up to freshly-killed or dying people, slashing them with a blade and drinking their blood for nourishment. It was horrific, day after endless day, for a full six months. I had nightmares, afraid of being eaten by lions, afraid of being eaten by humans! My fear was all I had to keep me going. My mother all the while was nursing a newborn, carrying a couple kids, and often practically having to drag me along, who was also toting a kid. How this was even possible, how we endured it, is beyond me.

After the six-month mark, the surge lightened up a bit, but only slightly, and we now had the advantage of being in farm country where food was at least somewhat obtainable, but only in very small quantities. The farm country was inhabited by my mother's tribe, but this didn't make things any easier. Because my father was of a different tribe, we children looked distinguishably different. My mother's tribe was prejudiced against us, just as my father's tribe was prejudiced against us because of his association with my mother's tribe. Same old story. We had to beg for food, and those who were generous enough to spare any at all were typically the ones who could spare the least. Our bellies were never full.

All in all as we traveled through the farm country, we could sustain ourselves fairly well. Rivers ran through and we had almost continuous access to water. We at least found ways to get food, and the pace we traveled at was a little lighter, although we didn't stop

for long as we could still hear the bombs and gunshots close by and steadily and tirelessly moving in our direction.

But the farm country came to an end, and so did the food. We marched on, but without enough food we became very ill. We fell ill with malaria as our bodies crumbled under the weight of malnutrition. We had diarrhea. All we could eat for any kind of nourishment was grass. At about the 1-year mark on our epic journey we finally reached the point of exhaustion beyond what we could continue to endure. We all lay down in the grass, delirious, lifeless, as a family, to die – my mother still with a child at her breast.

But as if by a miracle an old man found us there before it was too late. Although we were all unconscious, or at least unconscious enough to need to be told later how we were found and rescued, he saw that we were still alive and loaded us up on his camels, taking us back to his home to be revived. Back at his home he fed us cup after cup of water and soured milk, allowing us to purge our systems, vomiting huge quantities of undigested grass. We stayed with him for an entire week to get back on our feet again. He also loaded us up with ample supplies and sent us with a caravan headed towards our grandfather's house.

Within weeks after our miraculous rescue we arrived at my grandfather's house. There we congregated with him and a few other villagers and headed out together, fully supported with camels for a steady supply of milk. For three months we traveled together at a more leisurely pace in a much less dangerous environment, but still we marched onward every day. My mother then had the idea to buy corn, soak it, remove the hulls, sun dry it (make hominy), and in turn sell it for a good enough profit to provide us with corn and grain to eat. She left our caravan and joined another where she could sell her hominy. This went on for only 1 month before she had to return, because in her absence people were sneaking into our camp at night and stealthily milking our camels. This was a commodity we couldn't afford to lose. She instead sent me to a nearby city to keep the hominy-peddling business afloat and the corn supply coming. After 1 month I couldn't take it anymore though. I heard of a group of people setting out for Kenya to the North, and I sent word to my mother that I would be leaving for Kenya. I left my hominy behind, abandoned my family, and joined up with the Kenya-bound caravan.

The caravan wasn't happy to see me. They urged me, only being a young child, to stay in the city. "We don't have enough food for you," they said. "It's too dangerous, you're too young. Stay here." But I wasn't having that and came with them, walking out in front to prove my strength and endurance, offering to help out carrying supplies and water. Thinking that I didn't really have it in me, and that I would be a burden to them more than anything, they tricked me at the end of the first day. They told me that we were calling it a day and stopping to sleep. Once I fell asleep they got up and abandoned me, assuming that I would give up and retreat to the city. I truly think they were trying to look out for my safety by doing this, but they greatly underestimated my drive and stubbornness.

When I awoke I decided to keep going. I figured I'd soon find some people to join up with or perhaps catch up to the group that had tried to take off without me. This was an overly optimistic presumption; however, as days and weeks passed without me running into a soul. For the first month I kept looking and expecting to run into someone, but after about a full month I gave up on that hope. Still I marched forward, with the sun as my guide to keep me on course, to keep heading North, for months. I was totally alone, lost in the wilderness, surrounded by lions and hyenas. It was terrifying.

I was on my own, inching my way farther and farther North for an entire year. Travel was so slow because I repeatedly kept running out of water, and had to turn back for safety over and over again to get back to a known water supply. My diet was almost exclusively wild seeds and tree sap. Many hours each day were dedicated to preparing safe shelter for myself to sleep in, as lions would have surely gotten me if I had not taken precaution. Every afternoon I would dig a hole big enough to climb into and cover it thoroughly with limbs and branches. But even in these holes I was scarcely safe. Often I would hear and see lions pass closely by in the night, and I often awoke to Cobras in my den surrounding me. Danger was everywhere. Many times I was charged by lions as well, barely escaping by quickly climbing a nearby tree and hold on as tightly as I could until the lions gave up and wandered away. Day and night I held true to my visions of making it to America, discovering a new life. I talked and prayed to God constantly. My only companion.

It took me an entire year to reach the border of Kenya. By the time I arrived Kenya had just begun allowing people to cross and set up at the newly-established refugee camp. Because of the nature of the camp, it didn't make sense for me to enter. Besides, I couldn't be certain from such a distance, that any message passed to Southbound travelers would make it to my family. Because there were several people at the border planning on heading South in a group, I joined them. Since we traveled together, we were much safer and were able to get back to the city where I had abandoned my hominy-selling in half the time. The men had guns, we had a donkey to help us carry food and supplies. It was much easier.

After six more months, nearly a year and a half from my departure, I returned all the way to the village I was stationed at. Upon returning, I sent word to my mother to come join me, that there was a refugee camp set up at the border, and that we must go there together. She was by my side in a matter of days. She was ready. She was so glad to see me and proud that I had gone to such great lengths, to come all the way back from the border of Kenya to make sure that we could travel together as a family to safety. Right away we joined a large caravan, and it was relatively safe and easy traveling to the border as there were now hundreds of people heading North as the word had spread about the opening of the refugee camp. There was still plenty of risk and danger though, mostly from lions, who did manage to kill and eat three members of our caravan of 20-30.

The trip took another six months as expected, walking 18 hours per day on average. But we finally made it to the refugee camp, entering as a family in early spring of 1993, over two years after being forced from our home in Mogadishu.

I lived in the refugee camp with my family for five years. For the first 3 years, my only means of making money for the family was racing to the edge of the camp early in the morning to buy milk from local herders, in turn selling the milk back at the camp for a small profit. This got old really quick, but eventually I landed something much better. My brief stint in school paid off as I miraculously was able to land a job teaching young kids how to read and write in Somali. The school was set up within the boundaries of the refugee camp. The money was great, enough to support my family quite well.

This was not without drama though. My young students were repeatedly being raped by young teenagers of a different tribe. Most of my students were members of the Hawie tribe. Enduring what I endured as a young girl I found this completely indigestible. I complained time and time again, trying to put a stop to the matter, but nothing was being done. I felt compelled to take it a step further to make sure that action was taken. When I took the matter to the Kenyan school director, his investigation stirred up a storm of turmoil. The principle of the school was fired along with others. I was accused of being racist for my actions, and my brother was severely beaten in retaliation. Someone then bribed the Kenyan police force to arrest me, which landed me in a Kenyan prison, where I narrowly escaped without being relentlessly beaten and tortured as is common among Kenyan prisons.

This nightmare aside, my sights remained set on getting to America. My desire to do whatever it took to get there was like being in a trance. No one around me or my family could really conceive of such a possibility. I remember buying a suitcase to travel to Nairobi with my extra earnings. My brother asked me what it was for – for going to Nairobi to find the Refugee Resettlement office and the American Embassy. He looked at me in disbelief, like doing such a thing was akin to going to the moon. But I was unstoppable.

Travel to Nairobi from the refugee camp was highly dangerous and not-allowed. Refugees were to stay in the camp, not wander about Kenya looking for work and a ticket to the United States. It took me several trips to get all the details in order. Not to brush over the odds and ends of how I was finally accepted and allowed to enter the United States as a refugee, but to give you an idea I took on an alias, pretended to be someone's wife, and more to pull it off. Ironically, after a lifetime of prejudice against me, it was the help of a woman who was trying to seed the United States with black Muslims like myself that gave me the direction I needed to successfully make my way.

Getting on the plane was of course one of the most intense and exciting moments of my life. I was of course nervous too, as I had no idea really where I was going, had very little money, and didn't speak a word of English.

The trip took a couple of days, but we landed in Los Angeles, stayed overnight, and then finished the trip in Phoenix, where I stayed for my first few months, living with a roommate and working at McDonald's and the local hospital. But of course, as I'm sure you've gathered by now, life for Layla is rarely that simple. At the end of my first week in the United States I was raped in a park by a Somali man who grew up in the United

States and had been helping me out since my arrival. This was demoralizing and exasperating enough on its own, but on top of that I became ill, vomiting frequently to the point where I couldn't eat. I got so weak and thin that I fainted on the floor of McDonald's. I was immediately taken to a hospital where I discovered that I was not ill at all, but pregnant.

I didn't even know what an abortion was, and that possibility was never even explained to me, so I went to term with my pregnancy. But before that day came, the news of what happened to me started to spread. It started when, out of deep concern and frustration, I shared what happened with me with my roommate. She later relayed this to the sister of the man who raped me, and before you know it he was at my door, threatening me to leave town. He and his family were deeply embarrassed by this incident and wanted me to keep quiet with it. After five months in Phoenix, the pressure to leave became too great and I decided to travel cross-country by bus to live near a small Somali family in Baton Rouge of all places.

I didn't stay long, but jumped next to Columbus, then Omaha for a month and a half, and finally Washington state. In Washington I showed up at the local welfare office, 8 months pregnant, still barely speaking a word of English, with \$25 in my pocket. It was there that a social worker at the welfare office named Joyce White took me under her wing, making all the necessary calls to help me with my pregnancy, find a temporary place to sleep, food to eat, and more.

It didn't take me long to integrate into American culture from this point. I enrolled into local high school right away, got a job working at Texaco, lost my Muslim robes and bought fashionable real American clothes. Other refugees in the area were able to take care of my son Mohammed after he was born, so I could go out and have a really fun and exciting social life. I started dating, having lots of fun, living a more normal life for a girl in her late teens.

Once I graduated I enrolled at a local college with refugee support money. Soon after I met Daniel, and fell deeply in love for the first time. Daniel was a Navy Seal. We met at a dance club. We hit it off from the first moment we met. It was amazing. I never thought I could ever be in a relationship like that. I never thought anyone would love me like that, willing to do anything for me. It was heavenly. We were together for a year and a half before moving out to Riverside, CA, living with his mother at her house for two years while he worked and I attended vocational school.

Then we moved to Hawaii where Daniel was originally from, where my second child Hana was born. Our relationship lasted another couple of years before going sour. I've been on my own now for a couple of years, trying to fully get on my feet as a single mom, and things are really starting to click. I have my own 2 bedroom apartment, a good paying job as a model, a nice car, and more. My main focus and passionate desire to bring awareness to the situation in my home country are fully emerging.

This is of course just the surface of the story of my life. There are layers upon layers of details. There is much explanation needed to bring the political situation into proper context. It is also difficult to explain in such a short piece the husband-wife dynamic of Somalia in terms that someone of an American mindset can comprehend. There is the heart-wrenching end of my communication with my family, as the refugee camp in Kenya was shut down in 2000. I now have scarcely any idea where my family is, what they are doing, if they are alive or dead. It's something that fills me with guilt, with torment. I can hardly sleep or eat sometimes I'm so overwhelmed with emotion, picturing what type of torturous life they may be living. The details of my female circumcision, although a very minor detail in my own personal journey, is certainly another topic that is highly interesting to Americans who do not follow this custom. I've also gone through many spiritual and religious transformations along the way.

Most of all, my story is one of unfathomable triumph. My hope-driven determination and desire to overcome incomprehensible feats in achieving the wildest of dreams is universally inspiring. My story can bring hope and perspective to any human being in any situation, and if tactfully done can be a worldwide success – bringing me closer to the dream of one day reuniting with my family and perhaps having a significant impact on how the rest of the world chooses to intervene (ignoring at the moment) the desperate, barbaric situation that lingers on in the once great country of Somalia.