

Chapter One

September 2011

Think of Others



Karim watching a news report on Somalia

Think of Others

As you fix your breakfast, think of others.
Don't forget to feed the pigeons.
As you fight your wars, think of others.
Don't forget those who desperately demand peace.
As you pay your water bill, think of others
who drink the clouds' rain.
As you return home, to your home, think of others.
Don't forget those who live in tents.
As you sleep and count planets, think of others.
There are people without any shelter to sleep.
As you express yourself using all metaphorical expressions,
think of others who lost their rights to speak.
As you think of others who are distant, think of you and say:
'I wish I was a candle to fade away the darkness'.

Mahmoud Darwish

In the midst of a crowd of desperate, starving people the reporter was speaking his well-rehearsed lines into the camera. He seemed almost oblivious, detached from the horror that surrounded him. His tone and demeanor expressed that he had done this before, that he knew where he was and it was all too familiar to him.

The walking skeletons all around the reporter were disinterested in what he was doing or saying. They were too emaciated to care about anything other than searching for their next meal. Their wafer thin, jet black bodies were covered in rags if they were clothed at all.

“Somalia remains one of the most troubled regions on the planet,” the reporter said in the monotone manner of television newsmen everywhere. “Refugees by the thousands are pouring into these camps. The government in Mogadishu has little or no resources available to support the relief efforts here. Time is running out for most of the people living in these camps as -.”

Karim clicked off the television and wiped his mouth. Although there was still food on his plate, his appetite was gone. He was both sad and angry. What he watched on TV had triggered memories; some of which he would rather forget, but he knew were ingrained in his soul forever. He was very conscious of the fact that he had just been blessed with a hearty breakfast – a meal the unfortunate souls in Somalia would look upon as a feast. He was disgusted, not with himself, but with the world around him. There was simply no reason, no valid reason anyway, in Karim’s mind for such suffering to take place anywhere on the planet. He knew that an average North American or large European city threw away enough good food every month to feed all of the needy in Somalia for a year.

But such is not the way of the world. Resources are allocated by economics and the whims of governments, not by genuine need. Most see suffering in faraway lands and they ask, what’s wrong with them? Why can’t they take care of themselves?

Granted, Karim argued with himself, as a whole Western society gives millions every year to charities and tens of millions more in foreign aid, which does help advance progress in the developing world. Perhaps I am too hard on the West, Karim chided himself. After all he was a Western man now, at least by adoption. Were people from other parts of the world more charitable? Probably less so, Karim had to admit.

Even though he had never been there when he closed his eyes and sat back in his chair he could see the Somali camps in his mind’s eye. He was standing with the suffering people, hearing their cries for relief and feeling the hot sun beat down relentlessly on his head. Hope was absent in these places, or in very short supply. It mattered little if the camp was in Somalia or Sudan or any other place; they shared the same awful common characteristics; tents lined up row after row, parched earth beneath the people’s feet, lines of filthy human beings waiting their turn for a quick shower or a bowl of tasteless mush or for the slim chance to see a doctor who probably had no medications with which to treat them.

While the world knew all about these horrible places, seeing the suffering on television was like watching a Hollywood film, it just wasn't real; you cannot smell the stink of an overflowing outdoor latrine on the TV, or experience the horror of watching a child die in your arms from malnutrition or dysentery or hear the near constant wailing of those suffering from injury and disease.

As a physician Karim had worked in several refugee camps, doing his best to alleviate whatever suffering he could. By serving the people Karim relieved some of the emotional turmoil he experienced. Part of him felt guilty that he was so blessed while others struggled for survival. He was also angry that the privileged people on the planet, those who consumed most of the resources and lived a life of abundance, did so little to help others who were wanting for the basic necessities of life.

Karim's wife Sara was washing dishes and not paying close attention to what her husband was doing. Her focus was on the day ahead and how she was going to manage her household responsibilities. The sudden silence of the television caught her attention. She looked over and saw Karim first rubbing his forehead and then gazing outside with a blank stare at the fall splendor of their new home's backyard. She knew that he was troubled.

"Would you like something else to eat? More tea perhaps?" Sara asked her husband, as she put down the dishes and walked slowly towards Karim as she wiped her hands on a towel.

"I'm going to Somalia," Karim said, without offering an explanation. He continued to stare outside at the late fall day. The wind had picked up and the sky was cloudy, rain was in the forecast.

"What?"

"I'm going to Somalia. I cannot sit here in my comfortable home and do nothing to help them."

From past experience, Sara knew that Karim was not just talking. He was dead serious.

"Will you consider all the issues involved before you make your decision?" Sara asked.

"Such as?"

"How about our life in Canada? You fought so hard to bring us to this country, Karim. Now that we are here and established and we have a normal, peaceful life, why must you run off and leave us behind?" Sara knew that her tone wasn't completely fair, but still he should not go, she thought.

"No. I would never 'run off'. We have been blessed, no doubt. That makes us all the more responsible to give back, to return a measure of our good fortune to those in such terrific need."

“Somalia is a war zone. It is not just a question of helping refugees, there is real danger there.”

“We were both raised in a war zone, Sara. We know how to protect ourselves in such situations.”

“Why you?” Sara continued to protest. “Can’t you just raise money, perhaps organize things from here? You could go to the States, maybe -.”

“And be like all of the other people I see around me? Turn away from the suffering? Make it someone else’s problem?”

“You are making me sound selfish for wanting my husband to be at home. I’ve sacrificed too, Karim. When is enough finally going to be enough?” Sara was visibly upset now. Behind her somewhat controlled anger was a genuine worry for her husband’s welfare. She tossed her dishrag in the sink and walked out through the French doors and onto the patio.

Sara absolutely loved her backyard. They had two lovely large oaks in the back, both of which were in their full fall glory; their orange and red leaves were dribbling off in the breeze. The grass was still green; the air was crisp, but not cold. Karim followed Sara out to the backyard a moment later.

“I know you, Karim. Your heart is absolutely in the right place. But so is mine,” Sara said, gently removing herself from her husband’s embrace. “I am very opposed to you going to Somalia and for many reasons.”

“I feel compelled, Sara. Would you have me ignore these people? I cannot turn away from such need when I know that I can help them.”

“You are asking me to ignore my good sense, to willingly say, ‘Go ahead and go somewhere where human life has little value.’ You have a family, Karim. We matter too.”

“What if Saeed had said that in 1948? He is my example. We are called to a higher standard.”

“Yes, what if Saeed had said I can only give so much? What if he had retained some wealth for his family? You might not have been raised in such a horrible place, your brothers and sister -.”

“You don’t mean that, Sara. You’re upset and understandably so. My father’s generosity saved many lives.”

“You start my day off by making such a bold pronouncement? I’ll see you later this evening when you return.” Sara very respectfully kissed her husband on the cheek. She headed for the French doors, opened them and then turned and said, “And you must tell your son. He will not be pleased.”

It was nearly eight a.m. Karim was running late for work. He would have to ask the hospital for an extended leave of absence, but given where he was going and why he was traveling there, he was confident that they would grant his request.

Sara's feelings were of great concern to him. He did not want her to think that he was dismissing her out of hand as if she had no say in what he did with his life. He had expected her to have concerns, but Sara was not just worried, she was adamantly opposed to him going.

Before when Karim volunteered to serve as a physician in refugee camps Sara had always been supportive. She was worried as a wife was apt to worry, but she was not against his going. Was Somalia so different than the other places he had been to? Desperate poverty breeds violence, Somalia was nothing new.

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"So, your studies are going well this term?" Karim asked his son.

"Yes. I am beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Thank God medical school is almost over," Bara said.

"You will probably yearn for the easy days of med school when you experience the long and trying hours of your internship," Karim said.

"We aren't here to talk about me," Bara said.

"Yes, that's true I suppose," Karim agreed as he sighed and looked over at his wife.

"Dad, going to Somalia is a bad idea, period," Bara said with conviction.

"You base this on your vast experience in the world, son?" Karim argued, a bit sarcastically.

Bara knew that he had lost this argument before it began. "I don't have to visit hell to know it exists," Bara mumbled. "I happen to know a few things too, Dad."

"You are anything but stupid Bara, but don't be fooled into thinking that there is any substitute for experience. As you know, I have been to these types of places before. I have no illusions. I know what to expect."

"The camera doesn't lie," Bara said, as he opened his laptop. "Let me show you exactly where you're going, father."

Bara had collected pictures of Somalia from various Internet sites and other sources. He had also downloaded several articles and government reports on current conditions in the country. The slide show was indeed gruesome. He showed his father images of shredded Somali fighters tossed in shallow graves by the side of the road, pictures of roaming gangs of thugs who called themselves militia preying on people and beating them senseless and photos of the starving and near dead who by the

thousands were stacked like cordwood into overcrowded tent cities. Then he presented highlights from some reports from credible sources, all of which said that traveling to Somalia was a very dangerous proposition.

“That was a very convincing report, son,” Karim said. “If I were your instructor, I would give you the highest mark. Bara, I really get it, but you must see my point of view as well.”

“Why won’t you at least listen to him?” Sara said.

“I have been listening very attentively,” Karim answered. “I also received permission today to take a six month leave of absence from the hospital. They will even donate money and supplies to the relief efforts. I leave for Somalia in three weeks.”

“I thought we were going to discuss this first, as a family,” Sara said.

“We are discussing it,” Karim said.

“This is not a discussion. You’ve made your choice. What we think is unimportant to you,” Sara said, as tears now welled up in her eyes.

“Nothing matters more to my heart than what you both think and feel. I love you both very much. This is a question of a higher -.”

“You are needed here,” Sara said. “You’re not young anymore, Karim. Neither am I.”

“How can we ask others to do what we are not willing to do?” Karim said.

“It’s pointless, Mom. Dad’s going and that’s that. He will not be influenced by us,” Bara said, as he closed his computer and returned it to its case.

“I have been in contact with the umbrella humanitarian organization. They will fly me to Kenya and from there I can fly to Mogadishu. There is a hotel in town where I can live in relative safety. Rest assured I will take no unnecessary chances.”

Sara rose from her chair, walked over to her husband and kissed him on the top of his head. “Now we shall eat the marvelous meal I’ve spent all day preparing. No more talk of this. Tonight we enjoy each other in peace.”