

Girma Dali - Chapter 2

by John Gorman

He owed Benga. Never had the chance to really thank him, but what kids do. Words are empty. Girma Dali cut his wrist and pressed it to Benga's, two curious little boys dripping with possibility, sealing their promise of greatness— this is how they became blood brothers.

Late in their teens, during the storm of political unrest, these two young men again committed themselves to each other as brothers' keepers the smooth sheen of their boyish cheeks glowing in sunlight. When the warlords slashed and torched their village they were split apart. Girma Dali hid in a well. How he managed to hide with such rampant slaughter all around haunted him to this day. When he climbed free from the well the vicious stench of burning shacks, flesh, and souls nearly choked him. He vomited on the scorched earth. Limb after severed limb he did not find Benga, his pounding heart both relieved and grief-stricken. He had deep regret for his cowardice and asked for God's forgiveness the whole while staring at his cracked nails and bloodied hands. He prayed for Benga.

They grew up in the same village. Benga was one year younger big for his age and wise beyond his own good. He'd criticize the elder tribesmen, how they dressed or if they had a speech impediment. He didn't buy into the need for their silly shaman. Benga boasted his resourcefulness, bribed the smartest girls into doing his homework gave them Deutschmark, British Pounds, and crumpled Yen, tips he earned from holiday-goers promising them the moon, the stars, and enough cackling monkeys and roaring lions to feed an army. Clearly, Dali idolized him. It's a miracle he stuck with football. Dali's saving grace was that Benga was only a mediocre player. While Girma Dali kept getting picked in every game Benga sometimes sat out, wandered about and got into mischief.

Benga also can be credited with turning Dali into a more promising player, prodding him into games with the older, stronger boys. Benga was fearless and pushy.

Barefoot, Dali ran faster than anybody. He had a knack for footwork, balance, and an uncanny sense of recovery. When he drifted to the dusty sidelines he quickly darted back to the middle. If he took a spill he'd bounce right up onto his feet. Game and grit filled his bones. And though he outshined his pal, Benga was always buzzing about something. Benga was Girma Dali's first true coach and taught him all the tricks like how to head the ball.

Benga took him aside and broke it down for his friend. Benga had the art of heading down to a science. It was the rest of Benga's game that was more or less shabby. The standalone skillmaster hounded Girma Dali to get serious about headers. "Be a man," Benga said. To demonstrate the importance of this skill Benga tossed fruit at Dali. Everywhere he needed to be ready. Papaya and palm nuts whizzed by his head. Dali's lightning fast reflexes allowed him to dodge at will. Sooner or later he succumbed. Benga had a fascist's zeal for persuasion. Slowly, Benga worked his protégé up to stones. To this day, Girma Dali rubbed the gash on his forehead where he butt his first craggy stone. Thinking of it now, Dali was lucky he didn't lose an eye.

They stood on the side of the road. Dali needed to hold his arms behind his back. Benga started easy, underhand, a slow windmill of tosses. When Dali proved brave enough Benga stepped back a few strides. Benga marked a line in the dirt. He cocked his arm behind his ear then hurled a stone. He missed completely. Maybe he was afraid of killing his friend. Benga showed armor from the outside, but he worried. Benga scouted for good throwing material. When he nabbed a bunch of fat stones he dropped them by the dirt line. Dali, spread-eagle, kept his legs both knees locked. His mouth grew dry and his throat scratchy like the time just before he passed out hunting antelope. The balmy air felt heavy with rain. A drop splotched Dali's cheek and the cloudsplitter above seemed ready to let loose, but didn't. The air grew heavier. Only a machete could rip through it. The sky bulged with bleaker clouds. Whamp. Dali took a stone off the cheek. No raindrop this time. He rubbed his face and

Benga tossed the next one twice as hard. It sailed over Dali's head. It sounded like a furious elephant swinging its trunk.

"Stand still," Benga shouted.

"I'm not moving," Dali said.

"Yes, you are."

"No, I am not."

"Are you calling me a liar," Benga said.

"You think I'm dog food?"

Who can argue the crazy calculus of juvenile interpretation? Girma Dali made a small effort to move into the throws because Benga kept missing the mark and Dali realized how important this drill seemed to his friend.

"Don't do me any favors," Benga said.

"Well, hurry up then," Dali said. "We don't have all day."

Dali had looked off, had heard a strange noise, and when he brought his eyes back to his friend he'd already been clocked with the craggy stone, right across the forehead. Dali went down hard like a bundle of wood. After that it all seemed fuzzy. Benga was beside him when he awoke. Still woozy, a sharp tool pierced his skin. Dali screamed as if a lion bit him. A crust of blood stained his arm, neck, marked his forehead. His voice was hoarse. He felt as if his eyeballs were about to roll out of their sockets. His arms were strapped, tied in cloth, but his legs were free to kick. Benga's weepy brown eyes trailed off. Dali tried the best he could to pull together. He was ashamed of himself for falling to pieces his head almost mush.

Benga held his friend's hand as one of the elders stitched Dali's forehead.

Dali shivered, a wicked chill locked into his core and this weird feeling crept under his skin he'd pictured himself falling into a well, a cloak of darkness swallowing him whole. He shook with cold and fear, but then there was a glimmer, a scratch of light and Benga's soft, warm hand. Dali squeezed with all his heart.

