

The Story of Isnina Hassan

By Jim Scott & Isnina Hassan, March 3, 2019
Trinity United Methodist Church, Henrico, Virginia

This is the story of Isnina Hassan, and how she and her family came to America.

This story is based on interviews Jim conducted with Isnina. Her English is surprisingly good. Although a perfectionist can find fault, she's fluent in the sense of being able to express herself easily and articulately. She understands spoken English equally well, and has a strong vocabulary. Any difficulty we had understanding each other was the result of cultural differences: Isnina's unfamiliarity with some areas of American life, and Jim's ignorance of life in Somalia and the refugee camps.

Some names of people and places referred to might be inaccurate. Isnina knows them only by sound, not by spelling. In addition, detailed maps of Somalia are hard to find.

Isnina Adan Hassan was born in Somalia in approximately 1978. There's no birth record, but U.S. Immigration took the approximate year and made her official birthday January 1, 1978.

Her middle name "Adan" is, by Somali custom, the same as her father's first name; and her last name, "Hassan", is her grandfather's first name.

She lived with her mother Habiba, her father Adan, three brothers, Mohammed, Hussain, and Ali, and two sisters, Hawa and Quresha¹, in a village named Bakal.

Their home where Isnina was born and grew up, was a small one-room shelter built of sticks covered with bundles of grass. The roof was also bundles of grass, laid over a plastic sheet. They had no electricity, no lights, and no plumbing. Their water came from the Jubba River. When rains came, they huddled inside. Otherwise, there wasn't really room for everyone. They had two or three wooden beds, providing sleeping space only for the children. Isnina shared a bed with her older sister Hawa until Hawa got married and moved in with her husband's family. After that Isnina shared a bed with her younger sister Quresha.

The home was on land that they had inherited from her grandfather. The plot of land also had a big garden. Every day the children helped their mother with garden chores. They grew corn and another grain, probably wheat, that they would grind using stone implements to make flour for bread. Rainy seasons produced good crops, but sometimes the weather was too dry. They were sometimes able to buy meat from merchants: beef, goat, lamb, and even giraffe. They sometimes raised chickens; they would buy little chicks at the store and raise them. When they wanted a chicken dinner, they would kill a chicken, pluck it, and cook it.

¹ Pronounced KEER-sha.

They used the river not only as a water supply, but also for washing, bathing, and swimming. Crocodiles were a constant danger, and occasionally a villager would be killed by one.

The nearest city to their village was Bardera^{2,3}, but it was far enough away that she never saw the city. When her parents were younger they would sometimes go to the city, on foot, to buy clothing. In their village, cars were so rare that children were scared of them. If they saw a car they would hide out of fright of being run over.

Their village had two main tribes, Ogaden and Maclinweyne. Isnina's family was in the Ogaden tribe. The two tribes lived peacefully together; the children played together, the old folks socialized, all were neighbors. Then in 1991, for reasons she doesn't understand, the two tribes became enemies. Armed with guns, they began killing each other. Isnina's family had to run from the dangerous people and hide in the woods until nighttime, when they could return to the village.

So in 1992, when she was about 14, Isnina's family decided to head for Kenya, hoping to get into a refugee camp, or at least leave the fighting and killing behind. They traveled on foot along with others from their village who had the same goal.

Before getting to the Kenya border, they had to get across the Kutulo River, at a point where there was a village on each side of the river. They also needed to stay hidden, but it was difficult to do both. There were boats available, but only small ones, not big enough for the whole family and the other people trying to make the same crossing. So the women and children began to cross first. Isnina's father Adan, who was very old and unable to run, stayed behind to wait his turn. He was sitting under a tree as members of the family began to cross in the boats. Isnina's mother, Habiba, looking back, thought she saw someone in white clothes moving behind a tree on the side of the river they had just left. At first no one believed her, but then men started shooting at the people who had made it across the river. The only way to hide from the gunfire was by staying underwater among the tall grass in the river. Some stayed underwater too long and drowned.

Meanwhile, a man who was a relative of Habiba, who had never liked Adan, began beating him with the butt of his rifle, saying, "Old man! Why are you sitting here? Where's your family?" Then he told him to get up and walk. Adan replied, "You'll have to shoot me. I can't get up and walk. I can't."

Then another man from Habiba's tribe came and said to the man with the gun, "What are you doing to this old man? Why are you beating him? He can't walk." The first man said, "He has to get up and walk." They grabbed Adan's arms and dragged him for a while, before leaving him lying, bleeding, on the ground.

² Various spellings exist.

³ See map on page 10.

Isnina and her mother went back across the river to tend to her father. They found him unconscious from the beating. The two of them carried him to a boat and got him across the river.

Habiba was concerned for Isnina as well as for Adan, because rape was a constant danger in lawless Somalia. She told Isnina to take her father and hide. He still couldn't walk, so she put one of his arms over her shoulder and held him up, helping him move. Both were weak, having had nothing to eat all day. Finally he said to her, "I can't walk anymore. You need to leave me here. Just go, by yourself." She replied, "Well, I'm not going to leave you here." She put him under a tree and said, "Sit here. I'll come back." Running, looking for help, she saw a goat, and then found the people the goat belonged to. She told the strangers, "I need help. My father can't walk anymore." She said he was under a tree, some distance away. Two men came with her and talked to her father.

He could barely talk, but he managed to identify himself. It turned out that one of the men was Adan's nephew - his sister's son. They all cried, and then they carried him to the home of Adan's sister. That was the first time Isnina met her Aunt Isha, who still lived in the village her father had come from. The rest of the family came, too, and they all stayed there about two weeks.

After her father had healed some from the beating, and eaten enough to regain some strength, the family continued their walk toward Kenya. Aunt Isha asked them to visit her daughter Fatuma (Isnina's cousin), who lived in another village. She told them how to get to a nearby city, where they were to ask for further directions.

As they walked toward the city, Habiba carried three-year-old Ali on her back in a carrying cloth, because he was sick, and like the rest of them, weak from hunger. They walked all day for three days, and slept outdoors when night came.

Isnina walked behind her mother. Her father, Adan, was bringing up the rear, walking slowly because of age, hunger, and the beating he had survived. Isnina was the eldest after her older sister Hawa had moved away, so it was her duty to keep an eye on her father, and to help him get back up whenever he fell down. But she could also watch Ali on Habiba's back.

Ali had been crying since they left the city, and as they continued their walk on the third day, Habiba said to Adan, "Oh, he stopped crying." Adan replied, "Oh, maybe he's getting tired, because he's been crying for three days. He's probably asleep." After they walked a while longer, Habiba said, "He's getting heavy. I don't think he's asleep." Isnina looked and saw that Ali's head was dangling back on his neck. She could see that his eyes and mouth were open. She said, "Mom, I think something's wrong with Ali."

They stopped, and Adan checked Ali's wrist and chest for a pulse. But he didn't find one, and he said, "He's dead." And then Ali's body began to swell up.

At this time, they were almost at the city. They stopped and sat under a tree. Habiba held Ali in her lap, and used a little bit of a grease-like substance to smooth his eyes closed. She also closed his mouth.

Adan found a man standing at the gate of a nice house, apparently the home of someone with money. The owner came out, smoking a cigar. Adan said, "I need some help. I've just arrived at your city. My son has died, and I need somebody to help me bury him." The man was eager to help, and went door to door to find others who would also help. They found an imam and brought him, so he could read the Koran before burying the body. Adan went off to the burial, but Isnina and her mother were too exhausted to go. After Adan came back from the burial, a friendly lady made tea for everyone. Tradition would have required Ali's family to give something to the people who helped them, but they had nothing. So the tea served this purpose.

Then Adan asked for further directions from the city to the village where Isnina's cousin Fatuma lived. They managed to walk to Fatuma's village in another two or three days.

When they arrived at the village, her father said, "Wait here for me. I'm going to check that we have the right person." Then suddenly they heard someone crying. Isnina said, "Mom, somebody's crying. I don't know what happened. I'm going to go check." Her mother said, "Okay." So she went and checked, and found out that the first person her father had met was in fact Fatuma, and that's who was crying.

They stayed with her for a week. They heard that refugees were being accepted at the refugee camps in Kenya, and they told Fatuma that's where they were headed. Fatuma asked, "How are you going to get there? You don't have money, and I don't have any to give you. And how are you going to get there with my uncle in such bad condition?" Isnina's mother said, "We're going to try."

They began by returning to the city. Once they got there, they didn't know where to go next. They were thin from lack of food, and dirty because they had no place to bathe. Then a kind woman told them, "I'll talk to my husband first, but you can stay in our back yard." Isnina's mother built a little shelter for her father, near a big tree in the back yard. In the daytime they stayed under the tree, and when it rained they squeezed into the shelter. But her father continued to get worse, and soon he died. People from the neighborhood helped them bury the body. Three days later, they left, walking toward Kenya. They walked day and night for eight days, not knowing whether they were going the right way.

When they finally arrived at the border between Somalia and Kenya, they saw a fence, a water tower, an electronic tower (probably for telephone service), and an administration building. Many Kenyan workers were there, managing the arrival of refugees. Doctors examined each person; the healthy ones were taken on a bus to the camp, while those who were sick were taken by another bus to the hospital. Isnina's family were deemed healthy. Once they arrived at the refugee camp called Dadaab, they registered and were given a card to be used to get food.

When they first saw the camp from a distance, it looked like a combination of large and small trees and huge open fields. When they arrived, it was very hot and windy. They were instructed to line up for food. They were given flour, oil, sugar, salt, and beans.

Next they were provided with other essentials, since they had arrived with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. They were given pots and pans, and tarps, and a tent. Then they were driven around the camp and shown the camp site that would be theirs. The family began to set up their tent, fastening it to the ground with metal stakes. When the tent got carried away with the wind, they had to chase it and bring it back. It wasn't fun, but it was better than Somalia. At that moment, they thought they were in heaven. No more gun shots, no more killing, no more running from bad people. They felt relieved, as if they could breathe for the first time.

They learned that Isnina's older sister Hawa, the one who had married and moved away, was already at Dadaab. Technically, Dadaab is a town, not a camp⁴. At the time, Dadaab had three refugee camps: Dagahaley in the north⁵, Ifo in the middle, and Hagadera in the south.⁶ Isnina's family was assigned to Dagahaley, in the north, while her sister was in Ifo, in the center. The camps were administered by the U.N., through UNHCR (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), and were financed by foreign donors.

For the first several years, life in the camp was relatively pleasant. There wasn't much to do, so they would sit outside and talk with friends. The men would go look for jobs, but there weren't any. Each family cooked their own meals over an open fire, using firewood and pots and pans provided by the U.N. Cooking a meal took a long time, and the smoke was a major problem.

For every three or four families there was a "bathroom" for bathing and toileting. It consisted of privacy walls and a concrete floor; there was no plumbing. The toilet was a hole in the concrete floor, over a large pit in the ground. There was no seat, so people would squat over the hole. Every few years the pit would fill, and the bathroom would have to be moved to a new pit. A person could bathe in the bathroom, but they had to bring their own water. Soap was provided by the U.N. There was a door, but no lock, so a woman would leave her dress hanging over the door while bathing as a way of saying that the bathroom was occupied.

Domesticated animals around the camps included cows, goats, sheep, and camels, but no horses. In a jungle in the southern part of Dadaab there was wildlife, including giraffes, zebras, antelopes, and warthogs.

In 1998 or 1999, Isnina met her future husband Hassan Abdi in the refugee camp. Hassan was a Somali Bantu from near the city of Jilib in southern Somalia. Somali Bantus are an ethnic minority, and other Somalis discriminate against them. Isnina's mother would buy

⁴ See satellite view of Dadaab on page 11.

⁵ See satellite view of Dagahaley on page 12.

⁶ In 2011, two more camps were added in response to a flood of Somali refugees affected by severe drought.

sugar from him in a flea market. One day when Isnina went with her to the market to help her, she met Hassan. They started talking, and fell in love.

When Hassan was very young, his father divorced his mother. The father lived in the city, but the mother lived with Hassan and his five siblings in a village. They were farmers, and Hassan shared in the work. His mother came to Dadaab first, fleeing from the violence. Hassan came later, with his uncle (his mother's brother).

Soon Hassan and Isnina decided to get married. The male members of Isnina's family were against the marriage because Hassan was a Bantu. But there was no religious prohibition, so Isnina said, "Who cares? I'm going to marry him anyway!"

The wedding was a small ceremony at the camp, conducted by an imam (who was also a refugee). Isnina wore traditional Somali clothes for the ceremony, including a long dress and a big scarf.

Their first child, Muktar, was born in 2000. All of the children have the middle name "Abdi" for their father, and the last name "Abdulkadir" for their grandfather (Hassan's father).

About that time, conditions in the camp began to worsen. Up to that time there had been plenty of food, and the refugees could get in line to get food every 15 days. But the population began to outgrow the available resources. The wait time for food increased to 30 days, but the amount of food obtained each time wasn't enough to last that long.

Water was also sometimes in short supply. There was no river anywhere near the camp, so water was supplied at taps, and sometimes there were long lines of people waiting to get more water for their family at the taps.

To make matters worse, outsiders began to come into the camp, Somali merchants pretending to be refugees. They wanted to sell merchandise to the actual refugees. Refugees would sell some of their food so they could buy other things. They bought things like pots and pans, dresses, jewelry, and shoes. Shoes were not issued by the camp, so most people went barefoot unless they could buy shoes. Refugees also bought cow and camel milk from outside merchants, and meat, including goat, lamb, beef, and giraffe.

The camp administration⁷ also had a store that offered some of these foods. But refugees preferred to buy their meat and milk from the outside merchants. Many of the refugees were Muslims, adhering to a halal diet as prescribed by Islamic laws. They suspected that the "government" meat and milk might not be halal, whereas those from Muslim merchants probably were.

The administration tried to keep the merchants out. They would use a census or other means to figure out who was in the camp that didn't belong, and they would tell them to leave. Put in this position, a merchant would agree to leave, but would stay anyway, hiding

⁷ It's not clear whether this was the Kenyan government, the UNHCR, or somebody else.

temporarily if necessary. Others who had families in the camp would come in, supposedly to visit, but in reality being there to sell.

As the overpopulation continued, so did the lawlessness. There was fighting, stealing, and even murder. There was an eleven o'clock curfew, and police officers or guards came at night to enforce it. They shot flares into the air to help them spot curfew violators. Anyone they caught was put into the camp jail.

The camp had medical care, of a fashion. Those who could pay got actual medicine, and those who could not pay got something else; they were told it was medicine, but it never worked. To get *any* medical care, a refugee would typically wait in line two or three days, then spend all day at the facility, probably *not* see a doctor, and have to come back again the next day.

For an emergency, such as a bad cut, the injury would be cleaned and bandaged, and the patient would be given a shot and sent home. If an infection resulted, the patient would return every day for another cleaning. Anyone with a broken bone would be sent to a hospital near Nairobi.

There was a black market in medicine. People working as custodians in the medical facilities would steal medicine and turn it over to others who would sell it, splitting the profits.

In 2001 or 2002, the Abdi family applied for relocation to another country. They just wanted to get out of the camp, and find somewhere else to go. At first they applied for Mozambique (in southeast Africa). They knew nothing about America. Later they heard people talking about America, and decided that was their destination. There were three stages to the selection process, including a medical check. Once they made it through that process, in the summer of 2002, they were transferred to a refugee camp in Kakuma, in northwestern Kenya, for further interviews.

At that time, Isnina was seven months pregnant with their second child, Halima, so she and Muktar were flown to Kakuma in a small airplane. Hassan had to go by the normal method, a three-day bus trip. It was Isnina's first airplane flight, and she was scared.

They spent two years in Kakuma. Halima was born there in 2002, and Amina in 2004. After many interviews, they were cleared to go to America. This was in mid-December, 2004, when Amina was four months old. They had been in the refugee camps for about twelve years. They flew from Nairobi to Brussels, and then from Brussels to New York City, where they stayed overnight in a hotel. The next day, December 16, 2004, they flew to Richmond.

The airfare was paid, as far as Isnina knows, by the IRS.⁸ The cost, \$1500, was reimbursed by Hassan at \$30 per month.

⁸ This seems unlikely, but nobody has ever told her anything different.

They were accompanied from Nairobi to New York by people who were looking after them. But they spoke only English, not Somali, so most communication was by improvised sign language. Along the way, they were provided with food. In Brussels, a woman led Isnina and the girls to the airport ladies' room, and a man led Hassan and Muktar to the men's room. This was their first encounter with flush toilets.

When they landed in New York, they were driven by bus to a hotel. On the way to the hotel, they enjoyed seeing the Christmas lights, but there was no opportunity for sight-seeing. At the hotel, they were shown to their room, and food was brought to them. After that, no one else came to their room. No one told them about the thermostat, which had been set very low; so they were cold all night.

The bed was unfamiliar to Isnina. Although Hassan slept on the bed, Isnina chose to sleep on the floor with the children. They were very tired, so they slept. Early in the morning they were gathered up for the ride to the airport and the last flight.

When they landed in Richmond, the flight attendant told them they needed to leave the plane. The family of five was sitting on the front row, with all the kids in Isnina's lap. Hassan said, "No English. I'm not going to get off the plane." Mary Hetzel and Daud Mohammed (the translator) were outside the plane waiting for them, but they were not allowed to come into the plane. Finally, Hassan and Isnina were persuaded to follow the flight attendant off the plane and into the gate waiting area just inside the airport building.

They had no jackets, so Isnina was holding Amina close to keep her from freezing. Four-year-old Muktar kept staring at a lady next to them who was enjoying a snack. The lady asked if she could offer some of the snack to them, but there was still a language barrier. Isnina shook her head, but then they smiled at each other, and the lady gave some of her snack to Isnina and Muktar.

Meanwhile, the flight attendant made a phone call and got permission for Mary Hetzel to come into the waiting area. She came in, carrying a sign with "Abdi" written on it. Hassan was able to read it, and he said, "Hey, that lady has our name." But they had been given very clear advice: "Do not go with *anybody*." So they weren't sure what to do. Then Hassan said, "Well, she has our name." And then Mary said, "You must be Hassan Abdi?" Hassan stood and said, "Yes." Then Mary turned to Isnina, who was still sitting, exhausted, and said "You must be Isnina." And Isnina said, "Yes." Mary had all their names.

(Isnina didn't literally say "Yes", not in English, because she didn't know how to yet. The only English she had been taught was to say "Thank you" when somebody gave her something.)

A number of people from the church were at the airport to greet them. They brought jackets for everyone in the Abdi family. When Isnina put on her jacket, she was relieved, because she had been very cold.

When they were preparing for the ride from the airport to their new home, Isnina told Mary in sign language that she would carry Amina in her lap. As Isnina describes it today,

Mary said, "No. This is America. There's not such a thing. You have to put her in a car seat." Amina didn't like the seat, and cried all the way.

Their first apartment was at Nottingham Green. Their new friends from the church told them how to use light switches, bathrooms, and so on. A job was soon found for Hassan, and when he went to work, leaving Isnina at home, she was afraid to do anything. She didn't turn on any lights; she just sat in the dark. Her biggest fear was that if she turned on anything, the apartment would explode. She was afraid to go near the stove. Even when she flushed the toilet, she didn't understand the noise it made when the water drained. Furthermore, she didn't know how to explain her predicament to anyone. She asked herself, "What am I going to do?" She began telling Mary that she wanted to go home. But Mary told her, "You *are* home!" And Isnina replied (in Somali), "Not here! Back in Africa!"

She tried going outside to sit in the back yard, being careful not to go far, for fear that she wouldn't be able to find her way back. Once she was outside, she worried that people were staring at her, thinking she was different. So she became scared to go outside, and just stayed in the apartment.

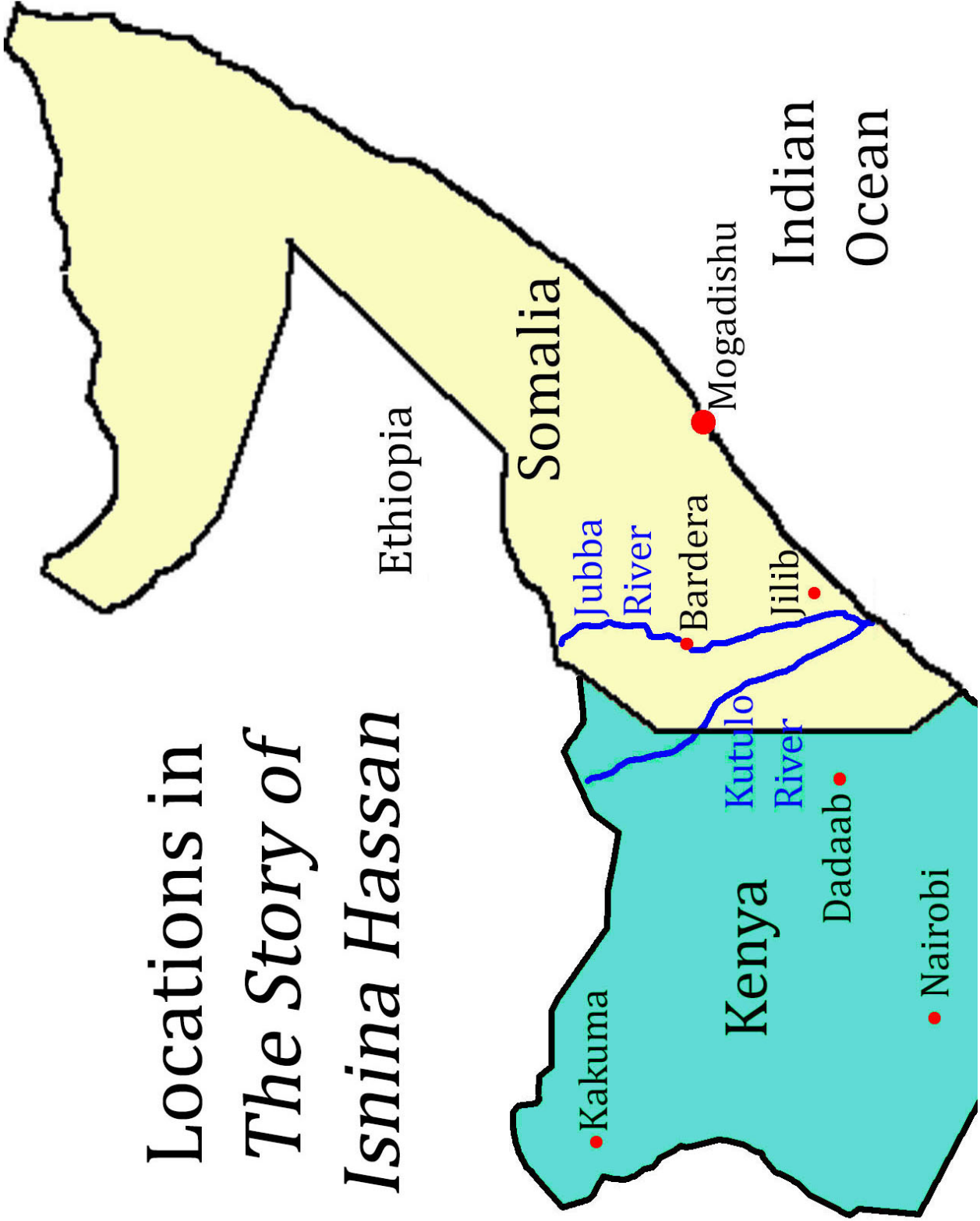
But as we all know, she soon adjusted very well. Not the least of her adjustment was learning to speak and understand English. How did she do it? Well, *not* through an ESL class. Mary got her *started* in an ESL class, but Isnina thought it was confusing because during breaks in class, the instructor was speaking yet another language (probably Spanish). She wanted to hear English.

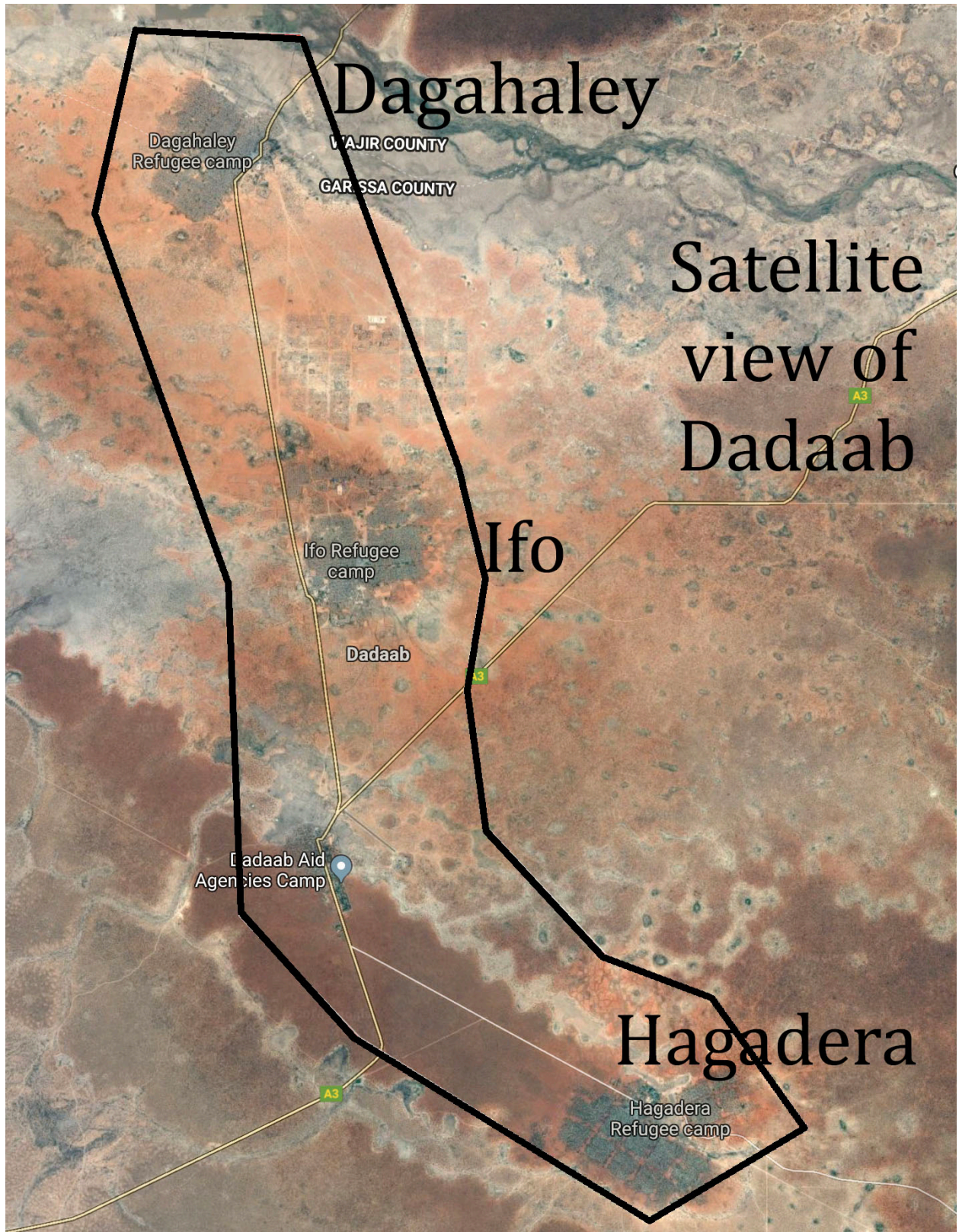
So she found her own way to learn English. Two ways, actually. The first way was by talking with people from the church who came to help her in those early days, teaching her things like how to do laundry. This group included Bonnie Andrews, Suzanne Axtell, Ann Burch, Frances Burch, Barbara Burton, Kay Carrithers, Claudia Diehl, Kelly Faglioni, Sandy Hamilton, Beth Heller, Mary Hetzel, Mary Jones, Jo Lewis, Ken Miller, Beth Monroe, Judy Oguich, Julie Peters, Don Pierce, Michael Ray, Elisa Romans, Bob & Julia Sessions, Charlie & Harriet Thomas, and Cyndi Worsham.

What was the second method that helped Isnina learn English? She watched *Sesame Street!*

The rest is history. When asked if she misses Somalia, Isnina simply says, "No."

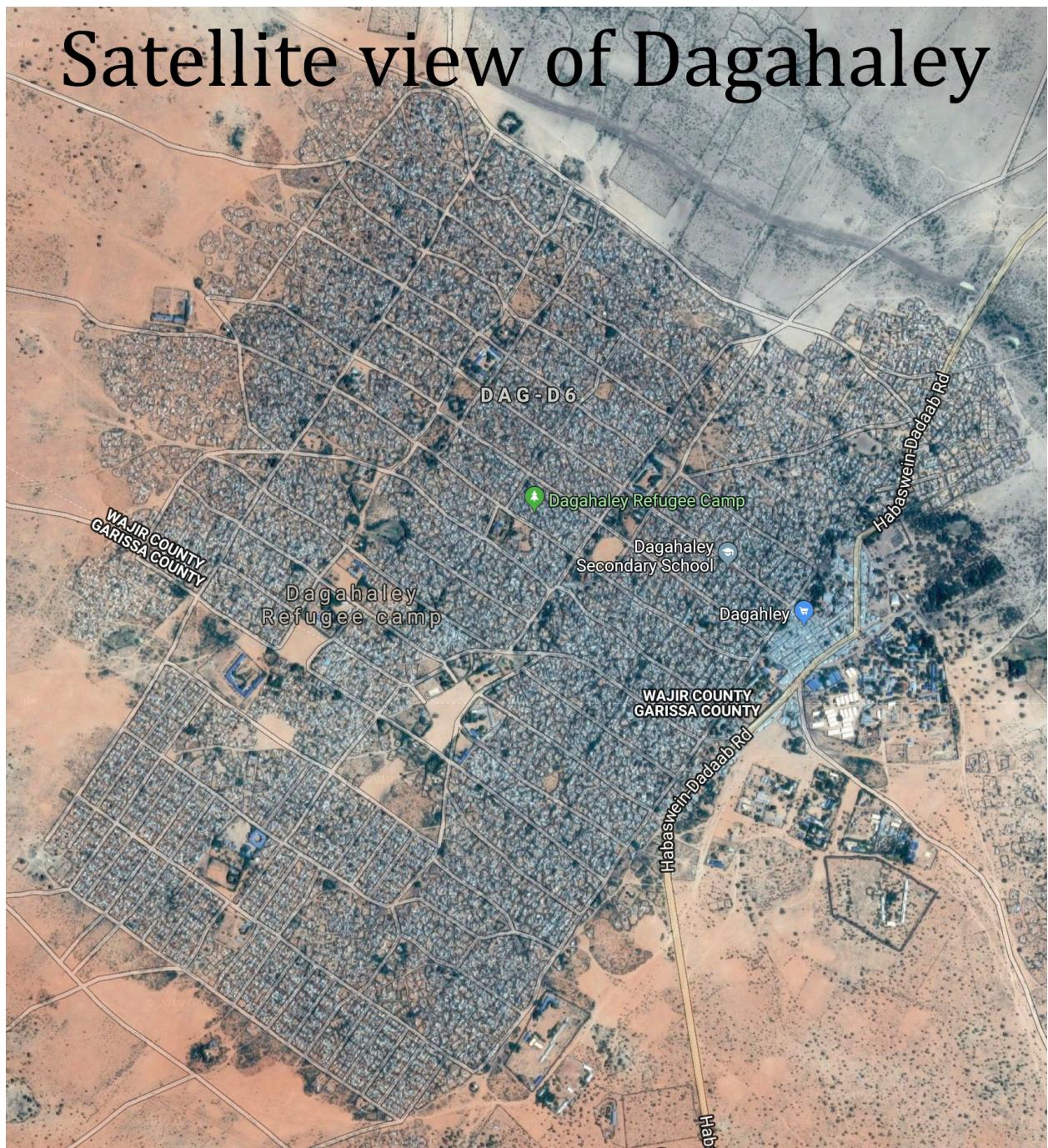
Locations in *The Story of Isnina Hassan*





Satellite view of Dadaab: Dagahaley camp is at the north end.

Satellite view of Dagahaley



Satellite view of Dagahaley, where Isnina's family lived

Time Line

- ~1978 – Isnina born
- 1992 – Isnina’s family walked to Kenya and Dadaab
- 1998 or 1999 – Isnina and Hassan met and decided to get married
- November 2000 – Muktar born in Dadaab
- 2001 or 2002 – Applied for relocation to another country
- Summer of 2002 – Transferred to Kakuma refugee camp for further interviews
- October 2002 – Halima born in Kakuma
- August 2004 – Amina born in Kakuma
- December 2004 – Flew from Nairobi to Brussels to New York
- December 16, 2004 – Arrived in Richmond

The Abdis
on arrival in
Richmond:

Back:
Isnina and
Hassan

Front:
Amina (in
lap), Muktar,
Halima



The Abdis
in
November
2015:

Left to right:
Ibrahim,
Muktar,
Hawa,
Isnina,
Yusef (in
lap),
Halima,
Amina

