



## Don't Tell Me You're Afraid: A Novel

By Giuseppe Catozzella

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**Don't Tell Me You're Afraid: A Novel** By Giuseppe Catozzella

**Based on a remarkable true story, an unforgettable Somali girl risks her life on the migrant journey to Europe to run in the Olympic Games**

At eight years of age, Samia lives to run. She shares her dream with her best friend and neighbor, Ali, who appoints himself her "professional coach." Eight-year-old Ali trains her, times her, and pushes her to achieve her goals. For both children, Samia's running is the bright spot in their tumultuous life in Somalia. She is talented, brave, and determined to represent her country in the Olympic Games, just like her hero, the great Somali runner Mo Farah.

For the next several years, Samia and Ali train at night in a deserted stadium as war rages and political tensions continue to escalate. Despite the lack of resources, despite the war, and despite all of the restrictions imposed on Somali women, Samia becomes a world-class runner. As a teenager, she is selected to represent her country at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. She finishes last in her heat at the Games, but the sight of the small, skinny woman in modest clothes running in the dust of athletes like Veronica Campbell-Brown brings the Olympic stadium to its feet.

Samia sets her sights on the 2012 Games in London. Conditions in Somalia have worsened, and she must make the arduous migrant journey across Africa and the Mediterranean alone. Just like millions of refugees, Samia risks her life for the hope of a better future.

*Don't Tell Me You're Afraid* is the unforgettable story of a courageous young woman, and it is also a remarkable window onto a global crisis.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## **Don't Tell Me You're Afraid: A Novel** By Giuseppe Catozzella Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"It's impossible not to be moved by this heart-wrenching novel based on the true story of Samia Omar . . . the voice of Samia packs an achingly topical punch, shouting out as an enduring witness to crimes committed by those trafficking in misery and despair."—*Mail on Sunday*

"Based on the devastating true story of Somalian athlete Samia Omar, this award-winning Italian novel offers a timely and unforgettable insight into the refugee experience."— Sam Baker, *The Pool*

"The first-person narrative . . . gives the story a spirit and urgency that readers won't easily forget. Catozzella's novel is both an intimate portrait of a heroic young woman and a disturbing look at the horrors many migrants face today."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"[*Don't Tell Me You're Afraid*] serves as a sobering reminder of the life-threatening challenges many migrants face in the pursuit of freedom."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Catozzella constructs a world. You read about it, witness it, are assailed by it. But when you realize that you too are in that world, that's when you get the feeling that its pages have changed you."

- Roberto Saviano

"Catozzella has managed to convey a close understanding of a harsh, unfamiliar reality. This is a novel that I salute for its ability to recount a great heroic epic of our time."

- Erri De Luca

"I will carry the memory of Samia with me for a long time – her childhood in a Mogadishu ravaged by civil strife, her hopes of becoming an Olympic champion, her journey to Europe tragically cut short in the sea of Lampedusa, in *our* sea. A story that is entirely true, that moved me . . . And that made me feel ashamed, once again, of what Italy, what Europe, has now become."

- Goffredo Fofi

### About the Author

GIUSEPPE CATOZZELLA's writing has appeared in *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Vanity Fair*, *Granta*, and other publications. He is the author of several works of fiction. *Don't Tell Me You're Afraid* has sold over 100,000 copies in Italy, where it won several major awards. Following the Italian publication, Catozzella was appointed a UN Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

ANNE MILANO APPEL, PHD, was awarded the Italian Prose in Translation Award (2015), the John Florio Prize for Italian Translation (2013) and the Northern California Book Awards for Translation-Fiction (2014, 2013). She's translated works by Claudio Magris, Paolo Giordano, Giovanni Arpino.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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\*\*\*This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof\*\*\*

## Chapter 1

The morning that and I became brother and sister was hot as blazes, and we were huddled under the skimpy shade of an acacia.

It was Friday, a holiday.

The run had been long and tiring, and we were both dripping with sweat: from Bondere, where we lived, we'd come straight to the CONS (Somali National Olympics Committee) stadium in Mogadishu without once stopping. Seven kilometers, making our way through all the side streets, which Ali knew like the back of his hand, under a sun scorching enough to melt stone.

Our combined age was sixteen: We were both eight years old, born three days apart. We couldn't help but be brother and sister, Ali was right, even if we were from two families who weren't even supposed to talk to each other yet lived in the same house, two families who had always shared everything.

We were under that acacia to catch our breaths a little and cool down, covered up to our behinds with the powdery white dust that swirls up from the roadbeds at the slightest puff of wind, when all of a sudden Ali came out with that bit about being his *abaayo*.

"Wanna be my *abaayo*?" he asked me, his breath still ragged, hands on his bony, narrow hips in the blue shorts that had been worn by all his brothers before ending up on him. "Wanna be my sister?" You know someone all your life, yet there is always one exact moment from which point on, if he is important to you, he will always be a brother or sister.

Bonded for life by a word, you remain that way.

I looked at him sideways, not letting him know what I was thinking.

"Only if you can catch me," I said abruptly, before taking off again, back toward our house.

Ali must have given it everything he had, because after a few strides he managed to grab me by my T-shirt and make me stum? ble. We ended up on the ground, him on top of me, in the dust that clung everywhere, to the sweat on our skin and to our thin clothing.

It was almost lunchtime. There was no one around. I didn't try to squirm free, didn't put up any resistance. It was a game.

"Well?" he asked, his breath hot on my face as he suddenly became serious.

I didn't even look at him, just squeezed my eyes shut, dis? gusted. "You have to give me a kiss if you want to be my brother. Those are the rules, you know."

Ali stretched out like a lizard and pressed a big wet kiss on my cheek.

"*Abaayo*," he said. Sister.

"*Aboowe*," I replied. Brother.

We got up and took off again. We were free, free to run again. At least as far as the house.

Our house wasn't even a house in the normal sense of the word, not like those nice ones with all the comforts. It was small, very small. And two families lived in it, mine and Ali's, around the same courtyard enclosed by a low earthen wall. Our dwellings faced each other from opposite sides of the yard.

We were on the right and had two rooms, one for me and my six brothers and sisters and the other for our mother and father. The walls were a mixture of mud and twigs, which hardened in the sun. Between our two rooms, as if to separate us from our parents, was the room belonging to the landlords: Omar Sheikh, a big fat man, and a wife even fatter than him. They had no children. They lived near the coast, but every so often they came to spend the night there, and when that happened the days immediately became much less pleasurable. "Save your jokes and funny stories for the day after tomorrow," my oldest brother, Said, would say whenever he saw them coming, referring to when they would leave again.

Ali, however, with his father and three brothers, lived in only one room, alongside the wall to the left.

The best part of the house was the courtyard: a huge enclosure, sure, I mean really huge, with an enormous, solitary eucalyptus. The yard was so big that all of our friends wanted to come to our place to play. The ground, like the floor inside the house and everywhere else, was the usual fine white dust that in Mogadishu ends up all over the place. In our bedroom, for example, we'd laid straw mats under the mattresses, but they didn't help much: Every two weeks Said and Abdi, my older brothers, had to take them outside and beat them as hard as they could, trying to get rid of every single grain of sand.

The house had been built by the fat man, Omar Sheikh, himself many years earlier. He'd wanted it put up right around the majestic eucalyptus. Having passed by it every day since he was a child, he'd come to love that tree, or so he told us countless times in that ridiculous little voice of his, which came out breathless. At that time the eucalyptus was already tall and sturdy, and he had thought: *I want my house to be here*. Then, under the dictator Siad Barre's regime, business problems had arisen and it seemed that war was coming, so he'd decided to move to a more peaceful location and had rented the three rooms to our two families, mine and Ali's.

At the back of the yard was the shed that served as the communal toilet: a tiny cubicle enclosed by dense bamboo canes, with a nauseating central hole where we did our business.

On the left, just before the latrine, was Ali's room. On the right, facing it, was ours: four by four meters, with seven mattresses on the floor.

Our brothers slept in the center and we four girls slept beside the walls: Ubah and Hamdi on the left and Hodan, my favorite sister, and I on the right. In the midst of us all, like an unfailing, protective hearth, stood the inevitable *ferus*, the kerosene lamp without which Hodan would never have been able to read and write her songs late into the night, and Shafici, the youngest of the boys, would not have been able to perform his hand-shadow plays on the wall; the figures were so clumsy and ungainly that they made us die laughing. "You create great entertainment out of shadows and a lot of imagination," Said told him.

All in all, the seven of us tucked into that little room had loads of fun before going to sleep each night, trying not to let our mother and father hear us, or Yassin, Ali's father, who slept across the way from us with Ali and his three brothers. A few steps away from me. Ali and I had been born three days apart and were separated by just a very few steps.

Since we'd come into the world, Ali and I had shared food and the outhouse every day. And of course dreams and hopes, which come with eating and shitting, as *aabe*, my father, always said.

Nothing ever separated us. Ali for me was always like a boy version of Hodan, and Hodan a graceful Ali. We three were always together, just the three of us; our world was complete; there was nothing that could separate us, even though Ali is a Darod and I'm an Abgal, the clans that have been at war since eight weeks before we were born, in March 1991.

Our mothers gave birth to us, the lastborn, while the clans gave birth to war: our "big sister," as my mother and father always said. An evil sister, yet someone who knows you perfectly, who knows very well how easy it is to make you happy or sad.

Living in the same house, as Ali and I did, was forbidden. We were supposed to hate each other, the way the other Abgal and Darod hated each other. But no. Instead we always did things our own way, including eating and shitting.

The morning that Ali and I became brother and sister we were training for the annual race through the districts of Moga' dishu. It was two weeks away, and to me that seemed like an eternity. Race day was the most important day of the year for me.

Friday was a holiday and there was also a curfew in effect, so you could go around freely and run through the streets of the city, surrounded by all that whiteness.

Everything is white in Mogadishu.

The walls of the buildings, riddled by bullets or nearly demolished by bombs, are almost all white, or gray or ochre or yellowish; in any case, light colored. Even the poorest dwellings, like ours, made of mud and brushwood, soon become white like the dust of the streets, which settles on the facades as on everything else.

When you run through Mogadishu, you raise a cloud of fine, sandy powder behind you. Ali and I created two white trails that very slowly vanished toward the sky. We always ran the same route; those streets had become our personal training field.

When we ran past the rundown bars where old men sat playing cards or drinking *shaat*, tea, our dust would end up in their glasses. Every time. We did it on purpose. Then they'd pretend to get up to run after us, and we'd speed up and leave them behind in no time, raising still more dust.

It had become a game—we laughed and the old men laughed a little too. We had to be careful where we stepped, however, because at night they burned the garbage and the next morning the streets were littered with charred remains. Gas cans, oil tins, shreds of tires, banana peels, broken bottles, anything you can think of. In the distance, as we ran, we could see scores of smoldering heaps, countless little erupting volcanoes.

Before slipping into the narrow alleys leading to the big street that hugged the coast, we always went along Jamaral Daud, a broad two-lane boulevard with the usual dusty surface and a row of acacia trees on either side.

We loved to run by the national monument, the parliament, the national library, the courthouse. Lined up in front of the complex were the street vendors, their colorful cloths spread out on the ground, displaying their wares: everything from tomatoes and carrots to windshield wipers. The men dozed beneath the trees lining the boulevard until a customer showed up, and when we ran by they looked at us as if we were a couple of martians. They made fun of us.

"Where are you two rascals going in such a hurry? It's a holiday!"



day. Have fun, take it easy,” they called as we sped past.

“Home to your wife, you old sleepyhead!” Ali replied. Some?

times they threw a banana at us, or a tomato or an apple.

Ali would stop, pick them up, and then sprint away.

The race was an event. To me it seemed like it was even more important than July 1, our national holiday, the day we declared independence from Italian colonizers.

As usual, I wanted to win, but I was only eight years old, and everyone was participating, even the adults. At the race the year before I’d finished in eighteenth place, and this time I wanted to cross the finish line in the top five.

When my father and mother saw me so motivated, from the time I was little, they tried to figure out what was going through my head.

“Will you win again this time, Samia?” Aabe Yusuf, my father, teased me. Sitting in the courtyard on a woven straw chair, he pulled me to him and ruffled my hair with those huge hands of his. I enjoyed doing the same thing to him, running my short, skinny little fingers through that thick black mane or

pounding his chest through the white linen shirt. Next he would grab me and, big and strong as he was, lift me up in the air with only one arm, then set me back down on his lap.

“I haven’t won yet, Aabe, but I will soon.”

“You look like a fawn, you know that, Samia? You’re my favorite little fawn,” he’d say then, and hearing his big deep voice become tender made my knees tremble.

“Aabe, I’m swift *as* a fawn, I’m *not* a fawn. . . .”

“So tell me. . . . How do you think you can win against those kids who are bigger than you?”

“By running faster than them, Aabe! Maybe not yet, but someday I’ll be the fastest runner in all of Mogadishu.”

He would burst out laughing, and if my mother, Hooyo

Dahabo, was nearby, she too would laugh out loud.

But right after that, while he was still holding me tight, Aabe would become melancholy. “Someday, of course, little Samia. Someday . . .”

I tried to convince him. “You know, Aabe, some things you just know. I’ve known since before I could talk that someday I’ll be a champion. I’ve known since I was two years old.”

“Lucky you, my little Samia. I, however, would just like to know when this damn war will end.”

Then he put me down and went back to staring straight ahead, his face grim.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Lourdes Williams:**

Information is provisions for individuals to get better life, information nowadays can get by anyone on everywhere. The information can be a know-how or any news even a concern. What people must be consider if those information which is inside the former life are challenging to be find than now is taking seriously which one is appropriate to believe or which one typically the resource are convinced. If you get the unstable resource then you buy it as your main information you will see huge disadvantage for you. All of those possibilities will not happen throughout you if you take Don't Tell Me You're Afraid: A Novel as your daily resource information.

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#### **Willie Navarro:**

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