

1. DESIRE

LEAVES COVERED the yard of a formerly grand house on Rutger Street in Utica, New York. Inside, Sadia Ambure—wearing a fleece jacket and a long zebra-striped skirt—walked around her living room, holding her newborn sister, Rahama.

The baby had a thick crop of dark hair and wore a striped onesie. Sadia had hardly put the baby down all week.

“You know who’s my best friend in the house?” Sadia asked her 19-year-old sister, Mana. “The baby! She won’t tell anyone my secrets.”

Mana, rail thin, with dark circles under her eyes, said, “Rahama brings charm to our family.”

“She loves me way better,” Sadia said.

“But you don’t want kids.”

“I don’t.”

“It will be sad if you don’t have any,” said Mana, the eldest of their mother’s 11 children. “I want a lot. I’m used to them.”

“I’ll have *one* kid,” Sadia, 15, said. “A son.” There were only two boys in their family.

A total of 19 family members—including her grandparents, aunts, and uncles—lived in the house her grandmother, Halima, bought for \$55,000 in 2011.

Halima, then 49, painted the walls sky blue, lavender, and deep purple. She ordered red brocade couches from a Saudi Arabian catalog, and hung long drapes, which are always kept closed.

The elegant, but run-down house—with 13 bedrooms and 2 large parlors—has been owned by a succession of families since the 1920s: native Uticans, Italian immigrants, then Bosnian immigrants, reflecting the changing makeup of East Utica. It was used as a drug rehabilitation center in the 1990s.

“Boys are easier to handle,” Sadia said. “They’ll sit down and watch anything on TV. Girls are harder—we fight.”

Her uncle, Yusuf—a small, handsome man—crossed the room, heading out to the Turning Stone Resort Casino, where he worked as a cook.

“You never in your life cook for us!” Sadia called out.

“If you had something interesting in the house, I’d cook it,” he said. “Your grandmother is very conservative—she only likes African food. I cook Italian and a little French.”

It hit Sadia that she was hungry: “I love steak with mushrooms and onions,” she said. But what she really craved was a Subway sandwich. They were forbidden by her mother—and had to be hidden in the refrigerator. It drove her crazy that she had to ask her mother’s permission for everything—even to go to the store.

“Can you get me Subway?” Sadia asked Mana.

“Today is not the day.”

“The kids get pizza when they’re good.”

“Not today,” Mana said. “You hear them?” she asked, looking up at the ceiling. There was the thudding sound of children running. “I told them to be quiet.”

Sadia lay Rahama on the deep-blue rug and drew her tiny sneakered feet into the air. The name Rahama translates as mercy or compassion from Allah. But to Sadia, it means unexpected gift from God.

Sadia buried her face in the baby’s belly.

Her anxiety from the past tumultuous months drained away. She felt hopeful.

It was late October 2013; she wanted to get things back on track. Stop fighting with other girls at school. Concentrate on her classes. And most difficult of all—get along with her formidable mother, who was raising her kids by herself.

Sadia was filled with desires: “I want to be a writer,” she said. “But it’s hard for me, a foreigner.” Her family—members of the Somali Bantu tribe—arrived in the United States from a Kenyan refugee camp in 2004. Still in ESL classes—though at the top level—she worried she did not speak or write as well as native-born students.

But school bored her—and she did not want to put in the effort regular classes would take.

She was obsessed with the television show *Game of Thrones*. “That

writer has the wildest imagination,” she said. “How could somebody be so good?” Someday, she hoped to create her own TV show. “I want somebody to remember me.”

She had other desires: “I want to be a model, but my family won’t let me,” she said. “I want to go away to school, but my family won’t let me.”

Holding the baby, she drew aside the drapes: Across the street stood two large brick Victorian houses.

“I don’t want to go to MVCC,” Sadia said, referring to Mohawk Valley Community College in Utica. “I want something big.”

Late at night, Ali Sarhan, 45, an Iraqi interpreter—who formerly worked for ABC News in Baghdad—feels pulled back home.

It is quiet on South Street—only three blocks over from Sadia’s family’s house—where he lives in an apartment with his girlfriend, Heidi Bakert, a Utica native. But he cannot sleep.

“Ninety percent of my problems in the world are that my sisters aren’t married,” he explained.

His sisters are single by choice: Retaj, 39, and Hawra, 32, both linguists, work for the Iraqi government. They live with their mother—who, before retiring, also worked for the government—in the family’s home in Baghdad. There are six bedrooms and two kitchens. “My sisters have everything they need,” Ali said. “The house, cars, money.”

It was spring 2016; security in Baghdad had gotten better. “Things feel normal,” he said. Always very social, his mother and sisters come and go—working, visiting friends, and attending cultural events.

But Ali, the only son—nearly 6,000 miles away—is the head of the household: He worries about his mother suddenly falling ill. And about his sisters—so independent now—growing old, alone. “There will be nobody to protect them,” he said.

“Until I die, they are my responsibility.”

He had a brother.

He tries not to think about Saif, who was two years older. Like Ali, he was almost six feet tall, but sunnier, and more traditional. He was different in another way: “He didn’t judge people,” Ali said. “Everybody loved him like crazy.”

Ali cannot imagine his mother and sisters moving to Utica: “They

have a beautiful life,” he said. “They would not come here, go to the refugee center, and find work. For them, Utica would be a place to visit for maybe two or three days.”

And he cannot go home: He left in 2008, after receiving death threats because of his work as an interpreter for Peter Jennings and other American journalists.

To quiet his mind, Ali thinks about the Salmon River, an hour outside Utica. Large and majestic, it flows 44 miles west, before emptying into eastern Lake Ontario. Ali always liked to fish, but rarely had a chance to in Iraq. In those days, he loved to watch men grill steelhead in large, open pits in Baghdad’s markets. He would get one wrapped in newspaper to take home.

Some winter weekends, Ali heads to the river with four Palestinian friends, who also lived in Iraq. They all grew up in 110-degree summer heat but stand happily in freezing water, in a spot where the dark silver, speckled trout gather—especially at daybreak and at the end of a rainy day.

Ali is surprised: Over the past year, the small upstate city has sneaked up on him. He loves Heidi, who is warm and high-spirited. They have a circle of close friends. He joined a mosque.

“But if security gets better for me,” he said about Baghdad, “I’ll be the first one back.”

Utica has no skyline. No grand boulevard.

But at 2 a.m., Mersiha Omeragic, 40, saw the sprinkling of neon lights on North Genesee Street—Delmonico’s Italian Steakhouse, Best Western, McDonald’s—and felt the same thrill she did arriving as a 19-year-old refugee.

She was returning from a trip to Paris.

Driving into the darkened downtown with her husband and four kids, past the low brick and brownstone buildings—some vacant—and the old Stanley Theatre, she does not see a down-and-out city.

Mersiha—who runs a bakery from her home—sees potential.

She dreams of opening a café and serving her cakes and Bosnian pastries to native Uticans—and to the newcomers: Bosnians, Burmese, and Sudanese.

“We have a lot of youth,” she tells her husband, Hajrudin, 45, referring to the students at MVCC and Utica College. “A lot of diversity.”

Hajrudin is more cautious, less optimistic; he spent time in a concentration camp during the Bosnian War. He reminds her that most new restaurants fail.

“We need to attract young and old,” she says.

They pulled up to their house on Blandina Street. It is five blocks away from Ali’s apartment.

Fifteen years ago, Mersiha and Hajrudin, newly engaged, were walking down Blandina Street when they saw a For Sale sign. The house had old siding, but it was big, with a porch and a long driveway leading to a two-car garage. The elderly owner was clipping bushes in his front yard and greeted the young couple. “Richard was Italian—his wife too,” Mersiha said. “He invited us in. He said, ‘I heard a lot of good things about Bosnians.’”

The two couples spoke all afternoon. “Richard told us, ‘I can see you living in this house for years. You remind me of us.’”

Going in the side door, Mersiha entered the darkened kitchen. The air was humid; it was late August 2015. Her husband carried their youngest son, Elhan, 4, who was asleep. Her three older kids trailed behind. She and her husband had renovated the house themselves: putting in a new kitchen and two new bathrooms, and building rooms for the children in the attic.

She did not stop, heading upstairs. She tucked Elhan and her daughter, Ajla, 9, into bed. She steered Ismar, 16, and Faris, 14, toward their bunk beds.

Back downstairs, she told Hajrudin, who is thin with a lined face, “I need you to go to Walmart for the eggs, milk, butter.”

Then she made herself a cup of thick Turkish coffee.

She had a rough night ahead. It was Wednesday. Saturday, she was catering a large wedding. She needed to produce a four-tier wedding cake and a dessert table for 250 people.

And in six hours, she needed to be at the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees for her full-time job teaching English as a second language.

She headed downstairs to the bakery. “I always work, work, work!” she said.

It was well lit, with walls the color of eggplants. Scores of bottled spices and homemade preserves filled the glass-covered cabinets. Sacks of flour, sugar, and nuts lined the counters.

Tying a bandana over her short, dark hair, she turned the light on in the next room; it looked like an artist's studio in Provence. There was an olive-colored love seat, small tables, and a hand-painted cabinet.

Strewn everywhere were pastries. Pistachio macarons were piled in a decanter. There was a stack of brownies under glass; two logs of strudel stuffed with Bosnian plums; and seeded rolls under a cloth napkin.

There was a luxuriant carelessness to the display. She looked around, happily; this is where she holds wedding tastings and does photo shoots.

Then, putting on her pink baker's smock, *Chef Mersiha* on the breast pocket, she brought a heavy bag of flour to the kitchen worktable. Always next to her is a framed photograph of her mother—a serious, dark-eyed young woman.

"My wrists and arms hurt," Mersiha said about the toll baking has taken on her body. "I had to have back surgery on my two discs."

"I should have used a pad," she added, about the hard linoleum floor. She recently tossed her flip-flops for supportive sneakers.

It was 2:30 a.m.: Rolling up her sleeves, she began assembling her bowls, spoons, and knives.