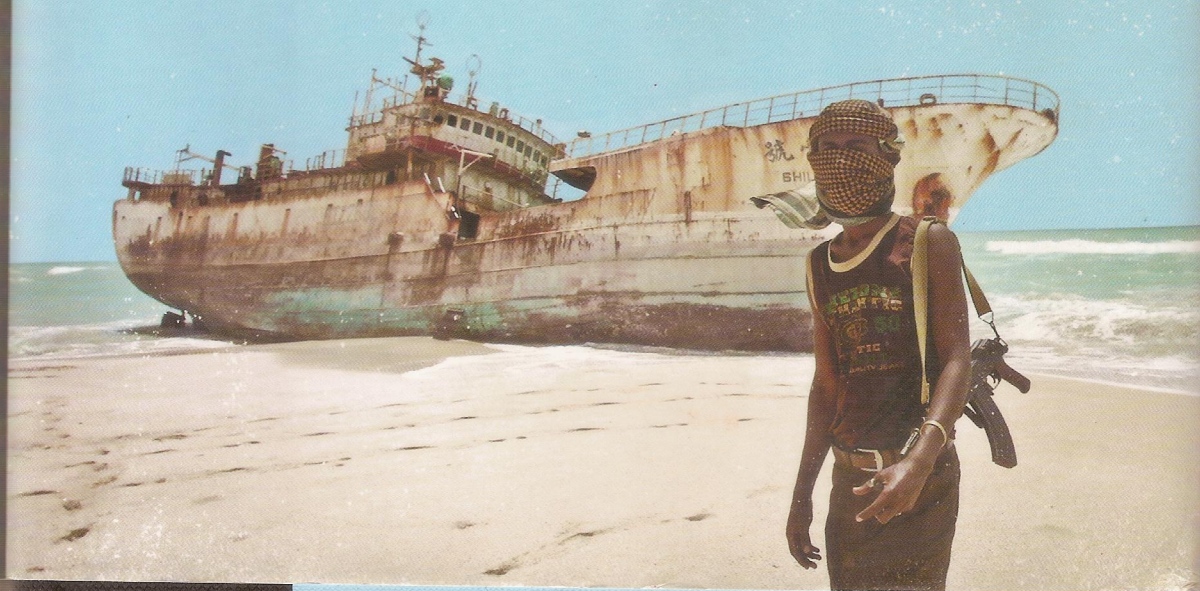


MICHAEL SCOTT MOORE

THE DESERT AND THE SEA

977 DAYS CAPTIVE ON
THE SOMALI PIRATE COAST



Part 1

THE RUMOR KITCHEN



I

My father, who wasn't very original, used to say, "Curiosity killed the cat," and of course I first went to the Horn of Africa out of curiosity. I liked the strange distances of the arid savanna, the rocky desert sound of the languages, the lack of Western pleasantries. Later I wanted to write about a pirate gang jailed in Hamburg. Their marathon trial was famous in Europe; it represented the first proceeding on German soil against any pirate in more than four centuries. I'd reported on it for *Spiegel Online*, where I worked in Berlin, and it seemed to me that a book about the trial and some underreported aspects of Somali piracy might be interesting.

I also went as a student of Ashwin Raman's. He was an Indian documentary maker, a war correspondent for German TV, and I first met him in Djibouti in 2009, while I worked on a series of magazine columns about pirates. Djibouti is a small nation squeezed into East Africa at the mouth of the Red Sea, and its capital was a grid of crumbling French colonial buildings with occasional tent neighborhoods—slums—that smelled like goat. The heat and glare were punishing. The traditional hotel for Europeans and wayward Americans was the expensive Hotel Méridien, just out of town. Drivers who picked me up for appointments in Djibouti were universally baffled that I hadn't reserved a room there. "It's a nice hotel," said a young French expatriate who ferried me to a NATO ship on the first morning. He frowned with one corner of his mouth. "You are the first journalist from Europe I have met who has not stayed there." But I'd avoided the Méridien for the simple reason that it would tell me nothing about Djibouti. "I don't even know where your hotel

is," the driver confessed when we got stuck in traffic. "I never come downtown."

I met Ashwin at Camp Lemonnier, an American base outside Djibouti Ville. We toured it together and interviewed the admiral in charge. By sheer coincidence, we both lived in Germany. Also by coincidence, we had both scorned the *Méridien*. (We were both cheap.) Ashwin's war-zone documentaries had won international broadcast awards, but he used nothing fancier than a palm-size digital camera. "I just film what I see, you know. That's all." On the job he looked like an Indian tourist making films for his grandchildren, but he had a talent for moving in and out of dangerous places. When we met, he had just finished a month of reporting with Somalia's Islamist fighters, al-Shabaab, by pretending to be a Pakistani Muslim.

Ashwin had led a colorful life. When he left India for the first time, in 1968, as a student bound for Oxford, the road to Britain had presented a complicated adventure; there were no suitable long-distance flights. Instead, a cargo boat intended for pilgrims to Mecca, a wooden hajj dhow, had carried him north and west along the fringes of the Arabian Sea. "I don't know if you have ever been on a dhow, but it can be a very peaceful way to travel. We had calm and beautiful sailing until the next stop, Karachi," in Pakistan. Humor rumbled in Ashwin's voice: "Then all these Muslim guys got on, and from there it was total chaos."

He disembarked near the head of the Persian Gulf, in Kuwait, and took a bus to Baghdad. He planned to board a train to Europe, "but when we entered Baghdad, on the first day, we saw a public hanging," he said. "It was one of the first hangings of the new Baathist regime. So it is interesting. I was in Iraq at the beginning of Saddam Hussein's rise to power, and at the very end."

He'd traveled to Iraq five or six times as a filmmaker for Ger-

man TV, to Afghanistan more than twenty. Something about him reminded me of V. S. Naipaul. He could be impish and kind, but he never said kind things. He was Oxford educated and chronically unimpressed. After a couple of hours at Camp Lemonnier, I had to mention the resemblance.

"I have met Naipaul," he said. "An extremely unpleasant man, I can assure you."

Ashwin wanted to return to Somalia to make a film about pirates and suggested traveling together. The idea flattered me. I needed a mentor for this kind of work. But for now I wasn't making any definite plans; I was getting to know East Africa. One step at a time.

Camp Lemonnier sat on an old French Foreign Legion base behind enormous berms of sand. It resembled an American town built from shipping containers. There were basketball courts and Quonset huts and little paved roads with street signs. Ashwin and I shopped for toothpaste and magazines at the Navy Exchange (a "NAVEX"), which could have been a drugstore airlifted from suburban L.A. It took me back to childhood in California—the fluorescent lights, the mouthwash, the Doritos, the ibuprofen. The Jack Daniel's and greeting cards. Desert heat pressing on an overcooled box of cheap racked clothing and a thousand brands of shampoo. One reason I lived in Berlin was to get away from this kind of thing, but the banality itself—the overpriced junk, all the stuff you could live without—had a pull of its own. The fluorescent lights reminded me of standing in line with my dad once to buy a bottle of something on a hot afternoon in L.A., when he was distracted, unbalanced, and possibly drunk, and he let his hot cigarette burn my arm. He was awfully sorry, and he made it up with some strands of licorice, but maybe these associations had kept me at a safe distance from American drugstores as an adult. At the Djibouti NAVEX, in any case, I caught a taste of the countersentiment, the weird lure of such

dysfunctional places. "If I were stuck on a lonely island, I would never feel homesick for Berlin," the German cabarettist Kurt Weill said a few years before his death, in 1950. "I would feel homesick for a drugstore in New York City."

II

I've made my father sound like a dolt, but that's not what I wanted. In the last years of his life, he could be rough mannered and forgetful, but I remember him as an eager and energetic man. He had a rakehell smile and a receding hairline, and our first years together had played out like a dream of suburban family life in the San Fernando Valley, in a big yellow house with a farmlike garden and a Doughboy pool.

He'd met my mom in Germany, during a stint in Europe for Lockheed. He'd spent most of his career as an aerospace engineer in California. When NATO needed a version of the F-104 Starfighter for its European fleet, Lockheed sent a team of engineers from L.A. to listen to the wishes of generals from Italy and France and tweak certain features on the plane. Mom at the time was a tart-humored secretary in her early twenties. She worked in the Lockheed office in Koblenz, a city across the Rhine from her small hometown.

When Dad first checked in for work, he asked for the "restroom," according to family legend. Mom had never encountered this word in English. *The poor man*, she thought—he must be jet-lagged. Like a well-mannered receptionist, she ushered him into the conference room and invited him to rest in there.

"You gotta be kidding," Dad said, according to family legend.

"Yes, it's not in use right now," offered Mom.

"In the potted plants?"

"Wherever you like," said Mom, unruffled, and stepped away on clacking heels.

Dad and most of his Lockheed friends returned to California with German wives. Their circle of friends while I was a kid consisted of garrulous Rhineland mothers with a taste for white wine and skeptical, conservative engineer dads. The first person I intended to marry, as a kindergartner, was the daughter of Denis and Sylvia Lyon, friends of my parents from Koblenz. They owned a little dachshund who felt overstimulated whenever guests came over and charged around their desert-suburban home, a miniature reminder of the family's maternal origins.

Dad worked on electrical systems for satellites and passenger jets, but he was also a drunk, so there was a constant tension between our suburban idyll and his alcoholic rage. He tried to kick his addictions only after he and Mom had split—after she kicked him out—and during the hot summer of 1981 he died in a cigarette-smelling bachelor apartment on Reseda Boulevard, near our local Catholic church. Mom said it was a heart attack. A few months later, we moved to a smaller house in Redondo Beach with less lawn, less upkeep, near the beaches, where the inland California winds wouldn't inflame her allergies.

I spent all of my childhood and most of my young adulthood in California, southern as well as northern, but the materialism and the god-awful traffic seemed as irrational to me as the monolithic aerospace and movie industries. As a boy, I had discovered a box in our hallway closet filled with coins my parents had collected from around the world—not just German marks but also French and Swiss francs, Mexican pesos, and British pounds. These currencies

seemed wonderfully exotic, and to slake my sudden and powerful wanderlust I started a stamp collection. But the desire to travel never subsided, and when my first marriage ended, in my thirties, I moved to Berlin, hoping to put my idle German passport to use and thinking with a measure of pride that I would never have to deal with Californian banality again. By “banality” I meant marriage and divorce, but also drugstores, U.S. politics, TV news, rush-hour traffic, vast American supermarkets, and everything that reminded me of the painful and tedious past.

The life I established in 2005 was quiet but pleasant, in a bachelor apartment overlooking a tree-grown park in eastern Berlin. I built some of the best friendships of my life in that neighborhood; I learned to love the languid, long-lit summers as well as the frozen winters. But I missed the ocean, and when I learned about an odd little surf scene in Germany, I decided to write a book about surfing, to show how a non-American tradition had evolved into a big American craze and then proliferated around the world. *Sweetness and Blood* became a travelogue about American influence on the world after World War II, both good and bad, as seeded by surfing hippies and wanderers and recreational Marines.

The research took me to West Africa, Cuba, Morocco, Israel, and the Gaza Strip. It introduced me to florid old pirate stories from Africa and the Caribbean. Large-scale piracy had started to flourish off Somalia around this time, and I followed the hijackings with helpless curiosity from the *Spiegel* newsroom in Berlin. It’s hard to write one adventurous book without thinking about another, and soon the headlines began to annoy me. Conventional wisdom about Somali pirates focused on their cruelty: “Forget all the romance of eye patches and parrots—these guys are *mean*.” I thought: *That must be wrong*. I was as full of pirate romance as the next American kid, but it was clear that the glow of high-seas heroism clinging to

Pirates of the Caribbean was a question of nostalgic Hollywood mistiness and lingering military kitsch. Pirates of old, I figured, were no less mean than Somalis. Of course I was right. What I didn’t realize was how much all pirates had in common.

In the 1980s, Lou Reed wrote a song about “video violence,” about an irrational pop-fueled world where people were in thrall to explosions and gunfire on TV. His prophetic bit of doggerel came before Columbine-style gun massacres were a routine irruption of evil in everyday American life. It came before the Twin Towers fell, before the Iraq invasion, before the most lurid scenes of cinematic imagination had oozed like gore into our headlines. The rise of modern pirates buzzing off Somalia was an example of entropy in my lifetime, and it seemed important to know why there were pirates at all.



In Djibouti I also boarded a NATO warship and sailed for a few days in the Gulf of Aden. The ship was a Turkish frigate, the *Gediz*, which had a good record of catching pirates off northern Somalia, and its captain, Hasan Özyurt, made frustrated noises because he couldn’t catch more. He grumbled about NATO’s rules of engagement; he wanted permission to get tough. Great world powers had kept the ancient crime of piracy quelled for almost two hundred years, he said. “It is an embarrassment for our civilization that they are here.”

Captain Özyurt was more or less right. Piracy had never vanished from the planet, but the last severe and famous phase of it was the Barbary era, when Ottoman rulers on the North African