



*She risked life and limb fleeing an abusive Somali boarding school for wayward Muslim women and girls.*

*But when Jasmin Osman returned home to Columbus, she did something just as courageous:*

*She told her story.*

# JASMIN'S ESCAPE

BY SUZANNE GOLDSMITH ||| PHOTOS BY TIM JOHNSON

Friday was the day Jasmin Osman chose for her escape. A Friday would be best, she remembers thinking, because it was the day off for the more agile of the two female guards at Daarul Rayxaan, the abusive “boarding school” in Hargeisa, Somaliland, where Jasmin, then 19, had been imprisoned for more than seven months. The other woman was overweight, and Jasmin figured she could outrun her. Early in the morning, the two male guards would still be sleeping. And on this Friday, unlike so many others, Jasmin was allowed to sleep without her legs chained together.

Jasmin woke before the other girls and slipped outside unseen. She watched from the back of the house as they rose and began their day. “Five minutes pass,” she says. “I’m like, ‘Hmm.’ Another five minutes pass. I’m like, ‘Wow. They’re really not looking for me.’”

Later, she learned another girl had noticed her absence and stuffed her bed so others wouldn’t become suspicious. Perhaps that’s what made the difference this time, as opposed to all the other times Jasmin had tried to break free.



Jasmin snapped this photo of her chained feet on a cellphone and sent it to her mother.

She ran to the wall that surrounded the school, which was about twice her height of 5 feet and 9 inches, gathered up her long baati, a Somali dress she was required to wear, and began to climb. The wall was smooth, but there were small divots where she was able to insert her fingers and sandaled feet.

At the top were spikes and coils of barbed wire. As she swung one leg up and struggled to part the coils that were already cutting her, she saw a man in the street. Xaaji Abdo, who lived nearby, could see that she was bleeding. He tried to tell her not to jump; it was dangerous. Then he called a nearby friend, Ibrahim Qaalib, who quickly arrived.

“Help me,” Jasmin whispered.

Miraculously, they did. Abdo climbed up and used a hat to protect his hands while pulling apart the coils so Jasmin could scramble onto the top. The men helped her jump into the street. Jasmin didn’t think about the wounds on her legs and hands, or notice that her head scarf had snagged on the wire and was left behind. She started to run.

**THAT DARING ESCAPE ENDED** an ordeal that began in July 2016 with a promise from her parents of a vacation in Uganda. It was a trick. Instead, her mother, a Somali immigrant who lives in Galloway, took her to Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland in the Horn of Africa, and left her at Daarul Rayxaan. There, Jasmin, who grew up in Columbus, Memphis and Denmark, was imprisoned along with about 30 girls aged 13 and up, most of them European- and North American-raised Somalis sent there by parents who thought they had become too Westernized, too wild or too irreligious. Their days included study of the Quran, but also harsh punishment for every infraction. They were beaten with sticks, ropes and garden hoses and given little to eat. The most rebellious, including Jasmin, were hobbled with chains, made to sleep outside alone in the cold, doused in cold water or confined in a tiny, dark room without windows or space even to stand up.

Jasmin was not the first to get out of Daarul Rayxaan. One girl escaped by faking wedding plans; another

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PHOTO: COURTESY SAADIA LIBAN

fabricated a medical crisis. But Jasmin was the first to look back once she was free and help the girls she’d left behind.

Safe in Central Ohio, Jasmin began searching online for information about the other girls. Her search set off a chain of events that began with a visit from the FBI to her home in Hilliard and culminated in the school’s closure. In May of 2017, Somali police conducted an armed raid on the school and, according to press reports, arrested its director. They freed 18 teenage girls, some as young as 13. The girls were returned to their home countries, which included Denmark, Norway, the U.K., Canada and the U.S.

Jasmin’s actions were motivated by a desire to rescue her fellow prisoners and prevent other young women from suffering the same plight. That’s also why she’s now telling her story, which *Columbus Monthly* confirmed with U.S. law enforcement officials, a British relief worker, her mother and both the men who aided her escape. “Sharing this story may have opened new wounds,” says Jasmin, whose story has attracted the attention of the international press, “but it’s also opening doors. Some more people can get help. You never know.”

**JASMIN OSMAN WAS BORN** in Vejle, Denmark, in 1997. Her mother, Saadia Liban, came to Denmark alone at 15 from a refugee camp in Kenya. Saadia never knew her father, and her mother died in the camp. In Denmark, she met and married Qays Osman, a Somali Dane, and when she was 18, Jasmin was born.

After a short and troubled marriage, Saadia left Qays. She took Jasmin and a second daughter to Memphis, Tennessee, where her brother was living. She applied for and was awarded asylum, and all three were granted U.S. citizenship. A few years later, they moved to Columbus, where Saadia remarried and had a third child. The younger two embraced their mother’s conservative lifestyle and religion, but Jasmin was rebellious. She disliked the religious school she attended on the weekends; she abandoned the hijab, or head scarf.

Seeking to put the past behind her, Saadia told her children little about her own history. But Jasmin was curious about her father, and when she joined Facebook, he found her. She begged to be allowed to visit him in London, where he operated a car service. The visit was a disaster. Jasmin, then 15, didn’t get along with her father’s new family and butted heads with him over her independent lifestyle. (Qays didn’t respond to messages seeking comment for this story.)

The three years that followed were rocky. Jasmin felt confused: Was she Danish? American? Somali? Did she belong with her mother or her father? Did anybody care about her? She grew depressed and had a stay at Buckeye Ranch, a residential treatment program for teens.

During that time, Qays unsuccessfully sued to have Jasmin and her sister removed from their mother’s care. Jasmin, who was an honor roll stu-

MAP: BETSY BECKER



Jasmin’s mother told her they were traveling to vacation in Uganda, but after a stop in Dubai they ended their flight in Hargeisa, Somaliland, where her mother left her locked up in an abusive boarding school.

dent at Hilliard Davidson High School during her freshman year, dropped out. She thought maybe she could get a fresh start in Denmark, staying with family members in Vejle. Her mother agreed. “I couldn’t fight Jasmin back and forth,” says Saadia. “It was like breaking this kid in the middle. So I let Jasmin do what she wanted.”

**ONCE IN DENMARK**, Jasmin again struggled against the restrictions placed on her by family. She left them and moved on her own to Copenhagen, where she got a job in a bar. She even got an apartment. Emotionally, however, she was struggling.

In June of 2016, Saadia flew to Copenhagen. She felt Jasmin was drinking too much, mixing alcohol with prescription medications. Jasmin agrees she was in need, although she does not agree that drinking was the root of the problem. “I had a serious attitude,” she says. “I was confused. Nobody was there [for me]. I was acting up.”



Jasmin has been studying real estate at Columbus State Community College.

Qays came to town as well, and for once he and Saadia found a point of agreement: Something had to be done about Jasmin. Qays had a plan, Saadia says, and she agreed to it. Today, she says she was at her wit's end and thought the religious rehabilitation school Qays proposed seemed a good place for Jasmin to wean herself from alcohol. They went to Jasmin together and told her they wanted to take her on a vacation to Uganda. Jasmin would go ahead with her mother, and her father would join them later. Jasmin bought the lie. She was thrilled to see her parents cooperating and excited about the travel, because she'd never been to Africa. "I'm so gullible," she says, shaking her head.

Jasmin and Saadia spent a few days in Dubai, buying traditional Muslim clothes for Jasmin. She wondered why. She also wondered why the next flight did not go straight to Uganda but touched down for a layover in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland. The northern portion of Somalia, Somaliland is a self-declared independent state, although it is viewed by most of the world as an autonomous region of Somalia.

They were seated separately, and when they deplaned, Saadia said a woman she'd met on the plane would take them to her house for some refreshments. "I thought it was weird," Jasmin says. "You're going to just meet some random lady in Somalia and then go chill at her house?"

The woman—who turned out to be Yasmin Suleiman, the head of Daarul Rayxaan—joined them in the baggage claim area. (*Columbus Monthly* was unable to locate Suleiman, but she sent a text message to a Norwegian media outlet claiming Jasmin's story was fabricated.) The three got into a taxi—and then two uniformed police officers got in as well. They demanded Jasmin's and Saadia's passports and other identity cards, as well as Jasmin's laptop. Describing those moments, Jasmin mainly remembers confusion. Why would they take her laptop when she was leaving the airport? Were they going to the police station? What would they do with her papers?

The car stopped in front of tall gates, which swung partway open. Everyone got out. Then two men emerged from inside the gates and took hold of Jasmin.

"I'm like, what is going on? People are grabbing me inside these double doors," says Jasmin. "My mom was screaming, 'This is too aggressive!'" The men dragged Jasmin inside, threatening Saadia with a baton, and closed the gates.

With her mother's screams fading in the distance, the men dragged Jasmin farther into the walled complex, put a metal chain with a padlock around her legs and forced her into a small, dark, boxlike room that she would later come to know well. She cried and yelled and banged on the walls. Eventually, she fell asleep.

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Later, they let her out and removed her chains. Jasmin's mother returned. Jasmin begged to be allowed to leave, but Saadia said no.

She told her daughter to change and get into bed, and she sat with her until she fell asleep. When Jasmin woke the next morning, her leg was chained to the bedpost, and her mother was gone.

**AMONG FAMILIES** in the Somali diaspora, including many in Central Ohio, there is a tradition known as dhaqan celis—return to the culture. It might involve visiting Somalia or another Muslim country for a family vacation, or moving there for a year or more so that children can attend school. In some cases, it involves sending a child to stay with relatives, sometimes for a long period of time.

Families are often motivated by concern that children growing up in Western countries are losing their cultural roots, language and religion, that their girls are not covering their heads, or that their boys are falling in with the wrong people. For some, the outcome of such a return is positive. But that is not always the case. Ifrah Udgoon, a high school science teacher in Reynoldsburg who came to Columbus when she was young and blogs about her Somali-American identity, was sent as a teenager to live for 3 and a half years with an aunt in rural Kenya. She had religious tutoring and attended a high school where she did not speak the language. “My parents thought they were helping me,” she says. Instead, she found the experience traumatizing, and her sense of trust in her parents was broken. “You really need your parents.”

The best reason to take children back to Somalia, says Horsed Noah, director of Masjid Abubakar, a mosque on Columbus' Far West Side attended by many Somalis, is to cultivate an appreciation for the benefits of living in the United States. But if Saadia had sought his counsel, as many families do, says Noah, he would have told her that when children go to Somalia, one or both

parents must go along. Otherwise, “things can go very wrong.”

Some representatives of the local Somali community acknowledged off the record that there have been other cases where young Somali Americans were sent by parents into dangerous or abusive situations. One girl reportedly ran away when her family sent her to the Somali capital of Mogadishu and was missing for two weeks. Indeed, another of the girls imprisoned with Jasmin in Daarul Rayxaan was from Columbus. She has since moved out of state, and *Columbus Monthly* was unable to locate her.

Zerqa Abid, who runs a social program for Muslim youth on Columbus' West Side, befriended Jasmin after a victim specialist with the FBI reached out to her to provide support. Abid feels the impulse to send children away is often motivated by shame, and she would like to see better education for immigrant parents to prevent such incidents. “There is so much community pressure, judging our faith on how our daughters dress,” she says. “It is so hard to function in our community when your daughter is drinking.”

“Who is mentoring these parents?” she asks.

**SULEIMAN, A SOMALI-BORN** Norwegian, allegedly advertised Daarul Rayxaan as a corrective school where wayward Muslim girls would learn the Quran and be taught to behave. She charged parents \$400 to \$500 a month.

Days consisted of five daily prayers, mornings spent memorizing the Quran and afternoons of boredom, at least for Jasmin. Meals were spartan: tea and bread for breakfast and a meager dinner of chicken with onions and potatoes over rice. Jasmin, who became friendly with one of the cooks, watched with amazement as the woman stretched four chicken legs to feed 24 girls.

Jasmin kept herself slightly apart from most of the other girls. Some, she observed,

responded to their situation with optimism, making friends and currying favor with Suleiman, who allowed special privileges to girls who were “good.” A second group, says Jasmin, were simply “broken.”

“They were, like, detached from their body,” she says. “Like their mind is not here.” One girl told Jasmine she had schizophrenia. When she was having what she called an “episode,” talking to unseen people or singing loudly, the guards would beat her to silence her, Jasmine recalls. Another girl arrived at the school pregnant. Shortly after her arrival, she miscarried. After that, says Jasmin, she never spoke.

Jasmin made her first escape attempt early on, managing to climb a wall into an area where the girls threw garbage. Cut by the barbed wire and with her dress filled with cactus prickles, she hobbled a short distance up the street before one of Suleiman's sons captured her.

That night, because of her wounds, she says, Jasmin was allowed to sleep inside. But after subsequent escape attempts, she was punished by being left outside overnight, with only a blanket and pillow, and with her legs chained together. The desert nights were cold, and mosquitoes plagued her. The animal sounds frightened her.

Unlike the girls who withdrew and became submissive, Jasmin grew bolder. She broke things in the house: a television, a window. She hit the male guards. When she misbehaved, they would chain her hands as well as her feet. Sometimes, they'd beat Jasmin with ropes or broom handles. She says she was once burned with a stick that had been heated on the stove. She retains the scar on her leg. And Jasmin began spending more and more time—sometimes days, up to a week—in a new, smaller confinement area Suleiman had created beneath the stairs. She says she was forced to urinate in the corner.

Shakila Taranum Maan is with Southall Black Sisters, a British group that fights

forced marriage and honor crimes against women. She works with five of the seven British girls who were freed from the school. They described the same punishments as Jasmin, she says. One suffered permanent damage to her eyesight, says Maan, from being forced to keep them open while looking at the sun. “Our capacity for torture is immense,” Maan says. “Nothing surprises me.”

**JASMIN'S WEEKLY PHONE CALLS** home were supervised, so she was unable to tell her mother what was happening. But one day in November 2016, the guard was distracted, and Jasmin quickly snapped a photo of her own chained feet and texted it to her mother. The photo shocked Saadia into action. She began sending it, along with an impassioned plea, to anyone she could think of: the Danish consulate, UNICEF, the Ohio legislature. She says no one helped.

Saadia resolved to get Jasmin out herself. She booked a flight to Hargeisa, where she went straight to the school and banged on the gates. “I could hear Jasmin's voice on the other side: ‘Mommy! Mommy!’”

They wouldn't let her in, but Somali police brought Jasmin to the station, where she was reunited with her mother. For a moment, it looked as if they might go home together—but the police would not release Jasmin without her father's permission. The two were forced to wait. They spent a night in a UNICEF safe house, but when Qays arrived, the police arrested Jasmin and Saadia for unclear reasons. After more than a week in jail, Jasmin was taken back to the school. Saadia gave up and flew back to Ohio.

After Saadia left, Jasmin recalls being chained almost all the time. She realized she needed to gain the director's trust if she was ever going to escape. She stopped acting out and was soon rewarded: Suleiman stopped chaining her at night.

Jasmin was fortunate to find willing helpers when she scaled the wall; the two men might just as well have turned her in. Instead, they ran with her a distance from the school to a spot where they helped her hide until she could call Saadia, using Qaalib's phone. They waited with her until Saadia had arranged for a woman in Hargeisa to hide her. The men gave her a sweatshirt to wrap around her head so she would not be seen in the streets uncovered, and got her a taxi. “It was just luck that they didn't laugh at me and walk away,” Jasmin says.

Six days later, Jasmin left Africa. The Danish embassy sent her transit papers and a

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— IFRAH UDGOON

plane ticket, and she flew to Nairobi, where she received a new passport. She then flew to Zurich, then Canada, and then, finally, to Ohio.

**BEFORE MUCH TIME PASSED**, Jasmin began looking for signs of the other girls online. She knew their names, their ages, their countries of origin. She thought about the girls who'd gotten out before her and never tried to help. She would be different. Finally, she found a missing-person post for a British girl named Ruun. She contacted Ruun's friends, who put her in touch with the British foreign office, which in turn contacted the FBI. Agents came to her house and interviewed her, writing everything down. They came back with pictures. She pointed to the photos she recognized. “Yup, that's her. Yup, that's her.”

Because several nations were involved, the FBI won't discuss how the raid on Daarul Rayxaan was conducted, or what the U.S. role was. But a representative did confirm that the information Jasmin provided was critical to making the rescue of the other girls possible.

Norwegian and Somali papers reported that Suleiman was arrested, although according to Tormod Strand, a reporter for NRK, a public TV and radio broadcasting company in Norway, she was released soon after.

After the raid on the school, Jasmin became something of a mini celebrity in Europe. She went back to visit Denmark, where she was profiled in the Danish newspaper *Berninske* and other news outlets. She was on Norwegian television. An independent film company flew her to Somaliland to make a documentary about her experience. A writer approached her about a book deal. Here in Ohio, though, where she has lived since January, few know her story.

**JASMIN WORRIES** about the other girls. Are they getting help reentering the world? “You need help,” she says. “For the first year,

you need a hand. It's like learning how to be yourself again.”

Udgoon, the Reynoldsburg teacher, is one who offered Jasmin a hand, reaching out after reading her story in an online post. She admires what Jasmin accomplished. “She fought really hard to get that place closed down,” she says. “She said, ‘I got out, I’ve gotta reach back and get other people out.’ That's powerful.”

For all the pain she endured, Jasmin's ordeal may, ironically, have helped her learn to be herself. She went to Hargeisa angry and confused. There, she discovered how strong she was—and after she escaped, she used her power to help those left behind. Today, she's on fire to tell her story. She shows the scars on her legs to anyone who asks.

This summer, Jasmin earned a real estate certificate at Columbus State Community College. She has a job offer at Century 21. Longer-term, she has big dreams. She wants to buy a piece of land in California and build a solar farm. Or start a desert music festival. Or buy a house in Denmark to produce rental income. Or maybe lease an office building.

Saadia, today, says she had no idea of the torture Jasmin would experience in Somaliland, but she doesn't regret taking her there; she believes Qays would have sent her there one way or another. By going with her, she at least knew where Jasmin was. She was not able to rescue Jasmin herself, but through connections she made in Somaliland, she was able to get Jasmin to safety once she escaped.

Jasmin, now 22, lives part time with her mother and tries to forgive her. She recognizes that trauma—whether the trauma of war, of early loss, of geographic dislocation or marital conflict—is at the root of her mother's decision to leave her in Hargeisa. She thinks a lot about whether she'll have kids, and how she'll “break the cycle.”

“I'm not able to find my inner peace—not yet,” she says. For now, she's focused on telling her story so others won't be duped as she was. She's also looking for her own apartment.

“Self-sufficiency. That's the goal.” ♦