

Abdulrazak Gurnah

SHORTLISTED FOR THE
BOOKER PRIZE

THE
NOBEL
PRIZE
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2021

PARADISE

A young boy in a school uniform is running on a dirt path towards a hazy landscape. The background features rolling hills and a bright sky. The entire image has a textured, painterly quality with visible brushstrokes in shades of blue, green, and orange.

'By turns touching and horrifying,
it is a novel to be grateful for'

Barry Unsworth

BLOOMSBURY

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021. He is the author of ten novels: *Memory of Departure*, *Pilgrims Way*, *Dottie*, *Paradise* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Award), *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea* (longlisted for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award), *Desertion* (shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize) *The Last Gift*, *Gravel Heart* and *Afterlives* (longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction). He is Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. He lives in Canterbury.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Memory of Departure

Pilgrims Way

Dottie

Admiring Silence

By the Sea

Desertion

The Last Gift

Gravel Heart

Afterlives

Paradise

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For Salma Abdalla Basalama

THE WALLED GARDEN

I

The boy first. His name was Yusuf, and he left his home suddenly during his twelfth year. He remembered it was the season of drought, when every day was the same as the last. Unexpected flowers bloomed and died. Strange insects scuttled from under rocks and writhed to their deaths in the burning light. The sun made distant trees tremble in the air and made the houses shudder and heave for breath. Clouds of dust puffed up at every tramping footfall and a hard-edged stillness lay over the daylight hours. Precise moments like that came back of the season.

He saw two Europeans on the railway platform at that time, the first he had ever seen. He was not frightened, not at first. He went to the station often, to watch the trains come noisily and gracefully in, and then to wait for them to haul themselves out again, marshalled by the scowling Indian signalman with his pennants and whistle. Often Yusuf waited hours for a train to arrive. The two Europeans were also waiting, standing under a canvas awning with their luggage and important-looking goods neatly piled a few feet away. The man was large, so tall that he had to lower his head to avoid touching the canvas under which he sheltered from the sun. The woman stood further back in the shade, her glistening face partly obscured by two hats. Her frilled white blouse was buttoned up at the neck and wrists, and her long skirt brushed her shoes. She was tall and large too, but differently. Where she looked lumpy and malleable, as if capable of taking

another shape, he appeared carved out of a single piece of wood. They stared in different directions, as if they did not know each other. As he watched, Yusuf saw the woman run her handkerchief over her lips, casually rubbing off flakes of dry skin. The man's face was mottled with red, and as his eyes moved slowly over the cramped landscape of the station, taking in the locked wooden storehouses and the huge yellow flag with its picture of a glaring black bird, Yusuf was able to take a long look at him. Then he turned and saw Yusuf staring. The man glanced away at first and then looked back at Yusuf for a long moment. Yusuf could not tear his eyes away. Suddenly the man bared his teeth in an involuntary snarl, curling his fingers in an inexplicable way. Yusuf heeded the warning and fled, muttering the words he had been taught to say when he required sudden and unexpected help from God.

That year he left his home was also the year the woodworm infested the posts in the back porch. His father smacked the posts angrily whenever he passed them, letting them know he knew what game they were up to. The woodworm left trails on the beams that were like the turned-up earth which marked the animal tunnels in the bed of the dry stream. The posts sounded soft and hollow whenever Yusuf hit them, and emitted tiny grainy spores of rot. When he grumbled for food his mother told him to eat the worms.

'I'm hungry,' he wailed at her, in an untutored litany he had been reciting with increasing gruffness with each passing year.

'Eat the woodworm,' his mother suggested, and then laughed at his exaggerated look of disgusted anguish. 'Go on, stuff yourself with it any time you want. Don't let me stop you.'

He sighed in a world-weary way he was experimenting with to show her how pathetic her joke was. Sometimes they ate bones, which his mother boiled up to make a thin soup whose

surface glistened with colour and grease, and in whose depths lurked lumps of black spongy marrow. At worst, there was only okra stew, but however hungry he was Yusuf could not swallow the slimy sauce.

His Uncle Aziz also came to visit them at that time. His visits were brief and far between, usually accompanied by a crowd of travellers and porters and musicians. He stopped with them on the long journeys he made from the ocean to the mountains, to the lakes and forests, and across the dry plains and the bare rocky hills of the interior. His expeditions were often accompanied by drums and tamburis and horns and siwa, and when his train marched into town animals stampeded and evacuated themselves, and children ran out of control. Uncle Aziz gave off a strange and unusual odour, a mixture of hide and perfume, and gums and spices, and another less definable smell which made Yusuf think of danger. His habitual dress was a thin, flowing kanzu of fine cotton and a small crocheted cap pushed back on his head. With his refined airs and his polite, impassive manner, he looked more like a man on a late afternoon stroll or a worshipper on the way to evening prayers than a merchant who had picked his way past bushes of thorn and nests of vipers spitting poison. Even in the heat of arrival, amid the chaos and disorder of tumbled packs, surrounded by tired and noisy porters, and watchful, sharp-clawed traders, Uncle Aziz managed to look calm and at ease. On this visit he had come alone.

Yusuf always enjoyed his visits. His father said they brought honour on them because he was such a rich and renowned merchant – *tajiri mkubwa* – but that was not all, welcome though honour always was. Uncle Aziz gave him, without fail, a ten anna piece every time he stopped with them. Nothing was required of him but that he should present himself at the appropriate time. Uncle Aziz looked out for

him, smiled and gave him the coin. Yusuf felt he wanted to smile too every time the moment arrived, but he stopped himself because he guessed that it would be wrong for him to do so. Yusuf marvelled at Uncle Aziz's luminous skin and his mysterious smell. Even after his departure, his perfume lingered for days.

By the third day of his visit, it was obvious that Uncle Aziz's departure was at hand. There was unusual activity in the kitchen, and the unmistakable, mingled aromas of a feast. Sweet frying spices, simmering coconut sauce, yeasty buns and flat bread, baking biscuits and boiling meat. Yusuf made sure not to be too far away from the house all day, in case his mother needed help preparing the dishes or wanted an opinion on one of them. He knew she valued his opinion on such matters. Or she might forget to stir a sauce, or miss the moment when the hot oil is trembling just enough for the vegetables to be added. It was a tricky business, for while he wanted to be able to keep an eye on the kitchen, he did not want his mother to see him loafing on the lookout. She would then be sure to send him on endless errands, which is bad enough in itself, but it might also cause him to miss saying goodbye to Uncle Aziz. It was always at the moment of departure that the ten anna piece changed hands, when Uncle Aziz would offer his hand to be kissed and stroke the back of Yusuf's head as he bent over it. Then with practised ease he would slip the coin into Yusuf's hand.

His father was usually at work until soon after noon. Yusuf guessed that he would be bringing Uncle Aziz with him when he came, so there was plenty of time to kill. His father's business was running a hotel. This was the latest in a line of businesses with which he had attempted to make his fortune and his name. When he was in the mood he told them stories at home of other schemes which he had thought would pros-

per, making them sound ridiculous and hilarious. Or Yusuf heard him complain of how his life had gone wrong, and everything he had tried had failed. The hotel, which was an eating house with four clean beds in an upstairs room, was in the small town of Kawa, where they had been living for over four years. Before that they had lived in the south, in another small town in a farming district where his father had kept a store. Yusuf remembered a green hill and distant shadows of mountains, and an old man who sat on a stool on the pavement at the storefront, embroidering caps with silk thread. They came to Kawa because it had become a boom town when the Germans had used it as a depot for the railway line they were building to the highlands of the interior. But the boom passed quickly, and the trains now only stopped to take on wood and water. On his last journey, Uncle Aziz had used the line to Kawa before cutting to the west on foot. On his next expedition, he said, he would go as far as he could up the line before taking a north-western or north-eastern route. There was still good trade to be done in either of those places, he said. Sometimes Yusuf heard his father say that the whole town was going to Hell.

The train to the coast left in the early evening, and Yusuf thought Uncle Aziz would be on it. He guessed from something in his manner that Uncle Aziz was on his way home. But you could never be sure with people, and it might turn out that he would take the up-train to the mountains, which left in mid-afternoon. Yusuf was ready for either outcome. His father expected him to make an appearance at the hotel every afternoon after his midday prayers – to learn about the business, his father told him, and to learn to stand on his own feet, but really to relieve the two young men who helped and cleaned up in the kitchen, and who served the food to the customers. The hotel cook drank and cursed, and abused

everyone in sight except Yusuf. He would break off in the middle of a foul-mouthed harangue with smiles when he caught sight of him, but Yusuf still feared and trembled in front of him. On that day he did not go to the hotel, nor did he say his midday prayers, and in the terrible heat of that time of day he did not think anyone would bother to hunt him out. Instead he skulked in shady corners and behind the chicken-houses in the backyard, until he was driven from there by the suffocating smells which rose with the early afternoon dust. He hid in the dark timber-yard next door to their house, a place of dark purple shadows and a vaulting thatch roof, where he listened for the cautious scurrying of stalking lizards and kept a sharp lookout for the ten anna.

He did not find the silence and gloom of the timber-yard disconcerting, for he was accustomed to playing alone. His father did not like him to play far from home. 'We are surrounded by savages,' he said. 'Washenzi, who have no faith in God and who worship spirits and demons which live in trees and rocks. They like nothing better than to kidnap little children and make use of them as they wish. Or you'll go with those other ones who have no care, those loafers and children of loafers, and they'll neglect you and let the wild dogs eat you. Stay here nearby where it's safe, so someone can keep an eye on you.' Yusuf's father preferred him to play with the children of the Indian storekeeper who lived in the neighbourhood, except that the Indian children threw sand and jeered at him when he tried to get near them. 'Golo, golo,' they chanted at him, spitting in his direction. Sometimes he sat with the groups of older boys who lounged under shades of trees or the lees of houses. He liked being with the boys because they were always telling jokes and laughing. Their parents worked as vibarua, labouring for the Germans on the line-construction gangs, doing piece-work at the railhead, or

portering for travellers and traders. They were only ever paid for the work they did, and at times there was no work. Yusuf had heard the boys say that the Germans hanged people if they did not work hard enough. If they were too young to hang, they cut their stones off. The Germans were afraid of nothing. They did whatever they wanted and no one could stop them. One of the boys said that his father had seen a German put his hand in the heart of a blazing fire without being burnt, as if he were a phantom.

The vibarua who were their parents came from all over, from the Usambara highlands north of Kawa, from the fabulous lakes to the west of the highlands, from the war-torn savannahs to the south and many from the coast. They laughed about their parents, mocking their work-songs and comparing stories of the disgusting and sour smells they brought home. They made up names for the places their parents came from, funny and unpleasant names which they used to abuse and mock each other. Sometimes they fought, tumbling and kicking and causing each other pain. If they could, the older boys found work as servants or errand runners, but mostly they lounged and scavenged, waiting to grow strong enough for the work of men. Yusuf sat with them when they let him, listening to their conversation and running errands for them.

To pass the time they gossiped or played cards. It was with them that Yusuf first heard that babies lived in penises. When a man wanted a child, he put the baby inside a woman's stomach where there is more room for it to grow. He was not the only one to find the story incredible, and penises were pulled out and measured as the debate heated up. Soon enough the babies were forgotten and the penises became interesting in their own right. The older boys were proud to display themselves and forced the younger ones to expose their little abdallas for a laugh.

Sometimes they played kipande. Yusuf was too small ever to get the chance to bat, since age and strength determined the batting order, but whenever he was allowed he joined the crowd of fielders who frantically chased across dusty open spaces after a flying slug of wood. Once his father saw him running in the streets with a hysterical mob of children chasing after a kipande. He gave him a hard look of disapproval and slapped him before sending him home.

Yusuf made himself a kipande, and adapted the game so he could play it on his own. His adaptation consisted of pretending he was also all the other players, with the advantage that this way he could bat for as long as he felt like it. He chased up and down the road in front of their house, shouting with excitement and trying to catch a kipande he had just hit as high in the air as he could, to give himself time to get under it.

2

So on the day of Uncle Aziz's departure, Yusuf had no qualms about wasting a few hours while he stalked the ten anna piece. His father and Uncle Aziz came home together at one in the afternoon. He could see their bodies shimmering in the liquid light as they approached slowly on the stony path which led to the house. They walked without talking, their heads lowered and their shoulders hunched against the heat. The lunch was already laid out for them on the best rug in the guest room. Yusuf himself had lent a hand in the final preparations, adjusting the positions of some of the dishes for best effect and earning a wide grateful smile from his tired mother. While he was there, Yusuf took the opportunity to reconnoitre the feast. Two different kinds of curries, chicken and minced mutton. The best Peshawar rice, glistening with

ghee and dotted with sultanas and almonds. Aromatic and plump buns, maandazi and mahamri, overflowing the cloth-covered basket. Spinach in a coconut sauce. A plate of water-beans. Strips of dried fish charred in the dying embers which had cooked the rest of the food. Yusuf almost wept with longing as he surveyed this plenty, so different from the meagre meals of that time. His mother frowned at the performance, but his face turned so tragic that she laughed in the end.

Once the men were seated, Yusuf went in with a brass pitcher and bowl, and a clean linen cloth draped over his left arm. He poured the water slowly while Uncle Aziz and then his father rinsed their hands. He liked guests like Uncle Aziz, liked them very much. He thought this as he crouched outside the door of the guest room, in case his services were required. He would have been happy enough to stay in the room and watch, but his father had glared at him irritably and chased him out. There was always something happening when Uncle Aziz was around. He ate all his meals at their house even though he slept at the hotel. That meant that there were often interesting morsels left over after they had finished – unless his mother got a clear look at them first, when they usually ended up in a neighbour's house or in the stomach of one of the ragged mendicants who sometimes came to the door, mumbling and whining their praises of God. His mother said it was kinder to give food away to neighbours and to the needy than to indulge in gluttony. Yusuf could not see the sense of that, but his mother told him that virtue was its own reward. He understood from the sharpness in her voice that if he said any more he would have to listen to another lengthy sermon, and he had plenty enough of that from the Koran-school teacher.

There was one mendicant Yusuf did not mind sharing *his* leftovers with. His name was Mohammed, a shrunken man with a reedy voice who stank of bad meat. Yusuf had found

him sitting by the side of the house one afternoon eating handfuls of red earth which he scooped out of the broken outside wall. His shirt was grimy and stained and he wore a pair of the most ragged shorts Yusuf had ever seen. The rim of his cap was dark brown with sweat and dirt. Yusuf watched him for a few minutes, debating whether he remembered seeing anyone who looked dirtier, and then went to get him a bowl of leftover cassava. After a few mouthfuls, which Mohammed ate between whines of gratitude, he told him that the tragedy of his life was the weed. He had once been well off, he said, with watered land and some animals, and a mother who loved him. During the day he worked his sweet land to the utmost of his strength and endurance, and in the evening he sat with his mother while she sang God's praises and told him fabulous stories of the great world.

But then the evil came upon him, and it came with such force that he abandoned mother and land in search of the weed, and now he roamed the world taking kicks and eating earth. Nowhere in his wanderings had he eaten food which had the perfection of his mother's cooking, until perhaps now, this piece of cassava. He told Yusuf stories of his travels while they sat against the side wall of the house, his high-pitched voice animated and his wizened young face cracking into smiles and broken-toothed grins. 'Learn from my terrible example, my little friend. Shun the weed, I beg you!' His visits never lasted long, but Yusuf was always glad to see him and hear about his latest adventures. He loved best to hear descriptions of Mohammed's watered land south of Witu and the life he led during those years of happiness. Next best he loved to hear the story of the first time Mohammed was taken to the house of the mad in Mombasa. 'Wallahi, I tell you no lies, young one. They took me for mad! Can you believe that?' There they had filled his mouth with salt and slapped him in

the face if he tried to spit it out. They had only given him peace if he sat quietly while the rocks of salt melted in his mouth and corroded his guts. Mohammed talked of the torture with a shudder but also with amusement. He had other stories which Yusuf did not like, about a blind dog he had seen stoned to death and about children abandoned to cruelty. He mentioned a young woman he had once known in Witu. His mother had wanted him to marry, he said, and then he smiled stupidly.

Yusuf tried to hide him at first, afraid that his mother would chase him away, but Mohammed cringed and whined with such gratitude whenever she appeared that he became one of her favourite mendicants. 'Honour your mother, I beg you!' he would whimper in her hearing. 'Learn from my terrible example.' It was not unheard of, his mother told Yusuf later, for wise people or prophets or sultans to disguise themselves as mendicants and mix with the ordinary and the unfortunate. It is always best to treat them with respect. Whenever Yusuf's father appeared, Mohammed rose and left, making cringing noises of deference.

Once Yusuf stole a coin from the pocket of his father's jacket. He did not know why he did it. While his father was having a wash after returning from work, Yusuf had plunged a hand into the smelly jacket which was hanging on a nail in his parents' room and taken a coin. It was not something he planned. When he looked at the coin later it turned out to be a silver rupee and he was frightened to spend it. He was surprised not to be discovered and was tempted to put it back. Several times he thought of giving it to Mohammed but was afraid of what the mendicant would say or accuse him of. A silver rupee was the most money Yusuf had ever held in his hand. So he hid it in a crevice at the base of a wall, and sometimes teased a corner of it out with a stick.

Uncle Aziz spent the afternoon in the guest room, having a siesta. To Yusuf it seemed an aggravating delay. His father too had retreated into his room, as he did every day after his meal. Yusuf could not understand why people wanted to sleep in the afternoon, as if it was a law they had to obey. They called it resting, and sometimes even his mother did it, disappearing into their room and drawing the curtain. When he tried it once or twice, he became so bored that he feared he would never be able to get up again. On the second occasion he thought this was what death would be like, lying awake in bed but unable to move, like punishment.

While Uncle Aziz slept, Yusuf was required to clear up in the kitchen and yard. This was unavoidable if he was to have any say in the disposal of the leftovers. Surprisingly, his mother left him on his own while she went to speak with his father. Usually she supervised strictly, separating real leftovers from what would serve another meal. He inflicted as much damage as he could on the food, cleared and saved what was possible, scrubbed and washed the pots, swept the yard, then went to sit on guard in the shade by the back door, sighing about the burdens he had to carry.

When his mother asked him what he was doing, he replied that he was resting. He tried not to say it pompously, but it came out like that, making his mother smile. She reached suddenly for him, hugging him and lifting him up while he kicked furiously to be released. He hated to be treated like a baby, she knew that. His feet sought the dignity of the bare earth yard as he wriggled with restrained fury. It was because he was small for his age that she was always doing it – picking him up, pinching his cheeks, giving him hugs and slobbery kisses – and then laughing at him as if he was a child. He was

already twelve. To his amazement she did not let him go this time. Usually she released him as soon as his struggles became furious, smacking his fleeing bottom as he ran. Now she held him, squeezing him to her steeping softness, saying nothing and not laughing. The back of her bodice was still wet with sweat, and her body reeked of smoke and exhaustion. He stopped struggling after a moment and let his mother hold him to her.

That was his first foreboding. When he saw the tears in his mother's eyes his heart leapt with terror. He had never seen his mother do that before. He had seen her wailing at a neighbour's bereavement as if everything was spinning out of control, and had heard her imploring the mercy of the Almighty on the living, her face sodden with entreaty, but he had never seen these silent tears. He thought something had happened with his father, that he had spoken harshly to her. Perhaps the food was not good enough for Uncle Aziz.

'Ma,' he said pleadingly, but she hushed him.

Perhaps his father had said how fine his other family had been. Yusuf had heard him say that when he was angry. Once he heard him say to her that she was the daughter of a hill tribesman from the back of Taita who lived in a smoky hut and wore stinking goatskin, and thought five goats and two sacks of beans a good price for any woman. 'If anything happens to you, they'll sell me another one like you from their pens,' he said. She was not to give herself airs just because she had grown up on the coast among civilized people. Yusuf was terrified when they argued, feeling their sharp words cut into him and remembering stories from other boys of violence and abandonment.

It was his mother who had told him of the first wife, recounting the story with smiles and the voice she kept for fables. She had been an Arab woman from an old Kilwa

family, not quite a princess but of honourable descent. Yusuf's father had married her against the wishes of her proud parents, who had not thought him grand enough for them. For although he carried a good name, anyone with eyes could see that his mother must have been a savage and that he himself was not blessed with prosperity. And although a name could not be dishonoured by the blood of a mother, the world they lived in imposed some practical necessities. They had greater aspirations for their daughter than to let her become the mother of poor children with savage faces. They told him: 'We thank God, sir, for your kind attentions, but our daughter is too young now to think of marriage. The town abounds in daughters more worthy than ours.'

But Yusuf's father had caught sight of the young woman, and he could not forget her. He had fallen in love with her! Affection made him reckless and foolhardy, and he sought ways to reach her. He was a stranger in Kilwa, only there as an agent to deliver a consignment of clay water-jars for his employer, but he had made a good friend who was a boat-master of a dhow, a nahodha. The nahodha gleefully sustained him in his passion for the young woman and helped him in his stratagems to win her. Apart from anything else it would cause some grief to her self-besotted family, the nahodha said. Yusuf's father made secret assignations with the young woman and eventually stole her away. The nahodha, who knew all the landfalls on the coast from Faza in the far north to Mtwara in the south, spirited them away to Bagamoyo on the mainland. Yusuf's father found work in an ivory warehouse belonging to an Indian merchant, first as a watchman, then as a clerk and a jobbing trader. After eight years the woman he had married made plans to return to Kilwa, having had a letter written to her parents first, begging their forgiveness. Her two young sons were to accompany her to

sweep away any vestiges of parental reproach. The dhow they travelled in was called *Jicho*, the Eye. It was never seen again after it left Bagamoyo. Yusuf had heard his father too talk about this family, often when he was angry about something or after a disappointment. He knew that the memories caused his father pain and stirred him into great rages.

During one of their terrible arguments, when they seemed to forget about him sitting outside the open door as they clawed at each other, he heard his father groan, 'My love for her was not blessed. You know the pain of that.'

'Who doesn't?' his mother asked. 'Who doesn't know the pain of that? Or do you think I don't know the pain of love that goes wrong? Do you think I feel nothing?'

'No, no, don't accuse me, not you. You're the light on my face,' he shouted, his voice rising and breaking. 'Don't accuse me. Don't start on all that again.'

'I won't,' she said to him, dropping her voice to a hissing whisper.

He wondered if they had been arguing again. He waited for her to speak, wanting to be told what the matter was, irritated by his powerlessness to force the issue and make her tell him what made her cry.

'Your father will tell you,' she said in the end. She let him go and went back inside the house. In a twinkling, the gloom of the hallway had swallowed her.

4

His father came out to look for him. He had only just woken from his siesta and his eyes were still red with sleep. His left cheek was inflamed, perhaps where he had lain on it. He lifted a corner of his undershirt and scratched his belly, while his other hand stroked the shadowy stubble on his chin. His

beard grew quickly and he usually shaved every afternoon after his sleep. He smiled at Yusuf and his smile grew to a broad grin. Yusuf was still sitting by the back door where his mother had left him. Now his father came to squat down beside him. Yusuf guessed that his father was trying to look unconcerned, and he was made nervous.

'Would you like to go on a little trip, little octopus?' his father asked him, pulling him nearer his masculine sweat. Yusuf felt the weight of the arm on his shoulder, and resisted the pressure to bury his face in his father's torso. He was too old for that kind of thing. His eyes darted to his father's face, to read the meaning of what he was saying. His father chuckled, crushing him against his body for a moment. 'Don't look so happy about it,' he said.

'When?' Yusuf asked, gently wriggling himself free.

'Today,' his father said, raising his voice cheerfully and then grinning through a small yawn, trying to look untroubled 'Right now.'

Yusuf stood up on tiptoe and flexed his knees. He felt a momentary urge to go to the toilet, and stared anxiously at his father, waiting for the rest of it. 'Where am I going? What about Uncle Aziz?' Yusuf asked. The sudden damp fear he had felt was quelled by the thought of the ten anna. He couldn't go anywhere until he had collected his ten anna piece.

'You'll be going with Uncle Aziz,' his father said, and then gave him a small, bitter smile. He did that when Yusuf said something foolish to him. Yusuf waited, but his father said no more. After a moment his father laughed and made a lunge for him. Yusuf rushed out of the way and laughed too. 'You'll go on the train,' his father said. 'All the way to the coast. You love trains, don't you? You'll enjoy yourself all the way to the sea.' Yusuf waited for his father to say more, and could not think why he did not like the prospect of this journey. In the

end, his father slapped him on the thigh and told him to go and see his mother about packing a few things.

When the time came to leave it hardly seemed real. He said goodbye to his mother at the front door of the house and followed his father and Uncle Aziz to the station. His mother did not hug and kiss him, or shed tears over him. He had been afraid she would. Later, Yusuf could not remember what his mother did or said, but he remembered that she looked ill or dazed, leaning exhaustedly against the doorpost. When he thought of the moment of his departure, the picture that came to mind was the shimmering road on which they walked and the men ahead of him. In front of all of them staggered the porter carrying Uncle Aziz's luggage on his shoulders. Yusuf was allowed to carry his own little bundle: two pairs of shorts, a kanzu which was still new from last Idd, a shirt, a copy of the Koran, and his mother's old rosary. She had wrapped all but the rosary in an old shawl, then pulled the ends into a thick knot. Smilingly, she had pushed a cane through the knot so that Yusuf could carry his bundle over his shoulder, the way the porters did. The brownstone rosary she had pressed on him last, secretly.

It never occurred to him, not even for one brief moment, that he might be gone from his parents for a long time, or that he might never see them again. It never occurred to him to ask when he would be returning. He never thought to ask why he was accompanying Uncle Aziz on his journey, or why the business had to be arranged so suddenly. At the station Yusuf saw that in addition to the yellow flag with the angry black bird, there was another flag with a silver-edged black cross on it. They flew that one when the chief German officers were travelling on the train. His father bent down to him and shook his hand. He spoke to him at some length, his eyes watering in the end. Afterwards Yusuf could not remember what was said to him, but God came into it.

The train had been moving for a while before the novelty of it began to wear off for Yusuf, and then the thought that he had left home became irresistible. He thought of his mother's easy laughter, and began to cry. Uncle Aziz was on the bench beside him, and Yusuf looked guiltily at him, but he had dozed off, wedging himself between the bench and the luggage. After a few moments, Yusuf knew that the tears were no longer coming, but he was reluctant to lose the feeling of sadness. He wiped his tears away and began to study his uncle. He was to have many opportunities for doing so, but this was the first time since he had known his uncle that he could look him full in the face. Uncle Aziz had taken his cap off once they boarded the train, and Yusuf was surprised by how harsh he looked. Without the cap, his face looked more squat and out of proportion. As he lay back dozing silently, the gracious manners which caught the eye were absent. He still smelt very fine. Yusuf had always liked that about him. That and his thin, flowing kanzus and silk-embroidered caps. When he entered a room, his presence wafted in like something separate from the person, announcing excess and prosperity and daring. Now as he leaned back against the luggage, a small rounded pot-belly protruded under his chest. Yusuf had not noticed that before. As he watched he saw the belly rise and fall with his breathing, and once he saw a ripple of movement across it.

His leather money pouches were belted round his groin as usual, looping over his hip-bones and meeting in a thonged buckle over the join of his thighs like a kind of armour. Yusuf had never seen the money belt unattached to him, even while he slept in the afternoon. He remembered the silver rupee he had hidden in the crevice at the base of a wall, and trembled at the thought that it would be discovered and his guilt would be proclaimed.