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Mail on Sunday

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Telegraph

GRAVEL HEART

Abdulrazak
Gurnah

'Riveting'
New York Times

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‘*Gravel Heart* is one of the beautiful novels that lingers in the mind long after reading. Gurnah writes about the clash of worlds with such pathos and elegance’ *Amanda Foreman*

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Pilgrims Way

Dottie

Paradise

Admiring Silence

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The Last Gift

Afterlives

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.

GRAVEL HEART

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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‘The beginning of love is the recollection of blessings:
then it proceeds according to the capacity of the
recipient, that is, according to his deserts.’

Abu Said Ahmad ibn Isa-al-Kharraz,
Kitab al-Sidq (The Book of Truthfulness) (899),
trans. Arthur J. Arberry (1937)

PART ONE

1

A STICK OF CANDY FLOSS

My father did not want me. I came to that knowledge when I was quite young, even before I understood what I was being deprived of and a long time before I could guess the reason for it. In some ways not understanding was a mercy. If this knowledge had come to me when I was older, I might have known how to live with it better but that would probably have been by pretending and hating. I might have faked a lack of concern or I might have ranted in angry outrage behind my father's back and blamed him for the way everything had turned out and how it might all have been otherwise. In my bitterness I might have concluded that there was nothing exceptional in having to live without a father's love. It might even be a relief to have to do without it. Fathers are not always easy, especially if they too grew up without their father's love, for then everything they know would make them understand that fathers had to have things their own way, one way or another. Also fathers, just like everyone else, have to deal with the relentless manner in which life conducts its business, and they have their own tremulous selves to salve and sustain, and there must be many times when they hardly have enough strength for that, let alone love to spare for the child that had appeared any old how in their midst.

But I also remembered when it was otherwise, when my father did not shun me with an icy silence as we sat in the same small room, when he laughed with me and tumbled me and fondled me. It was a memory that came without words or sound, a little treasure I hoarded. That time when it was *otherwise* would have

had to be when I was very young, a baby, because my father was already the silent man I knew later by the time I could remember him clearly. Babies can remember many things in their podgy sinews, which becomes the problem of later life, but it is not always certain that they remember everything in its place. There were times when I suspected that the fondling memory was an invention to comfort myself and that some of the memories I recollected were not my own. There were times when I suspected they were put there for me by other people, who were dealing kindly with me and were trying to fill in the empty spaces in my life and theirs, people who exaggerated the orderliness and drama of the haphazard tedium of our days, who preferred that what came to be was signalled by what had passed. When I reached this point I began to wonder if I knew anything about myself because it was most likely that I only knew what people told me about how I was as an infant, at times one person saying this and another saying that, forcing me to bow to the more insistent one and occasionally selecting for myself the younger self I preferred.

There were moments when these guilt-ridden thoughts became absurdly insistent, though I thought I could remember sitting in the sun beside my father on the doorstep of our house while he held a stick of pink candy floss into which I was about to sink my face. That was a memory which came to me as an arrested instant without conclusion, a moment without preamble or direction. How could I have invented that? I just was not sure if it had really happened. My father was laughing in that breathless way of his as he looked at me, as if he was never going to be able to stop, his arms squeezed to his ribs, holding himself in. He was saying something to me that I could now no longer hear. Or perhaps he was not speaking to me at all but to someone else who was there. Perhaps he was speaking to my mother in that heaving, laughing way.

I expect I was wearing a tiny vest, which came to just below my navel, and had nothing on below. I was sure of that, most probably. That is, I was sure I was probably not wearing anything below my vest. I have seen a picture of myself in

the attire, standing nonchalantly in the street in that standard costume of male tropical infancy. Girls were not allowed to wander around like that, for fear of accidental damage to their chastity and decency, although that did not mean that they were spared what was bound to happen. Yes, I am sure I have seen that photograph once – a fuzzy, incompletely developed print most likely taken with a box camera – of a half-naked native boy of about three or four years old, staring at the camera with a look of pathetic passivity. Most likely I was in a mild panic. I was a fearful child and a camera pointed in my direction perturbed me. Little could be made of my features in the faded photograph and only someone who was already familiar with my appearance could have been sure it was me. The print was too pale to reveal the scabs on my knees or the insect bites on my arms or the snot down my face, but clear enough to show the tiny bunch that swelled between my legs, as yet unscarred and unblemished. I could not have been older than four. After about that age, adult jokes about the little abdalla and how it was soon going to lose its cap begin to hit their mark and make little boys cringe with terror at the forthcoming circumcision, and an old woman squeezing a boy's testicles and shuddering and sneezing with pretend-ecstasy was no longer funny and began to feel like mockery.

In fact, I can be definite that photograph was taken before I was five because some time during that year and before I started Koran school, I went on a taxi ride with my father and my mother. The taxi ride was a rare event, and my mother made much of it, filling me with anticipation of the picnic we would have when we reached our destination: vitumbua, katlesi, sambusa. On the way, the taxi stopped at the hospital – it won't take long, my father said, then we'll be on our way. I took his hand and followed him into the building. Before I knew what was happening, my little abdalla had lost its kofia and the outing had turned into a nightmare of pain and treachery and disappointment. I had been betrayed. For days after that I had to sit with my legs wide apart, exposing my turbaned penis to the healing air while my mother and my father and the neighbours came to look on me with big smiles on their faces. Abdalla kichwa wazi.

I started Koran school soon after the trauma and deceit of that event. Attendance at the school required me to put on a calf-length kanzu and a kofia, and almost certainly a pair of shorts so that my hands did not wander playfully under there as boys' hands tend to do. And once I learnt to cover my nakedness, especially after it had been tricked and mutilated into a kind of prominence, I would not have been able to uncover it with the same freedom as before, and I would not have found myself sitting on our doorstep in a little slip of a vest. So it was certain that I was about four when I sat there in the sun with my father Masud while he fed me candy floss. For years I felt in my flesh the fondness of that moment.

That was the doorstep of the house I was born in, the house I spent all of my childhood in, the house I abandoned because I was left with little choice. In later years, in my banishment, I pictured the house inch by inch. I don't know if it was lying nostalgia or painful proper longing, but I paced its rooms and breathed its smells for years after I left. Just inside the front door was the kitchen area: no power points or fitted cupboards or electric oven or even a sink. It was a simple unmodern kitchen, although it had once been primitive in its gloom, its walls grimy with charcoal fumes. Like the inside of a beast's mouth, my mother told me. Traces of that grime still came through as a grey under-shine on the walls despite several washes of lime. In the corner nearest the door was a water tap for washing dishes and doing the laundry, the floor around it pitted and crumbling from the force of the water on the poor concrete. To the left-hand side of the door was a mat, never quite losing its vegetable smell over the years, and that was where we ate and where my mother received visitors. Male visitors did not come inside the house, at least not while my mother was young, or at least not all male visitors. That was how it was when I was a little boy but later a table and chairs replaced the mat, and many other changes were made to the kitchen to make it clean and modern.

A door closed off this large entrance room from the rest of the house, our deep interior, which consisted of two rooms, a small

hallway and a bathroom. The bigger of the two interior rooms was where my parents and I slept. I had a large cot which I loved. One panel slid up and down, and when I was in the cot and the panel was up and the mosquito net was tucked in, I felt as if I was in a craft of some kind, moving invisibly through the air. I have never lost that feeling of safety when I sleep under a mosquito net. Whenever my mother was busy and wanted me out of the way, she put me in the cot because she knew I was content in there. Sometimes I asked to be allowed in it myself, with the side-panel up, and then for hours I pretended I was hidden away in my own secret room, safe from all danger. It was still comfortable enough for me when I was ten years old. Later my sister Munira slept in the same cot.

Uncle Amir, my mother's brother, slept in the other room. A door led from the hallway to the narrow backyard where there was just enough room for a washing line. The backyard wall adjoined the yard of the neighbours who lived behind us, a man living quietly with his mother. They lived so quietly that for a long time I did not know the man's name because no one spoke to him or about him. His mother never went out. I don't know whether it was because she was ill, or whether the habit of seclusion had made her frightened of the outside. They had no electricity in the house and it was so dark in there that when I was sent round with a bowl of plums as a gift – plums were rare in those days – I could hardly make out her features in the gloom. I almost never heard any noise from their yard, just sometimes a man coughing softly or the clang of a pot. If I had to go to the toilet at night I tried if possible not to open my eyes, feeling my way to the bathroom in the dark. I never even looked at the back door at night but I could not help imagining a shadow looming over the wall in the diffused glow of a turned-down oil lamp.

There was no garden or pavement in front of the house, so a visitor stepped off the street straight into the entrance room. On hot days when the door was left open, the slight breeze lifted the door-curtain in a lazy billow into the room. Sitting in the sun on that doorstep with my stick of candy floss meant my father and I

would have had our feet on the road, assuming my legs were long enough to reach the ground, and we would have seen life trickling by. It was only a quiet lane, just wide enough for two bicycles to pass each other, with care. The tin roofs of our house and the one opposite almost met overhead to create a quiet twilight chamber which cooled the air and would have intimidated a stranger with its sense of intimacy and enclosure. The sun shone on the house steps for only a brief while in the day, peering in between the overhanging roofs, and that would have been the moment of the candy-floss stick.

No car could come down these lanes nor was ever intended to. These were streets built for the shuffle and slap of human feet, and for bodies to rub shoulders against each other, and for voices to murmur and reverberate their courtesies and curses and outcries. Any freighting that was necessary was done by handcarts and human muscles. Nor was the road straight like a proper road, though it was paved with old flagstones, worn by time and traffic and the water, which ran over them during the rains. Sometimes, late at night, the crack of hard-shod feet on the flags filled the lane with menace. Soon after it passed our house the road turned to the right, and a short while after that to the right again. Aside from the big roads that led out into the country, our roads bent and turned every few metres, fitting themselves to the way people lived their lives. In our part of the town there were no mansions and courtyards and walled gardens, and people lived their lives in a small way. That was how it was when I was a child, when the lanes were quiet and empty, not as crowded and dirty as they became later.

Our front-door neighbours Mahsen and Bi Maryam lived in a house as small as ours, door facing door like its opposite. Everyone called him Mahsen, without any kind of title, and always called her Bi Maryam. Mahsen was a messenger at the Municipal Offices, a short skinny man who would have been a certain target for bullies when he was a child. Messenger was the official and puzzling name for his work, because he did not really carry messages. He was sent on whatever errands the officers and clerks wanted done: fetch a file, escort someone out, buy a cold

drink, a cigarette, a bun, go to the market, take a broken fan to the electrician – the interminable busyness of office life.

Some of the officers and clerks were a quarter of his age but Mahsen never complained. He was always mild, soft-spoken and smiling, a man of endless courtesy and impossible piety. He greeted everyone as he walked home from work, anyone who made eye contact with him received a smile or a wave or a handshake, depending on intimacy, gender or age. He asked after this one's health and that one's family and transmitted any news he had picked up on the way. He was up at dawn every morning to go to the mosque for the al-fajiri prayers – not many people did that – and he did not miss a single one of his five prayers every day, devotions which he performed with discretion as if he meant to keep quiet about his doings. If he had not been so modest he would have been mocked as an exhibitionist. He was even polite to children when so many adults spoke to them with belligerence and suspicion, as if they disliked them and suspected them of wickedness and anticipated a challenge from them. Not a shred of evil reputation attached to him although some unkind people wondered aloud if everything was in its place up top.

His wife Bi Maryam did not bother much with discretion, and in many other ways she was unlike Mahsen. She was stout, suspicious and combative. She took every opportunity to draw attention to her husband's piety and generosity, as if anyone doubted it. *A man of faith*, she announced when the moment presented itself, *the beloved of Our Lord, see how He has given him good health and such looks. He will get his due when his master calls him back to Himself, despite your envy.*

She made a living cooking buns and flapjacks for local cafés, and had something to say about almost anything, which she always did and in a robust voice that was meant to be heard by her neighbours and any interested passers-by. She had advice to offer on people's ailments, had views on people's travel plans, on how best to grill fish and on the likely outcome of a rumoured marriage proposal. Children hurried past her door in fear that they might be summoned and sent on an errand. Mahsen and

Bi Maryam had no children of their own. Her greatest fear was to be misunderstood, which people were always deliberately and maliciously determined to do, so it seemed to her. Her voice and opinions did not seem to jar on Mahsen as they did on other people. My father said that Mahsen had probably gone deaf and could no longer hear her, but other people said it was because he was a saint. Some people said she knew medicines and were wary of her but my mother said that was just ignorance. What she feared was Bi Maryam's quarrelsome and ill-natured bullying.

For several years, before things went wrong, my father Masud worked as a junior clerk for the Water Authority in Gulioni. His job there was respectable and secure, a government job. That was before I really remember and I only know that time of his life as a story. When I remember him clearly he worked at a market stall or he did nothing, just sat in his room. For a long time I did not know what had gone wrong and after a while I stopped asking. There was so much I did not know.

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My father's father was a teacher, Maalim Yahya. I never met him because he left to work in the Gulf before I was born but I have seen a picture of him. Later I went to the same school where he used to teach, and there were several group photographs of the staff in the headmaster's office. There was one taken every year and they covered most of one wall in the office. The practice must have stopped several years before because there were no recent ones. The headmaster did not appear in any of the photographs nor did any of the teachers working in the school when I was a pupil there. It was like a glimpse of a mythical past: unsmiling men in buttoned-down long-sleeved white shirts or kanzus and jackets. Many of them must have passed away since then. Some were killed in the revolution although I would not have been able to point them out from the photographs. We only knew from rumours that some of the teachers were killed at that time. The headmaster himself had been a student in the

school and had been taught by Maalim Yahya. He pointed him out to me.

‘Your grandfather. He was very stern, most of the time,’ the headmaster said. I knew that describing a teacher as stern, or even fierce, was intended as a compliment. Teachers who were not stern were feeble by definition and were appropriately tormented by the children. They called him Maalim Chui behind his back, the headmaster said, because of the way he glared at them and made his hands into claws as if he would tear into them. The clawing threat was so comical that the boys struggled not to laugh but they did not because when their teacher was angry he was frightening. The headmaster demonstrated the glaring and clawing and I could not help laughing. ‘But when you had done something wrong and he looked at you in that certain way,’ the headmaster said solemnly, demonstrating an expression of ferocity as he attempted to retrieve his authority, ‘you felt as if you were about to wet yourself. In those days teachers did not hesitate to hit us, and if you received that look you knew that at the right moment you were going to get a cuff on the back of your head, which actually was not as bad as the way some of the other teachers beat us. You are a spoilt generation compared to us.’

I was in the headmaster’s office to be praised for a story I had written about a cycle ride to the country. The topic we were given came from our English Language textbook: What did you do on your holidays? Below the topic question was a drawing, which was intended to give us ideas. It showed two smiling children, a boy and a girl, running after a ball on the beach, free-flowing blond hair streaming behind them, while an adult woman with short blonde hair and a sleeveless blouse looked smilingly on. Another drawing on the same page showed two more children, or perhaps the same ones, this time with hair blowing about their faces, playing in front of a building, with trees and a windmill and a donkey and some chickens in the background. What did we do on our holidays ... as if we were like the children pictured in our school books, whose hair blew about our faces when we ran, and who went to the seaside on our holidays or went to our

grandfather's farm during the summer and had adventures in the haunted old house by the mill. Holidays were when the government school was closed, because there was no holiday from Koran school and the word of God, except for the days of Idd and the Maulid, or because of bed-ridden illness. A headache or a gut-ache or even a glistening grazed knee were not enough for a reprieve, although running blood was indisputable. On ordinary days, we went to government school in the morning and Koran school in the afternoon. During school holidays we went to Koran school all day, not to the seaside where our frizzy curly hair did not stream behind us as we ran nor to grandfather's farm where there was no windmill and where our hair did not blow about our faces.

But I had made good progress with the Koran compared to many other boys in my class, and by the time I wrote the story of the cycle ride to the country, I had finished with Koran school. I had escaped, which is to say I had completed reading the Koran twice, from beginning to end, to the satisfaction of my teacher, who had listened to me read every single line of every page over the years, correcting my pronunciation and making me repeat a verse until I could read it without stumbling. By the time I stopped attending Koran school I could read the Koran fluently and with the appropriate intonation without understanding anything much of what I read. I knew the stories, I loved the stories, because there were always occasions for the teachers to re-tell the travails and triumphs of the Prophet. One of the teachers at our Koran school in Msikiti Barza was an expert storyteller. When he stood up on those occasions we were told to put our tablets and volumes away and listen because it was a day that commemorated an important religious event, there was usually no further need to hush the students. He told us about the Prophet's birth, about the miraj, about the entrance to Medina. I loved the story of the angel who came to the young orphan boy herding sheep on the hills of Makka, split open his chest and washed his heart with driven snow. However many times I heard that story in my boyhood, it moved me and thrilled me, a heart made pure with driven snow. The angel must have brought it down with him from

snow-laden clouds, because I don't expect he would have been able to find that commodity on a Makkan hillside.

So what did the escaped ex-Koran school youngsters do during the holidays? They did not do anything in particular. They slept late, wandered the streets through the long day, gossiped, played cards or went for a swim, which did not amount to the seaside as it was only a few minutes' walk from home. No one did anything worth writing about, or if anyone did, it was likely to be something forbidden and so could not be written about in a classroom exercise. But I was asked to write about my holiday highlights, not to grumble about the absurdity of the task. So I made up a story about a cycle ride to the country, and named the trees that provided me with shade, and described the boy who pointed me in the right direction when I got lost, and the girl I spoke to but who disappeared before I could find out her name, and the blinding whiteness of the sand when I reached the sea.

My teacher liked it and showed it to the headmaster, who wanted me to make a fair copy in my best handwriting – the school did not have a typewriter – so it could be put on the noticeboard for everyone to admire. That was what I was in his office for, to be praised for what I had done. Then when the headmaster ran out of praise, yet could see that I was still standing patiently in front of him instead of grinning with pleasure and shuffling to be released, he pointed to the photograph in the manner of someone bestowing a parting gift. Take this and go. In the photograph, my father's father, Maalim Yahya, was standing at the end of a line behind a row of seated colleagues, a tall, thin, ascetic-looking man who returned the gaze of the camera with the look of someone suffering an ordeal. Or perhaps he was struggling with a very bad headache as my father sometimes used to do. My mother told me that my father inherited his headaches from his father, who was severely afflicted in that regard. He was wearing a jacket over his kanzu, a gesture towards his government-school role. My father looked nothing like Maalim Yahya, he must have taken after his mother whom I have never met or seen in a photograph.

At that time, respectable women did not allow themselves to be photographed for fear of the dishonour to their husbands if other men saw their image. But this fear was not the only reason to refuse as some men were also resistant, and in both cases it was from suspicion that the production of the image would take something of their being and hold it captive. Even when I was a child, although that was later than the time of Maalim Yahya's photograph, if a tourist from the cruise ships wandered the streets with a camera, people watched warily for the moment when the foreigner lifted it to take a shot and then several voices screamed in a frenzy of prohibition, to frighten him or her off. Behind the tourist an argument would start between those who feared for the loss of their souls and those who scoffed at such nonsense. For these kinds of reasons, I had not seen a photograph of my father's mother and so could not tell for certain if he did take after her. After seeing the photograph of Maalim Yahya, though, I thought that I had taken a little bit after him in shape and complexion. The recognition pleased me, it connected me to people and events that my father's silence had cut me off from.

The date on the photograph in the headmaster's office was December 1963, which would have been the end of the school year just before the revolution. Maalim Yahya lost his job soon after that, which was why he went to work in Dubai. The rest of the family, his wife and two daughters, followed but my father stayed behind. None of them ever came back while I was there, not even for a visit, and aside from that school picture I saw in the headmaster's office I had no image of my father's family. When I was very young, it did not occur to me that I should have one. My mother and my father were the world to me, and the snippets of stories I heard as a child sustained me even though the people they told of seemed so distant.

*

I knew more about my mother's family. My mother's name was Saida and her family had once been well off, not wealthy by

any means but well-off enough to own a piece of farming land and their own house near the Court House. During her childhood that part of town was occupied by the grandees, by people connected to the sultan's government, who lived in the seclusion of their walled gardens, and by European colonial officials, who lived in huge old Arab houses by the sea, and marked their ceremonial imperial rituals with white linen uniforms adorned with fantasy medals and wore cork helmets festooned with feathers and carried swords in gilt-edged scabbards, like conquerors. They gave themselves tin-god titles and pretended that they were aristocrats. Both varieties of grandees thought themselves gifted by nature, which had created them noble and granted them the right to rule as well as the burden that it brought.

My mother's father, Ahmed Musa Ibrahim, was an educated man, a travelled man, who had no time for these self-deluding patrician airs. He preferred to speak about justice and liberty and the right to self-fulfilment. He would pay for these words in due course. He had spent two years at Makerere College in Uganda and one year at Edinburgh University in Scotland, completing a Diploma in Public Health. In between his studies at those two institutions he spent several weeks in Cairo, visiting a friend who was a student in Education at the American University. Then he travelled through Beirut and stayed in Istanbul for three weeks on his way to London. The years in Kampala and Edinburgh, and his time in those other fabulous cities, gave him an air of incomparable glamour and sophistication, and when he started to speak about one or other of the famous sights encountered on his travels, his audience fell reverently silent. Or that was how my mother told it, that his words were held in such respect. He worked in the laboratories of the Department of Health, a short walk from home. His main work was in the malaria eradication campaign, but he also contributed to the cholera and dysentery control project, analysing samples and participating in seminars. Some people addressed him as Doctor and consulted him about their ailments, but he laughed them off and told them that he worked in the rat-catchers' department and knew nothing about hernias and haemorrhoids and chest pains and fevers.

I have seen a photograph of him too, taken at the back of the Department of Health building, near the gate to the yard where the departmental vehicles were parked. He wore a white linen suit, the middle button of his jacket done up, and a red tarbush at a dashing angle. His head was tilted to one side so the tassel hung a little away from the tarbush. His right calf was crossed over his left, drawing attention to his brown shoes, and his right arm leant against the unmistakable neem tree by the gate. In the distance behind him loomed the giant flamboyant that shaded the road running by the building. He stood in a jaunty, cheery pose in which he was play-acting his modernity, a cosmopolitan traveller to some of the world's great metropolises, Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul on the way to London and Edinburgh. The tarbush may have been abolished as backward in Atatürk's Turkish Republic, and it may have been on its way out in other places in the 1950s (Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia) where it was becoming an emblem of corrupt bashas and beys and the defeated armies of Arab nationalism, but the news had not yet reached my mother's father, at least not when the photograph was taken. To him it was still a sign of sophisticated Islamic modernity, secular and practical in place of the medieval turban. The white linen suit was more ambiguous: that it was a suit was a salute to Europe, as were the brown shoes in a sandal-wearing culture, but the suit was white, which when worn with modesty was the colour of homage and prayer and pilgrimage, the colour of purity and devotion. The photograph was saved from any air of vanity by the exaggerated crossing of the calves and by the uncertain, half-apologetic smile on his round chubby face, as if he was wondering if he had gone too far in his dressing-up.

Ahmed Musa Ibrahim hovered on the fringes of a group of anti-colonial intellectuals, people like him who thought themselves connected to the world, and who knew about Saad Zaghloul Pasha, the Egyptian statesman (hence the tarbush), and Gandhi and Nehru, and Habib Bourguiba, the Tunisian insurrectionist, and Marshal Tito – nationalist leaders who had refused to be cowed and crushed by imperial bullies of different political shades. These anti-colonial intellectuals Saida's father associated

with wanted to become modern too, like the nationalists they admired. They wanted to be able to determine the outcome of their lives without the overbearing presence of the British and their self-righteous and sanctimonious display of self-congratulatory restraint. Those who had dealings with them, like Saida's father, knew that that self-deprecatory mannerism really disguised a smug and condescending arrogance towards everyone, and especially towards *over-educated natives* like him, whose proper fate was subservience and ignorance. Yes, he knew them all right. They chuckled over babu stories about their natives and their Emperor-Seth-like aspirations to modernity – Diploma in Public Health (Failed) – and then humbly praised themselves for their long-suffering kindnesses to the charges they had appointed themselves to rule over. What else could they do? When they were confronted with their manipulative and intimidating methods ... well, there were times, inevitably, when one had to be cruel to be kind.

'No one bid the British to come here,' my mother's father said. 'They came because they are covetous and cannot help wanting to fill the world with their presence.'

It was the 1950s in a colonised territory, not the place to speak in this way. The British authorities preferred to forget that they were conquerors who ruled by coercion and punishment, and considered any outspoken comment on this as sedition. The empire was very fond of that word, but it was almost too late for words like that: sedition and legitimate government and constituted authority. It was time for them to go. There were heated debates late into the night; shouted conversations in cafés, rallies where activists spoke with hatred and derision; friends fell out and turned secretive as political lines were re-drawn. They were heady times, exulting times, watching British police officers scowl powerlessly on the fringes of rallies as the crowds roared, knowing that the departure of the mabeberu and their lackeys and stooges was unavoidable.

The times being as they were, it was inevitable that Saida's father became involved in politics. So in the years just before independence, he had to leave his job because he could not work

for a colonial government while he was plotting its downfall. The particulars of his appointment explicitly, and quite reasonably, forbade him from doing so and promised to send him to prison if he transgressed. He went to work on his land instead, growing vegetables for the market, or rather giving orders and employing others to do the hardest work while he stood nearby with arms akimbo. It may have looked as if he was doing nothing, he liked to tell his family, but if he were not there the work would immediately stop and those labourers of his would go to sleep under the nearest tree. We have no discipline, that's our biggest problem, he would say.

He became an informal adviser to one of the political parties, was active in the voter-registration drive and in the literacy-classes movement. He donated to the party and gave fund-raising speeches in local meetings and participated in the organisation of the rallies, which simultaneously offered a raucous challenge to the colonial order and taunted political rivals. He was visible to everyone as an activist, and there was street-corner talk already that he was likely to be given a junior ministerial post in the future. When it came to determining the outcome of their lives, things did not work out as he and his intellectual and political friends anticipated, though. He was killed during the revolution because he did all that he did for the wrong political party.

My mother knew all this first-hand because she was fourteen when her father was taken away. When she spoke about him, it was always with a certain solemnity. She hardly ever mentioned the stories he might have told, or something ridiculous that might have happened one holiday, when perhaps he tripped and spilled a bowl of fruit salad over his trousers, or dropped an expensive glass bowl, or reversed his car into a tree. It was only occasionally that I caught a glimpse of the chubby-faced, smiling man in the photograph: how he loved to sing along with Mohammed Abdel Wahab, making his voice gravelly like the great singer; how he played the air-guitar and pretended to be a rock'n'roller when Elvis Presley was played on the radio, swivelling his hips and rolling on the balls of his feet like the King. But more often she spoke of him as a personage: about his political activities, his generosity

to people, his crisply ironed cotton jackets, how esteemed he was. Her mourning for him was so profound that it had diminished those other more everyday memories of him and turned him into a figure of tragedy.

She returned to the story of his arrest several times. When news of the uprising reached them, their father's instructions were that if soldiers or gunmen appeared at the house, which they were certain to do as he was such a well-known campaigner for the other party, there was to be no yelling and screaming. Everyone but him was to lock themselves in an inner room because there were rumours of assault and violence and he did not want his wife and his children to be exposed to insult or harm. The people who were doing this had been badly misled but there was no need for hysterics on any account. He would talk to them when they came and then they would all wait for everything to calm down. When they heard the jeep stop outside the house, Saida and her younger brother Amir ran to obey the instructions, urged on by their parents, but their mother refused to leave her husband on his own and there was no time for their father to insist.

They heard the soldiers banging on the door with their gun butts but there was no shouting after that, just a murmur of conversation as their father had promised. Their mother later said that she knew every one of the four soldiers by name, and she called them out one after the other to them so they would remember. My mother said the names to me too, so that I would remember, but I have tried not to do so. The talking did not amount to anything. They did not realise the violence the victors had in mind and how quickly cruelty begets more cruelty. Their father was taken away by the revolutionaries and they never saw him again, nor was his body returned, nor any announcement made of his death. He disappeared. *I cannot describe*, my mother said. When she came to this point in her telling she would have to stop for a while. The family land and the house were confiscated and became state property, to be given away to a zealot or a functionary of the revolution, or to his mistress or cousin. The announcement of the confiscation