

Maps

A Novel

Nuruddin Farah

[Arcade logo]

Arcade Publishing • New York

Praise for *Maps*

“Nuruddin Farah is one of the finest contemporary African novelists . . . [Maps is] a true and rich work of art.”—Salman Rushdie

"Startling . . . passionate. Farah's masterpiece." —*The New York Times* Book Review

“Nuruddin Farah takes us deep into territory he has charted and mapped and made uniquely his own. . . . He excels in giving voice to tragedy in remote places of the world that speak directly and familiarly to our own hearts.”—Chinua Achebe

“Nuruddin Farah is a major writer, one of Africa’s best.”—Robert Coover

“. . . several contemporary reviews seemed inordinately relieved that Farah’s writing was not “angry,” “didactic,” or “political” (read: it didn’t point fingers at the West) but, rather, sensitive, subtle, and lyrical. The point they missed is that the two postures aren’t mutually exclusive . . . Farah has become one of the world’s most important—and most poetic—theorists of post-colonial identity . . .” —In *These Times*

“[Maps is] a remarkable novel . . . ambitious, original, informative.” —London Review of Books

“ Here is a writer who, while moving on an ordinary story can at the same time pack his page with descriptions of the scenes—the sights, the smells and tastes—and at the same time convey the inwardness and states of being of both his characters, almost track them as they move from thought to thought.” —The Guardian (UK)

CHAPTER ONE

§ I

You sit, in contemplative posture, your features agonized and your expressions pained; you sit for hours and hours and hours, sleepless, looking into darkness, hearing a small snore coming from the room next to yours. And you conjure a past: a past in which you see a horse drop its rider; a past in which you discern a bird breaking out of its shell so it will fly into the heavens of freedom. Out of the same past emerges a man wrapped in a mantle with unpatched holes, each hole large as a window — and each window large as the secret to which you cling as though it were the only soul you possessed. And you question, you challenge every thought which crosses your mind.

Yes. You are a question to yourself. It is true. You've become a question to all those who meet you, those who know you, those who have any dealings with you. You doubt, at times, if you exist outside your own thoughts, outside your own head, or Misra's. It appears as though you were a creature given birth to by notions formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas; as though you were not a child born with the fortune or misfortune of its stars, a child bearing a name, breathing just like anybody else, a child whose activities were justifiably part of a people's past and present experience. You exist, you think, the way the heavenly bodies exist, for although one does extend one's finger and point at the heavens, one knows, yes that's the word, one *knows* that that is not the heavens. Unless . . . unless there are, in a sense, as many heavens as there are thinking beings; unless there are as many heavens as there are pointing fingers.

At times, when your uncle speaks about you, in your presence, referring to you in the third person and, on occasion, even taking the liberty of speaking on your behalf, you wonder if your existence is readily differentiable from creatures of fiction whom habit has taught

one to talk of as if they were one's closest of friends — creatures of fiction with whose manner of speech; reactions to situations; conditions of being; and with whose likes and dislikes one's folk-tradition has made one familiar. From your limited knowledge of literature, you feel you are a blood relation of some of the names which come to mind, leap to the tongue at the thought of a young boy whose name is Askar and whose prodigious imagination is capable of wealthy signs of precocity — because you are this young boy!

As you sit contemplatively, your mind journeys to a region where there were solid and prominent shadows which lived on behalf of *others* who had years before ceased to exist as beings. As you sit, your eyes open into themselves, the way blind people's eyes tend to. Then you become numb of soul: in other words, you are not yourself — not quite yourself anyway. The journey takes you through numerous doorways and you are enabled to call back to memory events which occurred long before you were a being yourself. Your travel leads you through forests without any clearing, to stone steps too numerous to count, although when you reach the highest point, your exhaustion disappears the instant you see an old man, grey as his advanced years, negotiate the steps too. You remember now, that in the wake of the old man there was a girl, barely seven, following the old man as a goat follows a butcher, knowing what knives of destiny await it.

And you . . . !

You! You who had lain in wait, unwashed, you who had lain unattended to at birth. Yes, you lay in wait as though in ambush until a woman who wasn't expecting that you existed walked into the dark room in which you had been from the second you were born. You were a mess. You were a most terrible sight. The woman who found you described the chill of that dark room as a tomb. To her, the air suggested the dampness of a mortuary. You cried at her approaching and wouldn't be calmed until she dipped you in the bathtub she had filled with warm water. Then she fed you on a draught of goat's milk. Did anyone ever tell you what you looked like when the woman discovered you that dusk some eighteen years or so ago? No?

You wore on your head a hat of blood which made you look like a masked clown. And around your neck there were finger-stains, perhaps your mother's. (Nobody knows to this day whether she tried to kill you

or no.) You displayed a nervous strain and you began to relax only when embraced either by another person or dipped in warm water. When you didn't cry, you searched, with your hands up in the air, for someone to touch.

When day broke, once the woman had shared the secret of her discovery with a few of the other neighbours, the men took over and they prepared your mother for burial. Alone with you, Misra noticed that your eyes were full of mistrust. They focused on her, they stared at her hands suspiciously! Your eyes, she would say years later, journeyed through her, they journeyed beyond her, they travelled to a past of unfulfilled dreams: in short, your stare made her feel inadequate. There was an element of self-consciousness in the small thing I had found, she said. It was so self-conscious it moved its hands as though it would wipe away the mess it had been in; it moved its eyes, when not staring at me, she continued, as though to apologize for its shortcomings. And what eyes! What hands!

It was not long before you tasted in Misra a motherliness which reabsorbed you, a motherliness in whose tight, warm embrace you felt joyous one second, miserable the following instant. Again, you would try to make contact and when she did her best to return it, you would appear startled and ready to withdraw, you would shun any contact with her completely and move away. She helped you minimize life's discomforts. She groaned with you when you moaned constipatedly; she helped you relieve yourself by fondling you, touching you and by telling you sweet stories, addressing you, although you were a tiny little mess of a thing, as "my man", "my dearest man", or some such endearments which would make you feel wanted, loved and pampered.

In her company, you were ecstatic — there was no other word for it. Yes, you were visibly ecstatic. And you were noisy. You displayed your pleasures with the pomp and show one associates with the paranoid among kings. But then you could be quiet in her embrace too, reflective and thoughtful — so thoughtful that some of the neighbours couldn't believe their eyes, watching you pensively quiet, your eyes bright with visions only you could see. It was when she wasn't there, when you missed her presence, when you couldn't smell her maternal odour, it was then that you cried and you put your soul into crying,

appearing as though possessed, looking satanically agitated and devilishly messy. Upon returning from wherever she had gone, she would dip you wholly in water, scrub you and wash you with the same devotion as she might have used when cleaning the floor of her room. The community of relations decided that Misra, the woman who once was a servant, would “mother” you. One thing ought to be said here — you were the one who made the choice the community of relations had to approve of; you, who were barely a week old. And Misra agrees with this statement. So, begrudgingly, would Uncle Qorrax in Kallafo.

When agitated, you stretched out your hands in front of you like a blind man in search of landmarks and if you touched someone other than Misra, you burst instantly into the wildest and most furious convulsive cry. But if Misra were there, you fell silent, you would touch her and then touch yourself. It seemed to her that you could discover yourself only in her. “By touching me, he knows he is there,” she once confided in a man you were later to refer to as Aw-Adan.

There was something maternal about the cosmos Misra introduced you to from the day it was decided you were her charge, from the moment she could call you, in the privacy of the room allotted to the two of you, whatever endearments she mustered in her language. But to her you were most often “my man” or variations thereof — especially whenever you wet yourself; especially when washing you, touching and squeezing your manhood or wiping, rather roughly, your anus. Occasionally, however, she would gently spank you on the bottom and address you differently. But she always remained maternal, just like the cosmos, giving and giving. “While,” she said to you, “man is the child receiving into himself the cosmos itself, the cosmos grows larger, like a hole, the more she gives.” Admittedly this was something impenetrable to your own comprehension. To you, whether what she said made sense or no, she *was* the cosmos. She was the one that took you away from “yourself”, as it were, she was the one who took you back into the world-of-the-womb and of innocence, and washed you clean in the water of a new life and a new christening, to produce in you the correct etches of a young self, with no pained memories, replacing your missing parents with her abundant self which she offered generously to you — her newly rediscovered child! And you?

To Misra, you existed first and foremost in the weird stare: you were, to her, your eyes, which, once they found her, focused on her guilt — her self! She caught the look you cast in her direction the way a clumsy child grabs a ball and she framed the stare in the memory of her photographic brain. She developed it, printed it in different colours, each of which expressed her mood. She was sure, for instance, that you saw her the way she was: a miserable woman, with no child and no friends; a woman who, that dusk — would you believe it? — menstruated right in front of you, under that most powerful stare of yours. She saw, in that look of yours, her father, whom she saw last when she was barely five.

“Annoy a child and you’ll discover the adult in him,” she would repeat, believing it to be a proverb. “Please an adult with gifts and the child therein re-emerges.” And she annoyed you, she pleased you, and she was sufficiently patient to watch the adult in you come out and display itself. Not only did she see her father in you but also the child in herself: she saw a different terrain of land, and she heard a different language spoken and she watched, on the screen of her past, a number of pictures replayed as though they were real and as painful as yesterday. She sought her childhood in you and she hid her most treasured secrets which she was willing to impart to you and you alone. In you, too, she saw a princess, barely five, a pretty princess surrounded with servants and well-wishers, one who could have anything she pleased and who was loved by her mother, but not so much by her father because she was a girl and wouldn’t inherit his title — wouldn’t continue his line. A princess!

To you, too, although you were too small to understand, she told secrets about your parents no one else was ready to tell you. She told you why your mother had been hiding in the room where she had found the two of you and why she died in a quiet secretive way. She also whispered in your ears things about your father, who had died a few months before your birth, in mysterious circumstances, in a prison, for his ideals. Your mother took refuge in a room tucked away in the back yard of a rich man’s house and it was in there that she gave birth to you — in hiding.

Possibly you would have died of the chill you were exposed to, if Misra hadn’t walked in accidentally. Fortunately for you, anyway, Misra had found the room in which you were, a most convenient place to hide from Aw-Adan, who had been pestering her with advances she didn’t

wish to return in like manner. The room had been open and she stumbled into it, closing the door immediately behind her. She didn't realize until later that you and your mother were there: you alive and your mother dead. Hers would have to remain the only evidence one has and one has to take her word for it. She would insist that she didn't know until later who your father was. Why she waited until she had washed and fed you and mothered you — these are things of which she refuses to speak. At any rate, by the time the community of relations had been informed of your existence and your mother's death, some sixteen or so hours had gone past, and it was during this time that you and Misra had become acquainted and that she made sure no one else set eyes on you. Of course, no one dared challenge her statement. As a matter of fact, it was thought very wise that you were kept an untalked-about secret, considering whose son you were; so no one outside the immediate family knew about you for a long time. It was for this reason that your mother's corpse was buried in haste and secretly too, your mother who left behind her no trace save yourself — you who were assigned to Misra as a ward, or some said as if you were her child. You were the whisper to be softly spoken. Your name was to become two syllables no one uttered openly, which meant that not only were there no Koranic blessings said in either of your ears to welcome you to this world but your presence here in this universe was not at all celebrated. You did not exist as far as many were concerned; nor did you have any identity as the country's bureaucracy required. Askar! The letter "s" in your name was gently said so as to arouse no suspicions; whereas the "k" was held in the cosiness of a tongue couched in the unspoken secrets of a sound. As-kar! It was the "r" which rolled like a cow in the hot sand after half-a-day's grazing. Askar!

The point of you was that, in small and large ways, you determined what Misra's life would be like the moment you took it over. From the moment you "took her life over", her personality underwent a considerable change. She became a mother to you. She began walking with a slight stoop and her hip, as though ready to carry you, protruded to the side. She no longer saw as much of Aw-Adan, the priest, as she used to, a priest who used to teach her, on a daily basis, a few suras of the Koran and in whom she was slightly interested. That interest deteriorated with the passage of the days and finally petered out the way light fades when there is no more paraffin in the lamp. The point of you was that,

in small and large ways, Misra, now that you were hers, saw her own childhood “as a category cradled in a bed of memories, one of which was nurtured in thoughts which alienated the child in her”. She had had a “fatherless” child herself and the child had died a few months before you were born. She was sad she had had to feed you on a bottle; she was sad she couldn’t suckle you, offer you her own milk, her soul. Her own child had been eighteen months when he died and she had only just weaned him. Very often, in the secret chambers of her unuttered thoughts, there would cross an idea: that she probably had some milk of motherhood in her. And she would bare her breasts and make you suck them; you would turn away and refuse to be suckled and she would cry and cry and be miserable. Your crying would provide the unsung half of the chorus. She would promise you and promise herself never to try to breast-feed you again. Although she did, again and again. The question nobody is in a privileged enough position to answer, is whether or not your mother suckled you just before she died. You are in no position to confirm that. But Misra is “obsessed” with the thought that you were breast-fed by her. When pressed, she would insist, “I know, I know for sure that she did.”

Your father existed for you in a photograph of him you saw, in which he stands behind an army tank, green as the backdrop in the picture, and you were told that he had “liberated” the tank, while fighting for the Western Somali Liberation Movement, of which he remained an active member until his last second, brave as the stories narrated about him. Your mother existed for you in a suckle you do not even recall and there is nobody to dispute Misra’s theory that your mother actually suckled you. One thing is very clear. You did not inherit from her any treasures; if anything, she bequeathed to you only a journal and stories told you in snippets by others. And what did you bequeath to Misra? There is a photograph taken when you were very, very small; there is a hand, most definitely yours, stretched outwards, away from your own body, searching for *another* hand — most probably hers, a hand to touch, a hand to help and to give assurances. Also, there is one of the pictures which she still has and which has survived all the turmoil of wars and travel and displacements, a picture in which you are alone, in a bathtub, half-standing and playfully splashing in the joy of the water’s soapy foaminess. In the photograph, there is a hand of a woman — Misra’s most likely — a hand reaching out to make contact

with yours but which accidentally “hovers”, like a hawk, over your private parts — which the hand doesn’t quite touch! And there is, in the picture, a patch of a stain, dark as blood, a stain which your eyes fall on and which you stare at.

But most important of all, you bequeathed to Misra the look in your eye when she walked in that evening, running away from Aw-Adan’s lusty attentions. At times, she saw you reproduce a look which she associated with what she could remember of her own father; and at others, she saw another which she identified as her son’s — before he was taken ill and died.

It was a great pity, she thought, that there was no maternal milk she could offer to you, her young charge. But there was plenty of her and she gave it: she kept you warm by tucking you between her breasts, she held you close to her body so she could sense your movements, so she might attend to you whenever you stirred: you shared a bed, the two of you, and she smelled of your urine precisely in the same way you smelled of her sweat: upon your body were printed impressions of her fingerprints, the previous night’s moisture: yours and hers.

§ III

She nourished you, not only on food paid for by a community of relations, but on a body of opinion totally her own. With you, young as you were, needy and self-sufficient as an infant, she could choose to be herself — she could walk about in front of you in the nude if she wanted to, or could invite Aw-Adan to share, with the two of you, the small bed which creaked when they made love, a bed onto whose sagged middle you rolled, sandwiched as you were between them. When awake, and if you were the only person in the room, Misra spoke *at* you, saying whatever it was that she had intended to, talking about the things which bothered or pleased her. But there was something she did only in your or Aw-Adan’s presence. She spoke Amharic. She cursed people in her language. To her, it didn’t matter whether you understood it or not. What mattered to her was the look in your eyes, the look of surprise or incomprehension; a look which took her back to the first encounter: yours and hers.

Because of her relations with you, and because you were so attached to her, Misra's status in the community became a controversial topic. To many members of the community, she was but that "maid-servant who came from somewhere else, up north" and they treated her despicably, looking down upon her and calling her all sorts of things. It was said that her name wasn't even Misra. However, no one bothered to check the source of the rumour. No one took the trouble to reach the bottom of the mystery. But who was she really? To you, she was the cosmos and hers was the body of ideas upon which your growing mind nourished. It didn't matter in the least whether she came from upper Ethiopia or not, neither did it matter in the least if she had been abducted by a warrior from one of the clans north of yours when she was seven. Maidservant or no, she meant the world to you. Also, you believed that no one knew her as well as you did, no one needed her as much as you and nobody studied the changes in her moods as often as you. In short, you missed her immensely when she wasn't with you. And so, with a self-abandon many began to associate with you, you cried and cried until she was brought to you. With a similar self-surrender, you displayed the pleasure of her company. Which was what made some say that she had bewitched you.

She taught you how best you should make use of your own body. She helped you learn to wash it, she assisted you in watching it grow, like the day's shadow, from the shortest to the longest purposelessness of an hour; she familiarized you with the limitations of your own body. When it came to your soul, when it came to how to help your brain develop, she said she couldn't trust herself to deal with that satisfactorily. Not then, anyway. Was this why she went and sought Aw-Adan's help?

Aw-Adan and you didn't take to each other right from your first encounter. You didn't like the way he out-stared you, nor did you like him when Misra paid him all her attention, leaving you more or less to yourself. He commented on the look in your eyes: a look he described as "wicked and satanic". To defend you, she described the look in your eyes as "adulted". Aw-Adan did not appear at all convinced. Then she went on to say, "To have met death when not quite a being, perhaps this explains why he exists primarily in the look in his eyes. Perhaps his stars have conferred upon him the fortune of holding simultaneously multiple citizenships of different kingdoms: that of the living and that of

the dead; not to mention that of being an infant and an adult at the same time.” Disappointed with her explanation, Aw-Adan went away, promising he would never see her again.

But he came back. He was in love with her — or so she believed. And as usual, he couldn’t resist commenting upon the fact that she had organized her life around you: you were “her time” as he put it; for she awoke, first thing in the morning, not to say her prayers but to attend to your needs. And what was she to you? To you, said Aw-Adan, she was your “space”: you moved about her body in the manner an insect crawls up a wall, even-legged, sure-footed and confident. And he continued, “Allah is the space and time of all Muslims, but not to you, Misra, Askar is.” He didn’t see anything wrong in what he said. But then how could he? He was jealous.

In the unEdenic universe into which you were cast by your stars, you were not content, like any intelligent being, with the small world of darkness you opened your eyes on. You behaved as though you had to find and *touch* the world outside of yourself, and this you did in order to be reassured of a given continuity. “He behaves,” said Misra to Aw-Adan, her confidant, one night when the three of you were in bed and the priest was not in his foulest of moods, “Askar behaves as if he feels lost unless his outstretched hands bring back to his acute senses the reassuring message that I am *touchably* there. He cannot imagine a world without my reassuring self.”

“What am I to do then? Suggest something,” said Aw-Adan.

“Be as accommodating to me as I am to him,” she said.

“You are insane,” he said.

“And you jealous,” she said.

“You are never alone,” complained Aw-Adan, who wanted her to himself. “I see you with him all the time, so much so that I see him even when he isn’t there. You smell of his urine and at times I too smell of it and it upsets me gravely. Why can’t we just marry, you and I? He isn’t yours but with God’s help, we can make one of our own, together, you and I. Come to me alone — both of body and of spirit — and let our bodies join, without Askar’s odour and cries.”

“I cannot,” she said. “I am his — in body and spirit too. And no one else’s. I can be yours or somebody else’s only in sin. Yes, only in sin. Imagine — you, a man of God at that!”

And she burst into tears.

And Aw-Adan stirred.
And you woke up and cried.

§ IV

To make the picture more complete, one must talk about your paternal uncle, namely Uncle Qorrax. The truth is, he too had designs on Misra and you suspected he had his way with her many times. It was no secret that you didn't like Uncle Qorrax or his numerous wives: numerous because he divorced and married such a number of them that you lost count of how many there were at any given time, and at times you weren't sure to whom he was married — until one day a woman you nicknamed “Shahrawello” arrived on the scene and she *stayed* (as Sheherezade of the *Thousand and One Nights* did). But neither did you like his children.

He was a ruthless man, your uncle was, and you were understandably frightened of him. You often remember him beating one of his wives or one of his children. Naturally, you didn't take his apparent little kindnesses nor did you accept the gentle hand he invariably extended to you. You shunned any bodily contact with him. It was said you cried a great deal if he so much as touched you, although he never gave you a beating and could hardly have justified himself in scolding you. You were an orphan and you had a “stare” with which to protect yourself. He didn't want the “stare” focused on him, his wives or his children.

When you were a little older and in Mogadiscio, living in the more enlightened world of Uncle Hilaal and Salaado, you began to reason thus: you didn't like Uncle Qorrax's children because they behaved as children always do, no more, no less; they insisted on owning toys if they were boys, or on making dolls and dressing them if they were girls. His sons enjoyed being rough with one another, they took sadistic pleasure in annoying or hurting one another, whereas his daughters busied themselves nursing or breast-feeding dolls or clothing bones, not as though they were women caring for infants with broken hearts but as though they were little girls. In retrospect, you would admit there was a part of you which admired these girls when they jumped ropes,

challenged the boys, or took part in daredevil games — not when they chanted childish rhymes which small girls always did at any rate. And you admired the boys, from a distance anyway, when they dislodged fatal shots from catapults, cutting short the life of a gecko climbing up a wall or a lizard basking in the sun. It was the life-giving and life-taking aspects of their activities which interested you.

You once said to Misra that if there was anything you shared with adults, it was the visceral dislike of children's babble or the infantile rattle of their mechanical contrivances and the noise of their demands, "I want this", "I want that". You concluded your remarks to the surprise of those listening to you (there was a woman neighbour, married to an invalid, a man who lay on his back all the time, suffering from some spinal complaint you had no name for), by saying, "When will children stop wanting, when will they *be*, when will they do a job, as Karin's husband says, when will they accomplish something — not as children but as *beings*?"

She commented, "But you are an adult."

Karin agreed, "He is. Surely."

What you didn't say, although it crossed your mind, was that you *were* an adult, and, for whatever it was worth, you believed you were *present* at your birth. But no one said anything. Perhaps because you knew that when windows of bedrooms closed on the sleeping lids of children's heads nodding with drowsiness; when their snores filled the empty spaces of the rooms they were in; when their tongues tasted of the staleness of slumber in their mouths; when their parents surrendered themselves to their dreams, pushing out of their way the daylight inhibitions of who enjoyed the company of whom, in bed; when thoughts were unharnessed and allowed to roam freely in the open spaces of the uncensored mind: it was then, you knew, that Misra and you could tell each other stories no one else was listening to. And in the privacy of the late hour, in the secrecy of the night's darkness, you could afford to allow the adult in you to emerge and express adult thoughts, just as Misra could permit the child in her to express its mind.

And then the two of you would gossip. Like adults, you would exchange secrets each had gathered during the previous day, you would condemn and pass judgements. You would talk about people, talk about Shahrawello whose daily blood-letting of Qorrax was said to have kept him in good check. You also gossiped meanly and unpardonably about

a neighbour's son who ate ten times as much as you and who, at four-and-a-half, didn't utter a single word save "food"; a boy who weighed "a ton" and whose open mouth had to be stuffed with victuals of one sort or another. You nicknamed him "Monster" following your overhearing his mother say, "Oh Lord, why have you made me give birth to a monster?" Misra would feign interest in hearing you tell the story but suddenly her features would change expression, suggesting you were overdoing it, and she would say, "That's enough, Askar", and would immediately change the subject to something less trivial, less controversial; or she would tell you a story until your breathing was slow, then shallow, as if you were wading through a pond where the water was muddy and knee-high. Misra was an expert at handling your moods. And she was different from your uncle's wives. As mothers, these were generally indulgent for the first two or three years. Then they became ruthlessly rigid with their children, who were expected to behave according to strict codes and norms of behaviour with which they had not been made familiar. You imagined these women to be in season all the time, what with their constant loss of temper with their children and their caning them whenever they didn't leave the room the moment they were instructed to do so.

Misra would say, "To these women, when in their best moods, children are like passing royalty. Don't you notice how everything comes to a standstill when they totter past them and how they are admired?"

And you asked, "But why do people love children?"

"Some because they can afford to lavish a moment's indulgence on a child that didn't keep them awake the previous night; some because they see angels in the infants they spy and marvel at God's generosity; some because they have no children themselves and envy those who are thus blessed. There are as many reasons why adults admire children as there are adults who admire them."

"And why is it that they don't like me?" you said.

She answered, "Because you are no child. That's why."

In your mind, the memory door opened and you saw visiting relatives of Uncle Qorrax's and they were giving his children cash with which to buy sweets or footballs; you also saw that these same relatives caned them if they caught them misbehaving in public. But when it came to you, they asked after your health, although they did so with extreme caution, speaking articulately to Misra in the manner of one

who was talking to a foreigner who didn't understand the nuances of one's language. And these relations never took liberties with you, no, they didn't. You wondered if it was "guilt" that made them act the way they did, "guilt" that made them look away when you "stared". Or were they uneasy because yours was the "stare" of a parentless child?

"I want you to think of it like this," said Misra to you one night. "You are a blind man and I am your stick, and it is I who leads you into the centre of human activities. Your appearance makes everyone fall silent, it makes them lower the volume of their chatter. And you too become conscious and you interpret their silence as a ploy to exclude you, and you feel you're being watched and that you're being denied entry into their world. From then on, you hold on to the stick, both as guide and protector. Since you cannot sense sympathy in their silences, you think it is hate. You, the blind man, and I, the stick. And together we pierce the sore — that's their conscience."

You said, "No wonder they don't like me!"

Again, Misra changed the subject to less demanding topics, topics that were less burdensome than the notions of "guilt" or "conscience". And she lulled you to and led you to sleep: gently, slowly, with a voice that changed rhythms and a lullaby sung in a language that wasn't your own. Some of the tales she told you had plenty of blood in them, there was no denying that. In a couple of these, there were even human-eating types — with Dhegdheer dying not and the heavens raining not! On occasion, she would give, in outline, the moral of the tale before she narrated it to you, and at times she would let you retell it so you had the opportunity of offering your own interpretation. Years later, you discovered (it was Karin who gave you the information) that Misra used to have these tales told to her when you were away from the compound so she could feed your fantasies on them when you returned. Admittedly, this endeared her to you.

Unlike Uncle Qorrax's children, you never stole things from anyone. You mentioned your needs — and Misra met them. If she couldn't, she told you why. And she trained you not to value money or possessions. Also, no visiting relation unfolded secretly onto your outstretched palm a coin a parent might not have given you. Uncle Qorrax's children, you knew, stole from their father. They conspired to do so — one of them would keep an eye on him, say, when he was in the lavatory and the others would rummage his pockets and take away

a small sum that he wouldn't notice and share it among themselves. Often, they timed it so it coincided with the arrival of nomads, who had come to buy provisions from his shop, pitching their tents in their compound, when there was a great deal of movement. They knew he dared not put embarrassing questions to these guest-clients. His sons knew he would never offer them or their mothers anything they could do without. It was his "public" persona that insisted on being generous at times. He could be kind to his children and wives when "others" were there; he could even be generous. When alone with them, he was a miser. So, they stole from him when he wasn't there.

Misra had a public and a private persona too. She was warmer and kinder when alone with you, calling you all kinds of endearments, sharing with you secrets no other soul knew about. And in any case, you needn't have stolen anything from Misra or from yourself. It was when she wore the mask of the public persona that you "stole" from her time a few moments of tenderness which you exchanged surreptitiously.

And when Misra was in season and therefore nervous, you were entrusted to Karin, who was equally kind, equally generous — and who treated you, not as a child, but as a grandchild. Because you were two generations apart, Karin indulged you in a way which didn't meet Misra's patent of approval. The two women were the best of friends — the one with an ailing husband who had lain on his back for years and who was confined to a mattress on the floor from where he saw, whenever he looked up at the ceiling, a portrait of Ernest Bevin; the other, a woman who, by virtue of her foreignness, felt she had access to the Somali cosmos — if there is anything like that — only through you. Karin baby-minded for her. Likewise, when she was indisposed, Misra looked after the old man. Conveniently for the three of you, Karin and her husband's compound lay between yours and Uncle Qorrax's. And so you were content to go from one compound to the other without ever needing to touch the fringes of the third — namely Qorrax's.

But Qorrax called at yours when he chose, preferably when you began breathing shallowly through your nose, almost asleep. He would wait until your dream had taken you to a watery destination — where it was moist, green and all your own — your Eden. Then he would come into bed with Misra.

Oh, how you hated him!

On the other hand, you loved Uncle Hilaal and his wife, Salaado, directly you met them. The flow of their warmth was comforting — sweet as spring water. And everything either of them did or said, once you gave it a thought, appeared as necessary as the blood of life. You loved Hilaal and Salaado, you loved the sea and you loved Mogadiscio.

You began writing letters to Misra a few months after your arrival in Mogadiscio. But you never finished writing even one single letter, suspecting, rightly, that she wouldn't be able to read Somali although she spoke it well enough. You were most distressed when you learnt that there never was a mail service through the official channels between Somalia and Ethiopia. Uncle Hilaal told you that letters had to be sent to other destinations, preferably via a European rechannelling system, like letters between a person living in apartheid South Africa and another in black Africa or a correspondence between one person residing in Syria and the other in Israel. So, apart from the wall of separation the Somali orthography raised between the two of you, there was also the official Ethiopian line of thinking, which was inimical to any communication taking place between Somalis living on either side of the *de facto* border between Ethiopia and Somalia. There were, indeed, rumours to the effect that a number of people suspected of holding Somali sympathies had been summarily executed, some were said to be still in jails serving sentences a military tribunal passed on them. You couldn't vouch for the truth of all that you heard, but you heard reports in which a man entered the Ogaden on foot, one day, and was apprehended. In his holdall, they found letters said to have been written by one member of the Western Somali Liberation Front to another. The man was sentenced to death, there being no question in the mind of the tribunal that he was a saboteur.

You began most of your letters with the standard greetings and then penned something like this: "Perhaps you don't remember me any more and perhaps you do. But I am the Askar who, for years, was strapped to your body, was almost one with it. I am sorry I've been beastly and haven't written . . . but!" And so on and so forth. In them, you spoke lovingly of Hilaal and Salaado, describing them as kind-hearted, enlightened and highly educated. However, you were sad, you said, because they didn't have "a festivity of goings-on" as in Uncle

Qorrax's compound, where there were many people, relatives and others, who came, who called and were entertained and where one felt one was a member of a community. "Here," you went on in one of those unposted and unfinished letters, "it appears as though it were a great virtue to be self-sufficient — and Uncle Hilaal and Salaado are. And I am the child they've been awaiting all these years. I am a godsend to them, although I am sure this isn't the right way of putting it since they both strike one, at first, as not being at all religious. They lavish their love on me. And this matters greatly to me."

And you boasted of your material acquisitions. For example, a watch "that circulates with my blood, one that stops if I don't wear it somewhere on my person". And a radio which "is on all day and night, entertaining us with the latest songs". Not to forget the room "that is all mine and on whose walls I have mirrors and maps, the one to reflect my visage, showing me whether or not I've grown a beard after so many disastrous beginnings — including, do you remember? my saying that if Karin's menopausal hair-on-the-chin was 'manlier' than mine then it was high time I did something about it; the other, i.e. the maps which give me the distance in scales of kilometrage — the distance that is between you and me. Which is to say that we are a million minutes apart, your 'anatomy' and mine". Again, you boasted of the learning you acquired and spoke commendably of Cusmaan, whom Hilaal and Salaado had engaged as your tutor. You showed off by asking Misra if she knew how far the sun was from the earth.

You were happy. You missed Misra. Evidently. Or, to put it differently, you missed her body's warmth and the odour of her sweat — which was natural. Salaado was a cosmopolitan woman, she smelt of perfumes and her clothes smelt of mothballs, her nails of varnish, her shoes of polish. It was Hilaal who reminded you of Misra — his was the natural body odour. And he was fatter and liked to make bodily contact, just like Misra!

There was one essential fact which you never mentioned, not even in those unposted, unfinished letters — that Hilaal cooked all the meals, and Salaado drove their only car and everything was in her name, bank accounts, land deeds, literally everything. He drove, yes, but only when necessary. And she was a terrible cook. And neither did you translate into Somali one of Uncle Hilaal's favourite phrases: "Sooner or later, sex".

They were wonderful: calm when you were caught in a storm of your own making; comforting whenever you were in some form of discomfort; providing space when that was what you needed desperately; trusting of you and of one another and of your need of each other, giving, forgiving and loving all the time. You were your own person and your life was your own and you could do with it what you pleased. And they? They were at your service, they were there to help you if it was their assistance you sought; they were there to let you go if that was what you wished. For example, there was that time in Hargeisa, where Salaado and you were holidaying — you had earned a vacation by doing well in your eighth-grade examination — when Hilaal sent you a letter you've preserved till this day. Here is the body of the letter:

My dearest Askar,

I am indeed disturbed by your behaviour, disturbed and bothered by what Salaado refers to as your most depressive state of mind to date. And what do you mean by saying that you haven't become "a man" so you can sit "in a Mogadiscio of comforts, eat a mountainful of spaghetti while my peers in the Ogaden starve to death or shed their blood in order to liberate it from Ethiopian hands"? Do I also understand that you wish to straighten out "this question about my own birth"?

Now, first point first. A man, indeed. Are you "a man"? One day, I would like you to define what or who is a "man". Can one describe oneself as a man when one cannot make a viable contribution to the struggle of one's people; when one is not as educated and as aware of the world's politics as one's enemy is; when one is not yet fifteen; when all the evidence of one's being a man comprises of one's height and a few hairs grown on the chin? Who will you kill, your enemy or yourself? And what's wrong with eating well and not being a refugee, which you might have been if you weren't my sister, Arla's, son and if Salaado and I weren't doing well financially. And pray don't talk ill of the UNHCR people, whether in Geneva, Mogadiscio or here, in this, or any other continent: they're not statisticians obsessed with abstracted numbers and charts of starvation and malnutrition. Of course, they have to ascertain how many refugees there are and how much money they can raise and how many calories an African child can cope with. It is the tone I don't like, eating "a mountainful of spaghetti", etc. Indeed! Askar, one must be grateful for the little mercies in life. One must be thankful to the dedicated souls, serving in these camps under very hard conditions (for them), while they wait for a donor to donate the food and medicines — making sure (and this is very, very difficult) that the local mafia doesn't misappropriate them.

I confess, it pains me to remember the number of times you, Salaado and I have spoken about and analysed the seeds of your sense of "guilt". Salaado's telegraphic message suggests it to be as bad as the days following the tragic weekend when, overnight and in a coup de grâce, the Ogaden was wrung out of Somali hands and "returned" to Ethiopia's claw-hammer. Now what's this that I hear, that you were salvaged from the corpse of your mother? Is there anyone who can substantiate that with some evidence? Your mother lived long enough to have scribbled something in her journal. That means that she died after you were born, especially if we take into account Misra's statement which agrees with this claim of mine.

To think, at your age, when you're in Hargeisa for a holidaying trip, that your thoughts are still obsessed with some obscure facts relating to your birth. This disturbs Salaado — it perturbs me. Salaado tells me that you want to return to Kallafo in order to have this question answered once and for all. That is not the same thing as joining the Western Somali Liberation Front, I take it? But Salaado is under the impression that for you, the two are one and the same thing. Now what do you want to do? Of course, you can do both and we have no objection to your deciding to return to the Ogaden as a recruited member of the Front (which we all support) and when there, do your research into your beginnings. You tell us what you want and we'll give you our opinion.

Forgive me, but I've never held the view — nor has Salaado — that, since there are many able-bodied men and women in the Ogaden who can shoot a gun, kill an "Amxaar" in a scuffle and, if need be, confront the lion in the den, a youngster like you mustn't go. No. "Somebody" must go. But who is this "somebody"? If every father, mother, relation said, "No, not my son, let someone else join the Front", then you know where we'll end up? The view Salaado and I hold, is that since you'll prove to be excellent material as a researcher, as a writer of articles and as one who can impart enlightened opinion about the cause, why not "eat mountainfuls of spaghetti while others die" and why not, when doing so, complete your education.

Should you insist that you wish to re-enter the Ogaden without touching Mogadiscio, then I am afraid that neither Salaado nor I can do anything about it. All we can suggest that we offer is help. But I plead to you not to depart without at least letting Salaado know. If you inform me by return post that you're definitely leaving, then I'll make arrangements for more money to be transferred to Hargeisa, care of a bank.

If we're to believe that you "stared" at Misra when she found you and Arla, my sister, then you were at least a day old. For sight, my dear Askar, is a door which does not open instantly in the newly born. What I mean is, that it takes longer than a few minutes for a baby just born to develop the knack to look, let

alone “stare”. Be that as it is. But the fact that it shrouds your beginnings in mysteries preponderant as the babies born in the epic traditions of Africa, Europe and Asia — this fact does interest me greatly. Did you sprout like a plant out of the earth? Were you born in nine months, in three or seven?

In other words, do you share your temperament with the likes of Sunjata or Mwendo, both being characters in Africa’s epic traditions? For example, it is said that Sunjata was an adult when he was three. Mwendo, in the traditions told about him, is said to have chosen to be delivered, not through the womb, but through a middle finger. There are other epic children who took a day to be conceived and born and yet others required a hundred and fifty years to be born at all. Now why did this “epic child” wait for a hundred and fifty years? Because he made the unusual (I almost said, rational) request not to use as his exit (or was it his entrance) the very organ which his mother employed as her urinary passage. Another feature common among epic children is that they are all born bearing arms. And you, Askar, you’re armed by name, aren’t you?

Again, this is nothing unique to epic traditions of peoples. The world’s religions produce “miracle” children. Can you imagine an Adam, a grown man, standing naked, with leaves of innocence covering his uff, when God pulls at his ribs and says to him, “I am sorry but it won’t take a second, I assure you, and it won’t give you any pain either. Now look. Here. A woman, an Eve, created from one of your ribs”? I am sure you’ve heard of heroes given birth to by mountains or rivers or fishes or for that matter other animals. It seems to me that these myths make the same point again and again: that the “person” thus born contains within him or her a characteristic peculiar to gods. Well. Where do we go from here?

All is doubt.

Are you or are you not an “epic” child of the modern times? Do we know what the weather was like the moment you were born? Yes, we do. Your mother, in her scrawls, tells us that the sky was dark with clouds and that a heavy storm broke on her head as she fainted with the pains of labour and the heavens brightened with those thunderous downpours. But you didn’t take shorter than a month to be conceived and born, or seven hundred years. And there was no eclipse of the moon or the sun. I’ve read and reread your mother’s journal for clues. I am afraid it appears that you completed your nine months.

Please think things over. And please do not do anything rash. We will miss you greatly if you go — but we understand. Rest assured that we’ll not stand in your way if you wish to return to your beginnings.

Much, much love.
Yours ever,
Uncle Hilaal.