

To Build a Fire by Jack London

Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hair-line was the trail -- the main trail -- that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on the Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this -- the mysterious, far-reaching hair-line trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all -- made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo*, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below -- how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would

be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, travelling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numb nose and cheek-bones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing-point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystallized breath. The man's red beard and mustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco-chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of niggerheads, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek-bed. The furrow of the old sled-trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of

snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice-muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheek-bones and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheek-bones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose-strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber-jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom, -- no creek could contain water in that arctic winter, -- but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice-skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice-skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek-bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came from the right. He reflected awhile, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. Once clear of the danger, he took a fresh chew of tobacco and swung along at his four-mile gait. In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to it turned to ice. It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its

being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice-particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely across his chest.

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled. He had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice-muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numb. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numb.

He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it *was* cold. He strode up and down, stamping his feet and thrashing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his fire-wood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold of space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

When the man had finished, he filled his pipe and took his comfortable time over a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled the ear-flaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing-point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip-lash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whip-lash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own

sake that it yearned back toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of whip-lashes, and the dog swung in at the man's heels and followed after.

The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start a new amber beard. Also, his moist breath quickly powdered with white his mustache, eyebrows, and lashes. There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke through. It was not deep. He wet himself halfway to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

He was angry, and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o'clock, and this would delay him an hour, for he would have to build a fire and dry out his foot-gear. This was imperative at that low temperature -- he knew that much; and he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry fire-wood -- sticks and twigs, principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last-year's grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch-bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire -- that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

All this the man knew. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek had told him about it the previous fall, and now he was appreciating the advice. Already all sensation had gone out of his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly gone numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body. The extremities were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze the faster, and his exposed fingers numbed the faster, though they had not yet begun to freeze. Nose and cheeks were already freezing, while the skin of all his body chilled as it lost its blood.

But he was safe. Toes and nose and cheeks would be only touched by the frost, for the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with twigs the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with branches the size of his wrist, and then he could remove his wet foot-gear, and, while it dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them at first, of course, with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, and they seemed remote from his body and from him. When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger-ends.

All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to the knees; and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration. For a moment he tugged with his numb fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath-knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree -- an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail-mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail-mate could have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind. He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water flotsam. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather

them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss that were undesirable, but it was the best he could do. He worked methodically, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire-provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch-bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and thrashed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides. He did this sitting down, and he stood up to do it; and all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf-brush of a tail curled around warmly over its forefeet, its sharp wolf-ears pricked forward intently as it watched the man. And the man, as he beat and thrashed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

After a time he was aware of the first faraway signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating, but which the man hailed with satisfaction. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch-bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulphur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches. He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side the bunch, he closed them -- that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and the fingers did not obey. He pulled the mitten on the right hand, and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he scooped the bunch of matches, along with much snow, into his lap. Yet he was no better off.

After some manipulation he managed to get the bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice crackled and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his lap. He was no better off. He could not pick it up. Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch-bark. But the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out.

The old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that ensued: after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner. He beat his hands, but failed in exciting any sensation. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch between the heels of his hands. His arm-muscles not being frozen

enabled him to press the hand-heels tightly against the matches. Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes, and held the blazing bunch to the birch-bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame.

At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch-bark was alight. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel between the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward. A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire-provider had failed. As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting its weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. He spoke to the dog, calling it to him; but in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger -- it knew not what danger, but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. It flattened its ears down at the sound of the man's voice, and its restless, hunching movements and the liftings and shiftings of its forefeet became more pronounced; but it would not come to the man. He got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the dog. This unusual posture again excited suspicion, and the animal sidled mincingly away.

The man sat up in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, by means of his teeth, and got upon his feet. He glanced down at first in order to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth. His erect position in itself started to drive the webs of suspicion from the dog's mind; and when he spoke peremptorily, with the sound of whip-lashes in his voice, the dog rendered its customary allegiance and came to him. As it came within reaching distance, the man lost his control. His arms flashed out to the dog, and he experienced genuine surprise when he discovered that his hands could not clutch, that there was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and

more. All this happened quickly, and before the animal could get away, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it snarled and whined and struggled.

But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath-knife nor throttle the animal. He released it, and it plunged wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward. The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began thrashing his arms back and forth, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in the hands. He had an impression that they hung like weights on the ends of his arms, but when he tried to run the impression down, he could not find it.

A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek-bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he ploughed and floundered through the snow, he began to see things again, -- the banks of the creek, the old timber-jams, the leafless aspens, and the sky. The running made him feel better. He did not shiver. Maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and, anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys. Without doubt he would lose some fingers and toes and some of his face; but the boys would take care of him, and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start on him, and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things.

It struck him as curious that he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth. Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury, and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth.

His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided, and next time he would merely walk and keep on going. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable. He was not shivering, and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his chest and trunk. And yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Running would not thaw them out. Nor would it thaw out his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was

afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appeasingly. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than a hundred feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. However, the conception did not come to him in such terms. His idea of it was that he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off -- such was the simile that occurred to him. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this new-found peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an anesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

"You were right, old hoss; you were right," the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek.

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears down in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers.

Hidden Assets by Ginny Swart

One night, when I was ten, my father came home from work carrying a tortoise under his arm. With difficulty. It was the biggest tortoise I'd ever seen.

He placed it on the kitchen table and the seven of us watched as it slowly pushed out its ancient head and surveyed its surroundings. Then, faster than we expected, it extended its legs and tried to walk away, slipping and scrabbling on the plastic surface. My sister Ansie leaned forward and stroked its shell. A stream of yellow liquid trickled out from the rear end and she leapt back.

"Get that thing out of this house and into the yard where it belongs," said my mother sharply. "Yirra, Jannie, where'd you find a such a big tortoise?"

My father looked a bit sheepish.

"This guy from Angola got stopped coming through today. His whole family, seven kids, dogs, chickens, the lot. Course he didn't have any papers so they've all ended up at the Camp to get sorted out. The dogs had to go into the kennels and the chickens are in a cage there too. Then when I was parking his truck out of the way I found this big rock here sitting in a corner at the back. So I thought, shame man, he'll probably die. They could be sitting in that camp for months."

"Why didn't you just let it go in the veldt?"

"Ag, I thought the kids might like it. He's a big bugger, eh?"

My father was a policeman, at that time seconded to the Namibian Immigration and posted to the border post at Oshikango. His previous posting had been on the border of Mozambique in an even smaller town, where the families tried to come over at night, making chirruping noises like crickets to fool the customs officials.

They didn't fool my father however, he could spot a moving shadow in the bush without his binoculars and soon got a reputation for being a good man to have on a border crossing.

But it had been a depressing post. So many of the people came over on one leg, the other a bloodied stump wrapped in filthy bandages, and my father who was a big softie at heart used to get the whole family loaded onto lorries and taken off to hospital from where, he know, many of them would melt away into the relative safety of the South African bush.

This secondment was meant to be a promotion of sorts, an acknowledgement of his ability to spot the unwanted shadows. My mother didn't think much of it however. She found it difficult to make friends amongst the wives of the customs officials, who she thought were a rough lot. She disapproved of their drinking alongside their husbands of a Friday night and kept herself aloof from their raucous joking and coarse language. In the four years we'd lived there, she had never been invited for morning coffee and in turn, she had never invited anyone herself. She said we five kids kept her more than busy enough, thank you.

Our house which stood alone near the general dealers, was a standard government box with a red corrugated- iron roof and an outside long-drop, hot in summer and cold in winter and too small for five children. There was no place for pets in our house: my three brothers were allergic to cats and according to my mother all dogs were potentially vicious fighters, or at the very least flea carriers and hair shedders. Probably, we just couldn't afford to feed a dog.

"A Portuguese tortoise!" I was enchanted. "Let's call him da Silva."

Mr. de Silva owned the fruit and veg shop opposite the general dealer. He was the only Portuguese person we knew. The others who came across the border were in a hurry to reach Johannesburg or Cape Town, but for some reason Mr. de Silva had stayed put, selling wilted

turnips and soft, dusty oranges from their cartons. He made most of his money from the pinball machine that stood on the verandah outside his shop.

"He's an illegal immigrant," said my mother. "You're not allowed to bring him home, Jannie, you know that. He's livestock. We could get into trouble."

We knew about illegal immigrants. Every day Angolans in heavily-laden old trucks and rusty sedans tried to cross the border to escape the civil war not far behind them. They were stopped at the Customs post, their papers studied. The lucky ones were allowed through, to a life full of more peaceful possibilities in the Republic. Many others were rejected, my father was called from his office and they were driven away to an internment camp close by to await their fate.

"Ag ..." Pa smiled. "Nobody will mind if we just let it run in our garden. I couldn't just leave it there in that filthy truck. He was hungry."

"Hungry, my foot," said my mother, but she went into the kitchen and cut some slices of fresh cabbage. "Take this out to him and see if he likes it."

He did. Da Silva settled down in our back yard, the perfect pet. Days would go by when we forgot about him, then we'd see him heaving his ponderous shell out from under a bush and greet him like a long-lost friend. There was no emotional response from da Silva but he accepted cabbage, fruit or whatever else could be spared from the kitchen, and if we forgot about him, he foraged for himself. In winter, he disappeared underground, only digging himself out when he could feel the warmth once again.

The year I started high school, my father joined the Railway police and we moved down to De Aar in the middle of the Karroo. Da Silva came too, travelling in the boot of our green Valiant, completely filling a Sunlight Soap carton with holes punched in the lid.

The move meant a bigger and better house on the outskirts of a proper town, with a supermarket, which pleased my mother. But at the same time it was decided that Ansie and I would go to a Cape Town boarding school, and we were worried that in our absence da Silva would be forgotten completely. We appointed our youngest brother Frikkie to make sure he couldn't escape from the new garden and to feed him his usual tidbits. Frikkie was seven at the time and happily accepted the responsibility. Da Silva became *his* tortoise and he hotly defended his right to be the sole feeder and caretaker of the family pet.

Frikkie took to studying da Silva.. He borrowed books from the library and announced that he was a male Leopard tortoise, the biggest kind you could get in Africa, and a very large specimen at that. Da Silva was 600 cms from end to end of his shell and too heavy for Frikkie to pick up. He polished his yellow and brown patterned carapace with furniture wax so that it gleamed, and made him a strong wooden box in which to hibernate. He even did a school project on da Silva, for which he got an A, with the remark "Very well observed" at the bottom of it.

"That's nice," said my mother approvingly. "Pity it had to be about that blerrie tortoise though. You should get interested in sheep, man. Then you could get a job with Mr. de Witt or Mr. van Zyl and learn to be a farm manager one day. They train school leavers all about sheep, no need to go to agricultural college. Mrs. le Roux's son Hansie is doing very well with Mr. de Witt, he's even has his own house on the farm."

"I don't want to work on a farm, Ma," said Frikkie softly. "I don't like sheep. They're stupid and they've got funny yellow eyes."

"Course he doesn't want to work with sheep," said my father heartily. "Unless you've got your own farm, you spend your whole life dipping sheep and washing their backsides for blowfly. No, Frikkie's going to be a policeman like his Pa, eh Frikkie?"

"Maybe."

"A policeman? No, he's not! D'you think he wants to spend his life in some miserable little dorp like this? Working with all these drunks and skollies? No, Frikkie's going to do something to earn decent money. He gets an A for his school work - he's going to get a good job somewhere far away from this hole. Think he wants to end up like you?"

My father sighed and shifted his paunch uneasily. We recognized the beginning of a fairly regular one-sided conversation between our parents and so did my father. He got up and went to the door.

"Think I'll check the chickens before I turn in."

My mother clicked her tongue with annoyance.

"You concentrate on sheep, son," she said. "There's good money in sheep."

My mother always liked to have the last word.

One evening during the winter holidays while Frikkie was at a scout meeting, my father was reading the paper in front of the fire. Suddenly he gave a loud exclamation and snorted with laughter.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "Those clever buggers have started using tortoises for smuggling diamonds!"

It was reported that some Angolans, who were now leaving their country in their thousands and were officially classed as refugees, had taken to sticking uncut diamonds onto the shell of a small tortoise, then gluing the shell of a larger tortoise on top. These were then packed snugly at the bottom of a cardboard suitcase or in the centre of a cloth bag and took their chance going through the border, presumably taking care of the stones until the time was right to sell them on. Nobody knew how many had made it through into South Africa undetected, but in the past month, no fewer than four specially doctored tortoises had been found. One of them had uncut diamonds valued at half a million rands glued between the two shells. The give-away had been a double ridge at the bottom edge where the top shell fitted less than exactly over the other.

"Bloody marvelous!" chuckled my father.

The same thought struck us all simultaneously.

Da Silva. Diamonds. Could he have ...?

It was night time, as cold and dark as only a Karroo night can be. I fetched a flashlight from the garage and we walked out into the back garden, the frosted grass crunching underfoot. We found the rounded shape of da Silva under a pile of hay in his box. I felt a bit doubtful. If da Silva had been harbouring any diamonds for all these years surely we would have noticed it?

"Quickly, bring him into the light where we can see him properly," said my mother, her voice shrill with excitement. "Don't drop him now."

We had barely got da Silva onto the kitchen table when Frikkie came home.

"What're you doing with da Silva?" he demanded, glaring at all of us. "He doesn't feel like coming out now, he's hibernating. I never said you could play with him."

"Don't worry, Boet, we're just checking his shell," soothed my father.

"There might be diamonds under there," added my mother, flushed with the thought of sudden wealth. "Uncut diamonds."

"Oh, come ON Ma," retorted Frikkie, "You don't get diamonds from a tortoise! You get them from under the ground!"

"Don't get cheeky with me, young man," she snapped, "da Silva is from Angola, isn't he? They've been smuggling them out for years. His shell could be STUFFED with diamonds."

We peered intently at the edge of da Silva's shell and in the dim kitchen light, it suddenly seemed to me as if there could be a double edge to it. If I looked at a certain angle, there was definitely a thickness above the outer edge. This could easily be another shell, one that had been expertly glued down ten years before. How could we not have noticed this until now?

"Jannie," said my mother, "You've got to try and take this off. Shall I fetch the claw hammer for you?"

"MA!" Frikkie was horrified. "You can't smash da Silva's shell off! He'll die!"

"No, Boetie, not smash it off, you Pa is just going to ... sort of ... LIFT the top shell off," soothed my mother. "He won't hurt de Silva, now will you Jannie?"

I saw her wink at my father.

He studied the tortoise, who by this time had sleepily poked his head out and was staring around him with his beady little eyes unblinking in the light.

"I tell you what, skattie," he answered, "Let's leave this till tomorrow morning when it's properly light. I'll go down to the hardware and see if they've got anything that can dissolve the glue. I wouldn't want to damage the shell now, Frikkie's right, it could kill this animal."

"If you crack a tortoise shell they can die. They get infections, Ma," said Frikkie in a strangled voice. "Leave da Silva, he's not hurting you. He hasn't got any diamonds anywhere."

"Okay, Frik, put him back outside," said my father. "We'll look at him again tomorrow."

"Yirra, just think if that tortoise has been carrying uncut diamonds all this time!" said my mother dreamily. "You know it's not hard to sell those things. There're IDB men everywhere, you just have to know the right person. They pay you cash, no questions asked and even one little diamond can make a person rich. A big tortoise like ours can be carrying fortune. We could move to Cape Town near Auntie Hazel and we could buy a house there. And get a new car."

But in the morning, da Silva was gone. His wooden box was empty.

I suspected that Frikkie had taken him somewhere else until the diamond rush was over, but my mother was furious. She suspected da Silva of foul play, of knowing what our plans were and of deliberately foiling them.

"He's here in the garden somewhere," she muttered, her bony face alight with frustration. She was on her hands and knees, brushing aside the shrubs and poking a garden fork in between the cabbages. "Or maybe someone came and stole him in the night.. if they read the paper they'd know he could be a very valuable animal.". Considering there were about a thousand Karroo tortoises within a hundred meters of the town borders, I thought theft was unlikely, and we continued to search for da Silva until my father burst our bubble. He told us not to be stupid, that having uncut diamonds was a crime and that there was no point in looking, as we'd all go to prison if we found any and didn't hand them straight to the Authorities.

A man with a strong respect for Authority, he wasn't going to lose his job just because his wife and a bunch of greedy kids wanted to try a bit of illicit diamond selling.

Frikkie watched us from a distance, taking no part in the search for de Silva, which I thought was proof enough that he knew where he was. But we never saw him again and over the next few

months the completely tortoise faded from our lives. Ansie thought he might have fallen in love with a lady tortoise and followed her into the veldt.

My mother referred to him bitterly as 'that tortoise that could have made us rich' and for a long time afterwards I found her intently sweeping aside the bougainvillea branches and peering underneath the aloe bushes.

Ansie and I went away to college after that, and slowly my brothers grew up and left home too. Frikkie, who turned out to be the brightest of us all, won a bursary to study zoology at the university in Port Elizabeth. He did his doctorate on the Chelonians of the Northern Cape and became quite famous at the university when he discovered a new sub-species of tortoise. The local paper ran a picture of him with a tiny black tortoise in his hand, and made him sound like a bit of a freak, enthusing over his tortoises and telling the reporter they each had their own personalities. My mother pasted the whole article onto a piece of cardboard and framed it. It joined his graduation photo on the mantelpiece, next to the wedding photos of the rest of us and pictures of her many grandchildren.

When our parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, all five families descended on the small house in De Aar. Ansie and her husband came from England and my brother Andre flew over from Canada. The rest of us came up from the Cape. The reunion was noisy and cheerful with many of the cousins meeting for the first time.

After a huge dinner at the hotel my father made a short, rather slurred and emotional speech which embarrassed my mother and then sat down gratefully to get on with some serious brandy and coke. The rest of us caught up with family news.

Ansie and I were chatting to Frikkie, sitting alone while his new wife showed off their baby to her in-laws.

"Hey Frik, remember da Silva?" I said idly. "Was it you that set him free that night? Ma was so cross, remember?"

"No, not me," he grinned. "Didn't you guess? It was Pa.. I saw him go out in the middle of the night. He put him in the bakkie and drove him off to the veldt on the other side of the railway line."

"No! Did you ever say anything to him about it?"

"Ja, he told me the next day. He just said he thought it would get Ma off his back. He didn't want to kill da Silva any more than I did! He never really believed they'd find any uncut diamonds, and if they were there, he certainly didn't want to find them. It would have given him a heart attack just thinking about what to do with them."

"That's typical Pa," said Ansie lovingly. "Peace at any price. I suppose da Silva is still wandering around in the veldt somewhere. Tortoises live a long time, don't they?"

"He could live to be 60 years," said Frikkie. "He's a Leopard tortoise and they're pretty long lived. He's twice the size of the local tortoises around here. If someone found him they might have kept him too, although it's so illegal these days they might not want to risk the fine. I don't suppose we'll ever know."

But in the end, I did. Four years later I was visiting my mother in the council retirement home where she'd moved after my father died. Age hadn't softened her and she was one of the 'more difficult' residents, as the matron never failed to tell me. Now eighty- one and nearly blind, she

missed the stimulation of married bickering and often sat for hours just staring out of the window, as prickly as ever with the other residents. Whenever I came, she demanded to be read to out of the Cape Town papers I brought with me, commenting crossly on everything she heard.

Politics - they're idiots, the lot of them. What do they know about government, half of them are still in the trees. Sport - Naas Botha was the only one who knew how to kick a ball, why don't they bring him back? International news - she just wasn't interested. I searched for the shorter, human interest articles that she liked and had just finished reading aloud about a snake from Bloemfontein which swallowed a Maltese poodle. "Shame, that was somebody's little pet, let's hope it didn't suffer too much, eh," when my eye caught the headline below.

"Man found guilty after shaggy tortoise story."

Something made me scan it before I started reading to her. It was about a man being tried for the possession of uncut diamonds. He'd attempted to sell them to an undercover policeman, who had looked at the stones he offered and promptly arrested him. In his defense, the man said he'd come across the squashed remains of a big tortoise on the highway between Johannesburg and De Aar, and he'd found the stones right there amongst the broken shell. He claimed the tortoise must have found them somewhere and eaten them and by rights, this gift from the gods was legally his. The policeman hadn't believed a word of his story and neither did the magistrate. Five years and no option of a fine.

I must have made a small noise, because my mother snapped, "Come on, what have you found? Read it to me! Don't skip the good bits!"

"It's nothing, ma, just some man found guilty of IDB."

"Only fools would get involved with illegal diamonds," she said.

I turned the page and carried on reading aloud about a homing pigeon that came home after three years away from its loft.

An Indian Odyssey by David Iglehart

When returned to his swaying compartment, Doug Thompson found a strange man sitting on the floor. Thinking he had made a mistake, he started to go back out, but the other passengers in the room had traveled with him all the way from Bombay. The raw-boned farmer on the left with his wife and small daughter looked up at him idly, and the mustached businessman who shared his own seat was still busy with his stack of papers. Jammed among their suitcases and feet, the newcomer, a very small old man, sat cross-legged on a piece of cardboard, calmly reading aloud to himself in a barely audible voice as if he'd been there for hours. On the cover of his well-worn book, a tall, blue god and a warrior king with a golden helmet stood in the most ornate chariot imaginable. Its title was in the Devanagari script, but Doug recognized it immediately as the Bhagavad Gita, which he himself was reading in English.

He had found his copy in his hotel room the night before, the Indian equivalent of a Gideon's Bible, when jet lag and travel anxiety woke him at three in the morning. The picture of Krishna revealing Truth to his disciple on a battlefield of soldiers seemed so extraordinary that he read fifty pages before falling back to sleep, and then took it with him for his unexpected train ride.

He was on a quick return trip to India as a consultant on "enterprise software," with appointments in Bangalore and Chennai-Madras, but his carefully made arrangements had all gone wrong. Fog in New York had kept him on the runway for over three excruciating hours, which forced him to catch a late plane out of Frankfurt and made him miss his domestic connection in Bombay altogether. He had hoped to find another flight to Bangalore with only minor delays, but it was late May and many thousands of Indians were returning home on vacation from their businesses and studies abroad. Every plane was absolutely full, with impossibly long waiting lists, and, in spite of all his protests, the bored young woman at the airline counter told him flatly that he faced a one-week delay. One week! He wasn't about to put up with it. Aside from his appointments and the expense of staying so long in Bombay, he had promised Karen, his new wife, he would be home in fourteen days. Deeply exhausted, he found a hotel, slept a few fitful hours, and caught a train south early the next morning. It would take eighteen precious hours to reach Bangalore, but at least it would get him there in time for his second meeting. To stay functional, he would just have to rest as best he could along the way.

Squeezing past the old man, he picked up his book from his seat, sat down with his laptop computer beside him, and sighed. It already was going to be a long, uncomfortable ride, and now he didn't have enough room to stretch his legs. Irritated, he stared at the old man and wondered what on earth he was doing there. Did the overcrowded Indian railways actually sell tickets for space on the floor? None of the other passengers were paying the old man any attention, and he seemed oblivious to them all, as if he had were entirely at home there among their feet. The singsong way he was reading aloud was going to be very tiresome too if he stayed the whole remaining fourteen hours.

Doug went back into the corridor to look for the placid conductor who appeared after each stop, but couldn't find him anywhere. Dark, irrational blocks of thought tumbled through his mind about Indian inefficiency, overcrowding, overpopulation, and insufficient infrastructure, and he returned to his seat and stared out the window to compose himself. The train was pulling out of what seemed to be the same station. A dozen times that day already, he had seen similar travelers waiting on what could have been the same platform. The railway buildings, the tea stalls, the boys with meals in tins were identical, and out of the station stretched the same concrete apartments, the river with buffaloes and women washing laundry, the endless tiny fields

with mud-walled houses and farmers plowing with teams of bullocks. He had been traveling half a day, but had the feeling he was getting nowhere. Unlike at the airport, no one spoke English, and when he had gotten out at the last stop to find something safe to drink, he had become momentarily disoriented. A crowd of brown, peering faces had pressed against him uncontrollably, with no regard for his Western sense of necessary body space, making him feel suffocated. He had to fight his way through them back to the train, and almost failed to get back aboard in time. To make matters worse, his stomach was full of strange rumors of unrest ever since he had eaten the "tiffin snack" his hotel had prepared for him. The dry, smoky taste in the back of his mouth wouldn't go away, and the thought of getting sick on a jostling train, where no one could understand or help him was alarming. The clacking of the rails resumed its rhythm, and he closed his eyes, thought of Karen, and tried to sleep in spite of the jarring vibrations.

"I hope you don't mind," the old man said suddenly in a thick, British-Indian accent.

Doug pried open his weary eyes and stared at him. He was very thin, with balding white-gray hair, and wore a traditional white shirt and dhoti of the thinnest, hand-woven cloth, torn in several places. In stark contrast, his heavy glasses had such thick lenses that they magnified his eyes. He blinked, owl-like, when Doug didn't answer immediately, but he sat erect as if he was entirely comfortable on his strip of cardboard on the dirty floor, his head at knee level to the rest of the world.

"The train is overcrowded, as usual," the old man went on. "Still, I may not be here for long."

Doug sighed again - another traveler inconvenienced.

"The next stop is only thirty-seven and a half minutes away," the old man added, "but I can go to another compartment if you like."

"No. It's not a problem," Doug lied. The old man looked penniless, and he was so polite and unassuming that Doug didn't have the heart to send him away. All he really wanted to do was sleep. His eyelids drooped heavily.

"I rejoice that you are reading the Gita," the old man confided in him. "I had heard more and more foreigners have discovered it. When I saw your copy, I took it as a sign."

Doug made a mental note never to steal books from hotel rooms in strange countries and leave them on train seats again. He decided against conversation, leaned his head back, and began to drift.

The conductor finally arrived to take tickets, and he too showed no particular surprise at finding a passenger camped on the floor. Barely glancing at the worn slip of paper in cellophane that the old man showed him, he joked with him in Hindi as if he were an old friend and went out again. Doug nodded off.

"Excuse me, but are you ill?" the old man asked.

Doug opened his eyes again nervously, wondering whether something was beginning to show in his face. "I don't think so," he said. "My stomach's a little strange, but I'm hoping it's just because I haven't been able to sleep."

The old man studied him deeply. Then he pulled out a little box from the small cotton sack beside him and opened it. Inside were tiny compartments full of white pills, and he picked up a single pill in a slip of paper and folded it up neatly.

"Take this," he said, handing it to Doug. "It's entirely harmless. I take one every day. It will steady you the rest of the way to Bangalore. You still have a long ride."

Doug accepted it but didn't put it in his mouth, mildly surprised that the man had guessed his destination so easily, although since he was a Westerner with a laptop headed south toward the software capital of India, it probably had been easy. "Are you a doctor?" he asked cautiously.

"No, no. Medicine is my just hobby," the old man said with a laugh. "I worked in a railway station in the north, largely in charge of scheduling conflicts. That's how I got my pass."

"Have you come far?" Doug asked.

"From Almora again, in the Himalayas."

The Himalayas were over a thousand miles away, and Doug lifted his head.

"Are you going as far Bangalore?" he asked, hoping the old man could help him make sure he got off at the right stop. He was beginning to think he had better find a real doctor quickly in Bangalore.

"All the way to Kaniya Kumari, I should think - Cape Comorin - at the tip of India."

That was five hundred miles farther south than Bangalore, a long way to travel on the floor, though the answer was strangely indefinite.

"Quite an odyssey," Doug said.

The old man looked off into the air, as if he had to fly back into the remote past to find the reference. "Ah yes, the Odyssey. I've read it. Greek, is it not?"

"I believe so," Doug said. He had been forced to read it in college, four years before, and had promptly re-read it immediately.

"Quite a tale," the old man said

At this moment several boys brought in trays with the different meals the passengers had ordered. The old man didn't receive anything and returned his attention to his book. The others began to eat with relish, but when Doug smelled the fiery curry and pickles on his own plate, his troubled stomach threatened to run wild in the streets. Reeling, he realized he had to get rid of his plate quickly, and the old man looked like he could use a meal.

"Please," he said, holding it out to him, "would you like this?"

The old man accepted it with a polite nod but no noticeable surprise. "You're very kind, as I expected. I knew this was the right compartment."

"It's just that I don't think I can eat it," Doug added quickly.

The old man closed his eyes, apparently in prayer, opened them again, and began devouring his meal. The sight was an act of provocation that brought jeers of protest from Doug's stomach, and he got up immediately and went out of the compartment for fresher air. The whole corridor reeked of curry. He rushed to the "Western-style" bathroom and splashed water on his face, careful not to drink a deadly, microbe-laden drop, which brought longed-for relief. Secure for the moment from the sudden threat of cobblestones ready to be hurled from within, he went out to the windows between the cars, breathed deeply, and stared at the quiet, cool-looking paddy fields, full of toiling women, big-horned water buffaloes, and white buffalo egrets. He realized he was sweating and perhaps feverish - from food poisoning, dysentery, typhoid, or the Lord knew what. He was definitely going to have to find medical help. As soon as he reached Bangalore, he would phone his hotel about it. Only after the boys had returned for the trays did he return to his cabin.

The other passengers in the compartment filed out to wash their hands. The old man stood up as slowly as if he had to will each vertebra into place. Barely over five feet tall, he was stooped and frail, and as light boned as an egret. Before he left, he carefully folded up his strip of

cardboard and leaned it upright beneath the window beside his soiled bundle. When he returned, well after the others, he sat back down on his cardboard once more and read to himself aloud for a while. Then he fell silent and closed his eyes. Feeling more collected, Doug considered the pill folded up in his pocket, but couldn't imagine taking it without knowing anything about it or the old man. Hoping the rioters in his stomach had spent themselves in angry protests, he closed his tired eyes again to sleep. If only he could sleep...

"The Odyssey," the old man announced out of the blue again. "What an odd tale! I understood it."

"Yes?" Doug said, struggling for consciousness.

"Odysseus had been away at war. He was a clever man, but the gods turned on him because of his pride and the sins of his crew. All except for the goddess, of course. Because he was so devoted to her, she appeared to him whenever he needed her most, though sometimes she kept him waiting, for years even, to curb his great pride. She was always tricking him and appearing in disguise. They had a wonderful relationship."

Doug listened attentively. It was better to be distracted from the jostling placards and wall graffiti still distantly trying to communicate with him from his lower intestines.

"He had to battle demons and giants for the betterment of the world," the old man went on. "Eventually he was reduced to absolutely nothing, a naked man in the great sea of life, and learned humility. An innocent young girl pounding her laundry on a riverbank took pity on him and saved him, though he had many trials ahead on his great pilgrimage."

Doug opened his eyes wider at this novel interpretation of Odysseus, the great pilgrim.

"Finally he was reduced to appearing at his own home with a beggar's bowl and staff," the old man went on. "When they spread the banana leaves before him and gave him his balls of rice, he learned that demonic men had been killing his holy cows. You can imagine how low he felt. And now they wanted his wife. He would have wept in outrage and given himself away, but the goddess steadied him. Later she even fought in armor at his side, and with her help he defeated all the demons and purified his home. It is always better to have deity at your side."

"Good advice," Doug thought. Then he noticed that the old man was looking at him fixedly, and realized that he had been impolite enough to smile wanly at the banana leaves and rice. "Like you said, it's an amazing story," he said quickly. "I hadn't heard quite that spin on it before."

If the old man was offended, he didn't allow it to affect him for long.

"That is how I remember it, from a very long time ago," he said with dignity.

He looked so frail in his tiny space on the floor, with his pathetic bundle, that Doug suddenly felt very sympathetic toward him.

"Are you on a pilgrimage yourself?" he asked.

"Yes, since my retirement," the old man said, as if that were the most natural thing in the world. "It's mandatory, you know, once you reach sixty-five."

"Retirement or pilgrimage?" Doug asked.

"Retirement," the old man said gravely. "Pilgrimage is always voluntary. Basically, I'm always on pilgrimage now. I travel a lot."

Doug looked at him more closely still.

"Are you a ... an ascetic? What do call it? A san..."

"A sanyasin. Not particularly, not yet. I'm considering it, but it has legal implications. I would have to give up my pass, officially. You could say I'm on my way, but since I no longer have a family, it's not so important. You see, I've outlived them all - wife, children, relatives, friends - everyone who really knew me. No one in the world knows me now."

In his weakened condition, it seemed to Doug a terribly sad statement, though there was no sadness in the old man's voice, just the even clarity of great distance, as if all his losses had been long ago. Staring at what seemed to him the loneliest person on earth, Doug felt a surge of longing for his own wife and apartment in New York, if he could only survive the interminable train ride. To have no one to go back to anywhere, to be a stranger everywhere, would be appalling.

"And you're always on pilgrimage?" Doug asked, sorry for the old man. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I travel to lots of holy places - sometimes here, sometimes there. I can travel anywhere with my pass, and I do. The railway is very convenient when you can't be sure where you're going. Sooner or later you can get anywhere on the trains."

"But don't you know where you're going?" Doug asked. "How do you make arrangements? I mean, how do you decide?"

The old man looked at him calmly with his magnified eyes. "That would be rather awkward to explain," he said at last. "Eventually, I just know."

Doug looked back at him, and his great puzzlement must have shown, as well as his building illness.

"Since you have been kind to me and have a good heart, since you yourself are drawn to Krishna, I will tell you," the old man said at last. "When the time comes, He tells me. Sometimes He takes me by the hand and leads me to the next compartment on the next train."

Doug was as surprised as if he had stumbled upon an ancient Greek from three thousand years before or an outright madman.

"He too is a great rascal," the old man went on. "Sometimes He makes me wait for Him until the absolute last minute. The stories I could tell you about the trains I've almost missed or the times He's left me standing in the rain without a train in sight. It's quite a workout at my age. The conductors are justifiably furious when I board trains in motion. And He appears in all manner of disguises - a child, a dog, a fish, a kite. I have to admit - at first I thought you might..."

"Be Krishna?" Doug asked incredulously.

"Well, a Westerner with the Gita... Of course, He has a different presence altogether."

"Of... But does it work for you? You just go where Krishna leads you?"

"Ever since I my retirement... Basically, I've been living on the railways continually since then, with short interludes for temples, banyan trees, the confluences of rivers. It's not what I would have expected, but on the railway you have water, shade, a place to sit, toilet facilities - everything. Who am I to choose otherwise?"

Doug tried to imagine a life on jostling trains packed with strangers. It seemed a nightmare. His stomach turned, igniting Molotov cocktails ready to be thrown in its deepest interiors.

"And I do meet the kindest people," the old man said. "I've hardly spent a rupee on food in the last fifteen years. I can't tell you the money I've saved from my tiny pension. Really, I wouldn't live any other way now. I couldn't. I recommend it to you. All you have to do is think of Him - continually and sincerely, forever." He beamed, as if at the great, enjoyable joke his life had become.

Doug tried to digest the words "fifteen years." "If you don't mind," he asked, "how old are you?"

"Eighty-six."

That meant he had been living on the Indian railways for twenty-one years -longer by far than Odysseus, that great pilgrim, had wandered the Mediterranean.

And there he was, such a very old man, with no place left in life but a space on the hard, dirty floor.

Doug was on the point of making room for him on the seat, but his mind was full of questions.

"But how do you...? Where do you...? What do you...?" he began, but the long-suppressed rage of his internal populace finally erupted in flaming vehicles and shattered glass, with an audible, gaseous groan that made the other passengers look up, and he was forced to retreat quickly to the Western-style bathroom for nearly twenty minutes.

Shaky but much purged and better off, he returned to the compartment shortly after the train pulled out of another identical station, only to find that the old man and his strip of cardboard and bundle were gone. Apparently Krishna kept him constantly on the move from one holy spot to another, even at his advanced age, or the old man was completely and restlessly mad.

Gingerly, Doug took up his seat again, longing for rest. To steady himself, he picked up his copy of the Gita, and found that the old man had left him a message within it, handwritten over a page in Devanagari script.

"If you don't take your medicine, you won't get well," it read, much as Karen herself might have told him.

Doug stretched out his legs and thought about her a long time. He would call her as soon as he reached Bangalore. Before closing his eyes to rest at last, he unfolded the pill the old man had given him and swallowed it. How do you argue with an eighty-six-year-old Indian Odysseus under the special protection of Krishna, who had managed to keep body and certainly soul together on the Indian trains for so many years? And although the pill tasted strangely of honey and wild onions, it did him no apparent harm. One way or another, the smoldering barricades in his bowls went out, civil peace returned to his stomach, and he slept soundly all the rest of the way to Bangalore early the next morning. In fact, the conductor had to wake him with a gentle shake, incredulous and concerned that a passenger should still be slumped in a seat when everyone else had exited a quarter of an hour before. The brown crowd of Indian humanity streaming across the platform to the taxis, buses, and autorickshaws was hopelessly large, and, as he joined the flow, Doug couldn't help but wish that Krishna would take him too by the hand and make him better travel arrangements.

Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell

In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been bogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism – the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old 44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might be useful in terrorem. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone "must." It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of "must" is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could

manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go away this instant!" and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was

standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery – and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes-faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives," and so in every crisis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behavior. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.

There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole, actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralyzed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling. His mouth was wide open – I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not

die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast Lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. Burmans were bringing dash and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

A Handful of Dates By Tayeb Saleh

I must have been very young at the time. While I don't remember exactly how old I was, I do remember that when people saw me with my grandfather they would pat me on the head and give my cheek a pinch - things they didn't do to my grandfather. The strange thing was that I never used to go out with my father, rather it was my grandfather who would take me with him wherever he went, except for the mornings, when I would go to the mosque to learn the Koran. The mosque, the river, and the fields - these were the landmarks in our life. While most of the children of my age grumbled at having to go to the mosque to learn the Koran, I used to love it. The reason was, no doubt, that I was quick at learning by heart and the Sheik always asked me to stand up and recite the Chapter of the Merciful whenever we had visitors, who would pat me on my head and cheek just as people did when they saw me with my grandfather.

Yes, I used to love the mosque, and I loved the river, too. Directly we finished our Koran reading in the morning I would throw down my wooden slate and dart off, quick as a genie, to my mother, hurriedly swallow down my breakfast, and run off for a plunge in the river. When tired of swimming about, I would sit on the bank and gaze at the strip of water that wound away eastwards, and hid behind a thick wood of acacia trees. I loved to give rein to my imagination and picture myself a tribe of giants living behind that wood, a people tall and thin with white beards and sharp noses, like my grandfather. Before my grandfather ever replied to my many questions, he would rub the tip of his nose with his forefinger; as for his beard, it was soft and luxuriant and as white as cotton wool - never in my life have I seen anything of a purer whiteness or greater beauty. My grandfather must also have been extremely tall, for I never saw anyone in the whole area address him without having him look up at him, nor did I see him enter a house without having to bend so low that I was put in mind of the way the river wound round behind the wood of acacia trees. I loved him and would imagine myself, when I grew to be a man, tall and slender like him, walking along with great strides.

I believe I was his favorite grandchild: no wonder, for my cousins were a stupid bunch and I - so they say - was an intelligent child. I used to know when my grandfather wanted me to laugh, when to be silent; also I would remember the times for his prayers and would bring him his prayer rug and fill the ewer for his ablutions without his having to ask me. When he had nothing else to do he enjoyed listening to me reciting to him from the Koran in a lilting voice, and I could tell from his face that he was moved.

One day I asked him about our neighbor Masood. I said to my grandfather: I fancy you don't like our neighbor Masood?

To which he answered, having rubbed the tip of his nose: He's an indolent man and I don't like such people.

I said to him: What's an indolent man?

My grandfather lowered his head for a moment; then, looking across the wide expanse of field, he said: Do you see it stretching out from the edge of the desert up to the Nile bank? A hundred

feddans. Do you see all those date palms? And those trees - sant, acacia, and sayal? All this fell into Masood's lap, was inherited by him from his father.

Taking advantage of the silence that had descended on my grandfather, I turned my gaze from him to the vast area defined by words. I don't care, I told myself, who owns those date palms, those trees or this black, cracked earth - all I know is that it's the arena for my dreams and my playground.

My grandfather then continued: Yes, my boy, forty years ago all this belonged to Masood - two-thirds of it is now mine.

This was news for me, for I had imagined that the land had belonged to my grandfather ever since God's Creation.

I didn't own a single feddan when I first set foot in this village. Masood was then the owner of all these riches. The position had changed now, though, and I think that before Allah calls me to Him I shall have bought the remaining third as well."

I do not know why it was I felt fear at my grandfather's words - and pity for our neighbor Masood. How I wished my grandfather wouldn't do what he'd said! I remembered Masood's singing, his beautiful voice and powerful laugh that resembled the gurgling of water. My grandfather never laughed.

I asked my grandfather why Masood had sold his land.

Women, and from the way my grandfather pronounced the word I felt that women was something terrible. Masood, my boy, was a much-married man. Each time he married he sold me a feddan or two. I made the quick calculation that Masood must have married some ninety women. Then I remembered his three wives, his shabby appearance, his lame donkey and its dilapidated saddle, his galabia with the torn sleeves. I had all but rid my mind of the thoughts that jostled in it when I saw the man approaching us, and my grandfather and I exchanged glances.

We'll be harvesting the dates today, said Masood. Don't you want to be there?

I felt, though, that he did not really want my grandfather to attend. My grandfather, however, jumped to his feet and I saw that his eyes sparkled momentarily with an intense brightness. He pulled me by the hand and we went off to the harvesting of Masood's dates.

Someone brought my grandfather a stool covered with an oxhide, while I remained standing. There was a vast number of people there, but though I knew them all, I found myself for some reason watching Masood: aloof from that great gathering of people he stood as though it were no concern of his, despite the fact that the date palms to be harvested were his own. Sometimes his attention would be caught by the sound of a huge clump of dates crashing down from on high. Once he shouted up at the boy perched on the very summit of the date palm who had begun hacking at a clump with his long, sharp sickle: Be careful you don't cut the heart of the palm.

No one paid any attention to what he said and the boy seated at the very summit of the date palm continued, quickly and energetically, to work away at the branch with his sickle till the clump of dates began to drop like something descending from the heavens.

I, however, had begun to think about Masood's phrase, the heart of the palm. I pictured the palm tree as something with feeling, something possessed of a heart that throbbed. I remembered Masood's remark to me when he had once seen me playing with the branch of a young palm tree: Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering. And I had felt an inward and unreasoned embarrassment.

When I again looked at the expanse of ground stretching before me I saw my young companions swarming like ants around the trunks of the palm trees, gathering up dates and eating most of them. The dates were collected into high mounds. I saw people coming along and weighing them into measuring bins and pouring them into sacks, of which I counted thirty. The crowd of people broke up, except for Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the east, and two men I'd never seen before.

I heard a low whistling sound and saw that my grandfather had fallen asleep. Then I noticed that Masood had not changed his stance, except that he had placed a stalk in his mouth and was munching at it like someone sated with food who doesn't know what to do with the mouthful he still has.

Suddenly my grandfather woke up, jumped to his feet, and walked toward the sacks of dates. He was followed by Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours and two strangers. I glanced at Masood and saw that he was making his way toward us with extreme slowness, like a man who wants to retreat but whose feet insist on going forward. They formed a circle around the sacks of dates and began examining them, some taking a date or two to eat. My grandfather gave me a fistful, which I began munching. I saw Masood filling the palms of both hands with dates and bringing them up close to his nose, then returning them.

Then I saw them dividing up the sacks between them. Hussein the merchant took ten; each of the strangers took five. Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the eastern side took five, and my grandfather took five. Understanding nothing, I looked at Masood and saw that his eyes were darting to left and right like two mice that have lost their way home.

You're still fifty pounds in debt to me, said my grandfather to Masood. We'll talk about it later.

Hussein called his assistants and they brought along the donkeys, the two strangers produced camels, and the sacks of dates were loaded onto them. One of the donkeys let out a braying which set the camels frothing at the mouth and complaining noisily. I felt myself drawing close to Masood, felt my hand stretch out toward him as though I wanted to touch the hem of his garment. I heard him make a noise in his throat like the rasping of a sheep being slaughtered. For some unknown reason, I experienced a sharp sensation of pain in my chest.

I ran off into the distance. Hearing my grandfather call after me, I hesitated a little, then

continued on my way. I felt at that moment that I hated him. Quickening my pace, it was as though I carried within me a secret I wanted to rid myself of. I reached the riverbank near the bend it made behind the wood of acacia trees. Then, without knowing why, I put my finger into my throat and spewed up the dates I'd eaten.