

Re-imagining the past

Yasmine Allas

A Handed-Down History



AT A YOUNG AGE, the writer Yasmine Allas fled Somalia after her father was murdered during the civil war. For years she sought a way to return to the city where she grew up, until one day she was approached about making a television documentary about her youth. When she arrived in Africa, she found that everything had changed beyond recognition; the landscape was ravaged and the population had moved away. She realized that it was impossible to revive the past if you were continually escorted by a camera team. There was only one option: to use her imagination. And this is exactly what she has done in

this extraordinary and original novel.

The story centres around a love affair between the young nurse, Zeyneb, and a wounded soldier whom she refers to as the 'Stranger'. On the day he is discharged from hospital, he asks her to marry him and promises to come back for her when he is physically strong enough to do so. Much later, after Zeyneb has been promised by her father to another man, she is standing on the veranda when she sees a land rover entering the square. It is the Stranger. His arrival presents her with a difficult dilemma: either obey her father or follow her heart and run away with the Stranger.

This story is narrated years afterwards by their only daughter, a writer who has been living in the Netherlands for decades and returns to her land of birth to make a television documentary. She has great expectations of the reunion, but there is no one there who knows her and no one she knows. She is not even accepted as a fellow Somali and it is clear that she does not belong there, she is not welcome. The daughter becomes acquainted with an old man who secretly takes her to her birthplace. There she pictures herself sitting on the garden swing in bygone days, she reflects on her parents' marriage and the fate of her father, who was dragged out of the house by soldiers on that ominous day, never to return. This lyrical, occasionally magic-realist novel – a self-portrait, a love story and a social history all in one – is ultimately about accepting being uprooted. She is obliged to abandon the memories that have made her what she is, and a country she flees a second time.



photo Wim van de Hulst

Yasmine Allas (born in 1967) arrived in the Netherlands in 1987. She attended drama school, acted with various companies, and performed her own solo show. In 1998, she made her writing debut with the successful novel, *Idil, een meisje* (*Idil, A Girl*). Her second novel, *De generaal met de zes vingers* (*The General with Six Fingers*), 2001, was also highly acclaimed. In 2004, *De blauwe kamer* (*The Blue Room*) was published, followed by an essay collection entitled, *Ontheemd en toch thuis* (*Uprooted but Still Home*), 2006, on coping with Dutch culture and her own background and beliefs. *Een nagelaten verhaal* (*A Handed-Down History*), her fourth novel, has also been very well received and has been reprinted several times since its recent publication.

The powerful and unsentimental quest of a sensitive woman seeking herself and her position in life. DE TELEGRAAF

A poetic parable. Strong and delicate in equal measure. DE VOLKSKRANT

A well-written, richly stratified and occasionally shocking book. Splendid literature.

HP/DE TIJD

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De Bezige Bij
Van Miereveldstraat 1
NL – 1071 DW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 305 98 10
FAX: +31 20 305 98 24
E-MAIL: info@debezigebij.nl
WEBSITE: www.debezigebij.nl

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Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature
Singel 464
NL – 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

A Handed-Down History

(Een nagelaten verhaal)

by Yasmine Allas

(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010)

Translated by Joni Zwart

pp 155 – 165

Two days later, towards the end of the morning, Zeyneb's father was waiting for her and the Stranger on the veranda.

Normally she would have given her father a warm embrace and quickly breathed in his scent but now, for the first time in her life, she hesitated.

'*Abo, iska waran?* Father, how are you?' was all she could say.

Diiriye nodded, brief and stiffly.

Then the Stranger and he shook hands. Brief and stiffly.

Maryam's most beautiful carpets were spread out on the wooden floor of the reception room.

The classic rose shades delighted the eye; the blue, brighter than the sky of Hardu, was a joy to see, and the mysterious purple was an invitation to look deeper and read the story that was woven in the fabric. An invitation to discover the long-legged orange birds that prodded the tall bilious-green grass with hooked beaks, or the snakes showing their forked tongue to children at play in the arbours. The carpets were a feast for the eye, an enticement to the imagination. Maryam only brought them out on religious feast days - and for distinguished visitors of course.

Today the two oldest of the Three Lucifers were seated on those carpets, to one side of the room, stiff legs folded beneath their sarongs. On the other side sat Guuleed.

The eldest Lucifer, a cross-eyed looking man with ash-coloured, tightly curled hair, beckoned Zeyneb and the Stranger, inviting them to take their place on the carpets opposite.

While Maryam poured out sweet ginger tea, Zeyneb managed to whisper to the Stranger: 'The situation is different from what I had expected. The best thing would be to give them the marriage certificate right away. Trust me.'

‘Tradition... a man without tradition is a man without balls,’ the grey Lucifer said to him. He rasped as if his vocal cords were made of sand paper.

‘Dear Sirs, before you sits my friend. I speak on his behalf,’ Guuleed said. ‘We have come because my friend wishes to declare his love for your beloved daughter. We have come to ask your consent for his marriage to her. Please do not cherish the hope that very many or very long words shall be used in doing so. It is not in my friend’s nature to speak much.’

‘Love?’ said the Lucifer, raising his left eyebrow. ‘What do you mean by “love”? Perhaps I should make it clear that this is a matter of respect. Namely, what a man has to offer a woman and her family. This is about his good name and above all his ancestry. Surely you know that a wise man who wants to start a family, who wants to build a future, has no misconception that love has anything to do with it? What self-respecting man would even use the word? Character, respect, power and above all honour: these are what men are valued for. It is different, of course, for a woman. For women, life is about fertility, beauty, modesty and sacrifice.’

Then Diiriye turned to the Stranger. ‘This concerns you. You are the man who has come to ask for my daughter’s hand, but you haven’t said a word yet.’

‘As you have heard,’ the Stranger answered, ‘Guuleed, my friend and a member of my clan, has expressed my wishes.’

‘What do you have to offer my daughter?’ Diiriye persisted.

The Stranger slowly shook his head. He seemed deep in thought.

‘Nothing,’ he said after a long while. ‘I need your daughter’s help to get to know life. Besides that, I very much wish to love her.’

‘In that case, gentlemen,’ said Diiriye, ‘seeing as I am Zeyneb’s father after all, I shall now make the decision. I shall be brief.’

He turned toward the Stranger, who looked straight ahead.

‘I am sorry; I cannot grant to you something that I have already given away. As my kind, but wilful daughter has probably told you, I have promised her to

another man. To a young man who knows what he has to offer both my daughter and her family. He is the son of Dhahar and a member of our family.’

After Diiriye had finished speaking, the Stranger stood up, smoothed out his white coat and from its pocket produced a bundle of stamped papers. With a bow he presented them to Diiriye.

‘*Allahu akbar*, cursed are those who come from the south!’ thundered the Lucifer who had so far kept quiet, jumping up and snatching the papers from the Stranger’s hands.

‘Just as I thought, Diiriye, your daughter has already given herself to this southerner.’ As he spoke, the Lucifer’s irises disappeared under his eyelids till only the whites of his eyes remained visible. He raised his hands to the sky.

‘The violation has already taken place, brother Diiriye. Your negligence shall be held against you until eternity. Cursed be you during the days you have left and cursed be you also during the nights you have left. Allah will consider your place in the hereafter.’

He unfolded the papers and handed them to Diiriye.

Diiriye pensively rubbed his beard. He stared at his daughter’s marriage certificate for a long time, then began to shake his head.

‘Shaking your head will save neither your honour, nor ours. You shall have to break your daughter’s bones one by one, until she knows her place. You shall have to tear her tongue from her mouth, so she can never speak a word to a man again. And we, we shall tell these men the truth, make them feel what it is like to be humiliated.’

‘Peace, dear friends, peace.’ Diiriye called, rising to his feet with a lightness that ill-suited him.

It worked; the Lucifer sat down again, still gasping with anger. He dried his lips with the sleeve of his sarong. ‘Tell them: cursed are those who do not observe the rules of Allah, cursed are those who do not know that through our veins runs the same blood as the blood that once ran through the veins of our prophet.’

‘To hell with your prophet,’ fumed Guuleed, jumping up too. His eyes, which usually radiated only warmth, had become obscured behind a fine, dark veil that spoke of doom.

‘How dare you talk of honour while we, my friend here and I, have defended your prophet-blood and your authority? This man,’ he tapped the Stranger on his upper leg, ‘almost lost his life in battle while you and your fellow-Lucifers were playing at being soldiers for your women.’

‘Peace,’ Diiriye repeated, placing himself between the Lucifers and the Stranger and Guuleed. He remained standing there for a long time, motionless, as if transfixed, searching for words that could bring peace and reconciliation. Not a sound came from his mouth. The beads of sweat trickling over his temples and his cheeks fell on the collar of his neatly pressed white shirt.

Eventually he took a deep breath. ‘Dear guests,’ he nodded to Guuleed and the Stranger. ‘Honoured guests,’ he gestured towards the Lucifers. ‘You expect deeds from me, but first I must tell you something. I want to tell you what role Allah had reserved for me as a father. You should know that I, an honourable father, have never imposed restrictions on my daughter as I raised her. That is to say, I have given her all the space she could want, but I have also told her what life is like, how Allah has put the world together for men and for women. I should like to tell you my story, the story that started two years after my dearly beloved mother departed.’

Diiriye stopped to take a deep breath. He looked around the reception room.

‘As a fourteen-year-old boy I had a dream. In my dream I was in the sea. I swam between orcas and dolphins. I felt blessed as I dreamt this. The next week, the dream repeated itself; not long after I had fallen asleep I found myself swimming along colourful coral reefs amidst the most beautiful sea creatures.

‘It went on this way for years on end, until one night the dream was disturbed by a voice that spoke to me. Whether I was awake and in my bed or still dreaming and under water, I cannot remember, but the voice told me that I would father two girls. A short time later, when I actually wanted to carry on

dreaming, I heard another voice, very softly, as if the sound came from far away. It was the voice of a girl who called me: “Father, father, it is I, I am your Zeyneb.” The voice led me to the courtyard, where to my surprise I found a mermaid. She had a perfect, small face with two large dark eyes that sparkled in the moonlight. She was so breathtakingly beautiful that my heart skipped a beat. My dear and honourable guests, if you had only seen her delicate, translucent fins. Never have I felt as moved as when I took that little creature in my arms; the warmth of her smooth body, the gently flapping tail, the nostrils opening as wide as they could with each breath... Never before had I felt new life as close to me as I did then.

‘You mustn’t think I want to excuse my daughter’s behaviour with this story, quite the contrary. I only want to make it known that it was I who allowed Zeyneb her freedom, the space to flourish and grow into the woman she has become.

‘I beg you now to grant me one more moment of patience so that you can listen to the decisions I made in that process.

‘It started on that Sunday night as I stood in the courtyard with the miraculous, beautiful mermaid in my arms. The voice that had, earlier on, woken me from my dream returned. He ordered me to teach the mermaid how to swim. At first I didn’t understand because I was under the impression that the mermaid already knew how to swim. I stood there and looked around me in despair, searching for someone to advise me. But I was, and I remained, alone.

‘The voice repeated the instruction and added that I was to love her unconditionally and should never restrict her freedom, that she indeed *was* the child of freedom and that I should protect her, stand behind her and watch over her. And finally the voice said that when one day I would have to let her go, I should never betray the trust that had been built. I held the mermaid tighter in my arms and whispered to her: “Zeyneb, my dear mermaid, you are my child, my child of freedom, and I will raise you as I am told by Allah.”

‘I put on the first pair of mules I could find and ran outside, zigzagging between the fishermen’s wooden shacks until I reached the beach.

‘The soft murmur of breaking waves welcomed us. High in the sky the full moon was shining and slowly I waded into the glistening water. When it reached my waist, I spread out my arms and let the mermaid slip away. For a second I felt her oiled skin brush against my thigh and then she disappeared beneath the surface. For a moment I stood as paralysed, remembering that the voice had told me that I had to teach the mermaid how to swim. Desperately I started beating the water around me in a wide circle, hoping it would part for me, hoping I could bring her to the surface again. When that didn’t work, I dived and swam as if my life depended on it, till my lungs threatened to burst. But that too, as you understand, failed to bring her back to me. Underwater, unlike my dreams, it was pitch dark.

‘When I surfaced, I could hardly stand, only my head cleared the waves, so far had I swum from the coast. I looked around and saw only a single lamp burning in the distance. I was terrified, but then came the voice again, the voice of the sea, the voice of Allah.

“‘The child of freedom is being prepared, my boy,” said the voice. “Have faith, and prepare yourself too. Despair will not help you.”

‘These words calmed me and I cast my eyes over the moonlit infinity. I thought of the day that my deeply beloved mother had departed, the moment she had walked towards her infinity, and I, comforted as I was, stretched out my hands so far that I felt I could touch the moon.

‘My dear friends, now I have told you why I promised never to restrict Zeyneb in her freedom. Her upbringing was entrusted to me by Allah.’

Diiriye looked briefly at his daughter, who had nestled up against the Stranger.

‘Zeyneb’s arrival was foretold. I have never spoken of this, but today I felt called upon to share the story with you. That is not to say I am asking for

understanding, quite the contrary. Simply, I wish to say that I have done as I was told: I have granted Zeyneb freedom.

‘Despite this, I could not fall asleep last night. For hours I tossed and turned, because I was disappointed. Later I was angry with myself and with my daughter. To be honest, I was also angry with you, but as you know, I am not a man who can be angry for long. After a while I put aside my petty human feelings and said to myself: Diiriye, you made a promise once, a promise that obliges you to be lenient and support the decisions of your daughter. I hope you will now in turn be able to understand, no matter how weak my plea may sound to you, that I have no option but to respect her choice. There if nothing left for me to do but grant her the happiness that has been presented to her. I cannot but allow her to follow her own will.’

With these words Diiriye turned to the Lucifers.

‘My dear friends, I know what awaits me: you will pass a judgement on my position within our clan, you will pass a judgement on my fatherhood, and I shall have no other choice but to fully accept the consequences of your judgement.’

‘Father, I know I have disappointed you,’ said Zeyneb. ‘But I have come here to accept the consequences of what I have done. You do not have to pay for the choices I have made. For this reason I ask you to cast me out, to disinherit me and to say in the presence of the Lucifers that I am no longer your daughter.’

‘Enough, enough!’ the youngest Lucifer roared while he flew to his feet, foaming with rage. ‘How much longer must we watch this outrageous spectacle, Diiriye? How far do you want to go, how far does your daughter want to go - and how far, I can hardly bring myself to say it, will the cursed southerners go to humiliate us? You have knowingly chosen to side with your daughter. You are proving to us that you are a man with no spine, Diiriye. You babble about mermaids and dreams that have nothing to do with reality. So now the moment has come for me to take responsibility. I shall end this outrage.’

The Lucifer snatched the marriage certificate, which Diiriye had handed back, from the Stranger's hands. Before anyone knew what was happening, he tore up the papers and threw the shreds into the air. As Zeyneb reached out to catch what she could of the papers, pistol shots echoed in the reception room. The youngest Lucifer toppled and fell on his side. He groaned and tried to pray. From under his blue sarong, crimson-red blood flowed slowly across the carpet. It flowed across the orange birds with the hooked beaks, it flowed through the arbours where the children played, it flowed along the tongue of the snake, it discoloured the blue and the rose, it destroyed the purple and wiped out the memory of the merchants from the east who had once offered Maryam their carpet for sale.

Guuleed stood motionless, his weapon still in his hand. Maryam appeared in the doorway, her mouth wide open. She stared at the blood, at the fallen Lucifer and at her carpet.

And Zeyneb? Zeyneb bit her lip, touched her shaking legs and kneeled beside the Lucifer. Without any hesitation she pulled up his sarong, scanned the battlefield of his body and started pushing his intestines back into his belly, just as she had seen Makko, the senior nurse in the hospital, do once. The Lucifer had stopped groaning, but his widening eyes were spinning around as if he was searching for something invisible.

Then Diiriye grabbed Zeyneb by the shoulders and pulled her up. 'You must go, Zeyneb. Take your husband and his friend. Go, there is nothing you can do here. Go,' he stammered. Everything about him was shaking, even his eyelids. 'There is nothing left to say child. Go,' Diiriye repeated.

'Father, I am cursed. I stand here, on the day that should have been the most beautiful of my life, with blood on my hands and a lifeless body at my feet,' she whimpered.

'You must go, child. Please go, my dear Zeyneb.' whispered Diiriye again, and he moved to crouch down next to the Lucifer.

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Around half past midnight, there was a knock at the door. I opened it. The man I had met in the place that once was a sweetshop called Nac Nac, stood before me. The scent of coconut oil and fruity tobacco accompanied him, reminding me of Guuleed.

‘Welcome home, dear,’ he said, taking a bowl from beneath his shawl and placing it on the small wicker table.

‘That’s ever so kind, but you shouldn’t have. I’ve already eaten.’

‘It’s tradition, dear.’

He removed the lid of the bowl. I couldn’t believe what I was looking at. The bowl was filled with fat, a mass of yellow fat, with pieces of mutton in it that looked more like rabbit droppings than meat.

‘Are you alright?’ the man asked.

‘I’m sorry. I have a weak stomach. I don’t digest fat very well.’

‘Weak stomach?’ The man shrugged, took two spoons from his shirt pocket and pushed them firmly into the bowl, where they stood, stiff as rods.

‘I got there in the end,’ I said, trying to draw attention away from the chunks of meat and the spoons.

‘After you left Jeylani’s shop, having explained to me exactly where in Hardu I was, I left too, as quickly as possible.

Opposite my parental home I held still. But I didn’t dare to look at it. I was afraid to reveal my feelings in front of the television crew. I’d been searching in vain for five days and had actually given up hope of finding anything from my past. So seeing the house I grew up in went beyond all my expectations. When I suddenly recognised it, it brought back so many memories, that I decided instantly to keep them to myself. When it comes to it, we have the right either to share our memories or not. You should have seen it. I managed to stare at the

ground for minutes on end. Presumably they thought I was sad or grumpy because of my argument with Rob. Anyway, what do you care about my quarrel with Rob? Let's just say, it felt strange, splintered almost. I've kept quiet about our conversation, too. And I haven't told them that tonight you and I...'

He cut in by pushing the bowl of meat toward me.

'If you're not going to say it, then I will: Bismillahi, *bon appétit*, dear.'

I took a deep breath and pointed at the spoons. 'We're supposed to eat this together, right?'

'You seem to have forgotten your own customs. Oodkac ijo subag, meat and fat. You share it with your guest if you appreciate his visit, if you hold him in high esteem. And you eat from the same bowl in order to strengthen the bond.'

'Thank you for giving me such a warm welcome. Let's eat.' I took a spoon.

'Bismillahi,' the man repeated.

I'd forgotten the routine. I hadn't used that word for a very long time.

'Bismillahi,' I replied, not feeling very convinced.

The man began shovelling the oodkac ijo subag greedily into his mouth. Wanting to avoid the rancid fat, I placed my spoon straight up in the bowl, close to some loose chunks of meat. With one quick move, I angled the stem towards me, so that I could bring two pieces to my mouth with as little fat as possible. I noticed that the man, chewing loudly by now, was keeping a close eye on me. Triumphant, I started smacking along.

The man licked his lips. He looked at me encouragingly.

Quickly I brought the spoon to my mouth a second time and pressed the tough mutton behind my teeth. A greasy slick remained on my tongue. At once I dropped the spoon onto the wicker table and pushed my tongue forwards under my teeth, hoping to scrape away the fattiness. When this didn't work, I grabbed a piece of gingerbread from my bag and stuffed it into my mouth. I manoeuvred the pieces of oodkac with my tongue, mixing them with the cake so that it seemed almost as if the bakery had added candied peel for the occasion. I chewed thoroughly once more, and then decided to swallow. It

worked: the oodkac ijo subag was gone - down my throat and towards my stomach it went.

‘Really it should be me welcoming you to my hotel room,’ I said relieved. I got up quickly to plug in the tiny coffeemaker that I had brought with me. ‘In the Netherlands we offer our guests coffee and cake,’ I said.

‘We?’ You consider yourself one of them?’

‘It’s funny you should notice that. For the past two years I haven’t known where I belonged. I felt so estranged from Holland that I thought it would be like home here. And yet, over the past week I’ve realised quite how uprooted I have become. Now, more than ever, I’m aware that I belong *there*. That I have to find my peace *there*.’

As the little coffeemaker sputtered, I placed some slices of gingerbread on a saucer and set it between us, on the wicker table.

‘This is a typically Dutch cake. I didn’t like it at first, but once you’re used to the taste, it’s delicious. Exceptionally delicious even.’

My companion pushed the saucer aside without a word.

‘You should smell and taste this too,’ I said enthusiastically, pouring him a cup of coffee. ‘It smells comforting, doesn’t it? It reminds me of the city I live in. When I stand at the window with a mug filled with black coffee, it feels as if nothing in life will ever change. As if everyone in the world lives peacefully side-by-side. I know these thoughts must sound naïve, but they make me happy. And then I can spend hours gazing fondly at the ducks quacking in the canal. I’m a morning person, and I like seeing Amsterdam wake up, slowly but surely, how the city outside gradually comes to life. How the noise of the city slowly swells. How the rain lashes the windows of my house.’

‘I think you’ve come back to establish for yourself how far removed you have become from your own culture. Is that right?’

‘I’ll tell you why I’m here. I’ve come back to see the place where my parents’ love started. I’ve come back to see the house where my parents were so happy. It would mean a lot to me if I could show you that.’

‘I had already worked out what you want from me. You want me to accompany you to the house of your birth.’

For a few seconds I was too happy to speak.

‘I want to show you the veranda where my mother sat when as a young girl she chose for love. For love – unlike others – not for the family. I want to show you the square where my father, dressed in a pearly white suit, appeared in the middle of the day to secretly collect his beloved. I want to show you the Thought Gallery where it all started, the first exchange of furtive looks, the first conversation, the first little touch, and then the spark of love that ignited everything else. Love in a time of war. That’s what I want to share with you. By the way,’ I said, ‘I don’t even know your name.’ I took a gulp of my coffee.

‘Najib,’ he replied at once.

I fell silent.

‘I share the same name with your gardener,’ he added.

‘You’ve remembered that well.’

‘I believe I’ve upset you.’

‘I’m surprised. You’re the second man in my life with that name.’

‘I can see in your eyes that it affects you.’

‘Your name brings back too many memories. It’s the name of the man who so terrified me as a child, and whom I nonetheless trusted deeply at the same time. Najib came into my life when I was five. Very quickly he made himself my teacher, as if he were a male governess. My mother and aunt trusted him and were happy he looked after me. When I was seven he taught me to shoot birds with a catapult. He taught me to climb and to skip. We’d spend hours on end making clay figures. I was happy and for a long time I felt safe with him. Anyway, it’s all such a long time ago. May his soul rest in peace. Your coffee’s gone cold.’ I put a piece of cake in my mouth.

‘You’re changing the subject. What did the man do?’

‘Well, Najib, in his way, loved me. And he took the role of governess very seriously, too seriously sometimes. As he often said himself, he was inclined to

protect me from the impure world. “I wish you were a mole,” he would whisper, “a female mole living deep in her tunnel. A cave, which no one knows the entrance to, but me.”

‘Najib had no idea how vulnerable a child’s soul can be. Unfailingly, each night before bed he would tell me that he wished we could live on an island miles away from anywhere. “It’s my vocation to protect you,” he said. “One day the moment will come when I have to save you.” Then he stroked my head and whispered: “Don’t be afraid. Allah has sent me to set you free and to take you to paradise.” I lay in my bed, rigid with fear. The fear that he really would take me with him, far away from my family, suffocated me. But he didn’t notice.’

As I was talking, I suddenly noticed my guest’s piercing look, which made me feel uncomfortable. I became quiet and looked down, suddenly finding my top too low-cut for this meeting.

‘I’m sorry,’ I mumbled, quickly flinging a shawl around me.

But Najib wasn’t listening. He seemed lost in thought. He shook his head. ‘Yes, that’s it: an impure soul,’ he said suddenly, as if he was voicing his thoughts out loud.

I looked at him, curious to hear his explanation.

‘I knew it,’ he said softly. He ran a hand over his face.

‘What did you know for heaven’s sake?’ My heart was in my mouth.

He hesitated for a long time. Then he said: ‘He violated your innocence.’

Suddenly I didn’t want any more coffee and I put the half-empty cup back down on the table. In the same moment I felt my stomach turn. There wasn’t much time left to be surprised or upset. I stared at Najib for a short while as a cold sweat came over me.

‘The smell of the fat, it’s so over... ove... o...’

I couldn’t finish the sentence because I started to gag. I got up, shaking, quickly threw the shawl from my shoulders and ran to the bathroom. Even before I managed to hunch over the bowl, my stomach was emptying. The

vomit seemed to come from my toes, as if my entire body was turning inside out. The shivering and shaking continued for minutes on end. I had to sit on the floor. When I was finally calm again, it occurred to me that the bathroom looked like a pigsty that hadn't been mucked out for a week. It looked as though my dinner had been sprayed around the turquoise tiled wall and the white bathroom floor with a high-pressure sprinkler. I burst out laughing.

How embarrassing, I thought, examining myself in the mirror above the basin. I looked as sick as a dog: hollow cheeks and sunken eyes with deep bags underneath them, as if I had been ill for weeks rather than ten minutes. I washed my face with cold water and just as I turned to pick up a towel I noticed Najib's presence. He was standing in the doorway. As if nothing was the matter, I grabbed the towel from the edge of the bath and began to clean the floor with it.

'You see, women with weak stomachs often end up in embarrassing situations.'

Najib said nothing, just watched as I tried to clean the towel under the shower. As I knelt again, and tried to scrub the sticky brown stains from the tiles.

'I must've sounded pretty hilarious just then.'

He remained silent.

'I'm quite loud when I vomit. There are people who can empty their guts without a sound, but I don't understand how they do it. And there are some people who love throwing up. Can you imagine that? I certainly can't.'

'You have to come back. We need you here,' said Najib when finally I went to the basin to wash my hands.

I turned to him with a start.

'What do you mean?' I asked, inadvertently aggressive. I understood exactly what he meant.

'Your country needs you. We need you. Hardu needs you.'

I smiled as I cleaned my nails.

‘Now, while there’s still time. You can decide whether you want to do something for your country. Because later you’ll not be able to say that you didn’t know. Later you’ll not be able to say that an entire generation was doomed to fail, that the whole country was doomed to fail and that the rest of the world was watching but didn’t act. Let me just say it out loud: you, our lost daughter, we want you to come back.’

‘But I’ve built a life there. I can’t just throw everything away again and come back. Besides, what can I do on my own? I feel awful now, because I’m not indifferent to your words.’

‘It has nothing to do with conscience or with guilt,’ said Najib, following me back into the room. ‘I’m telling you the truth. I’m reminding you of your duty. That’s all.’

‘I don’t know what to say. I’m confused.’

‘Don’t be so sentimental, dear. Your people are confused, your country is confused. It would be very selfish of you to put your own happiness above the happiness of your country and the wellbeing of your people. You can lead a new life in the West, but you won’t become one of them. You will always stay who you are. One of us. Life in the West is short-lived, dear. When it really comes down to it, you belong here. Don’t forget that.’

‘I don’t know if I could ever live my life here again. I’ve already had to leave everything behind me once, to start anew. I’ll never be my old self again, but I’ve decided to be happy with the future I have there.’

‘You’ve become a Westerner. You think like a Westerner too.’

‘Is that a compliment or a criticism?’

‘Neither, just an observation. No more, no less.’

‘I must say that my return has solved nothing for me; it hasn’t provided any answers to my questions. Quite the opposite: it has only added to my confusion.’

‘Well,’ said Najib, as he got up. ‘Shall we go? I came, I thought, to accompany you to the house of your birth.’

Twenty minutes later I stood at the foot of the stairs that led to our veranda. The steps looked exactly as they used to. The full moon shone bright and strong, just as it used to, across the silent city. It felt as though nothing had changed at all. As though at any moment I might hear my mother's voice and Ahlan's giggle from the reception room. As though I might hear the hum of my father's jeep approaching. As though I might feel the strong arms of Guuleed around my waist. As though he might lift me up to plant a tender kiss on the tip of my nose.

But it remained deathly quiet around me and for the first time since my arrival in Hardu, it even seemed a little chilly.

'Careful, the stairs creak,' whispered Najib.

'You don't have to worry,' I hissed in his ear. 'I know these steps. I won't wake anyone up. Not even these people, eventhough they did simply take our house. But I won't frighten them. And even if they were to find me here, they still wouldn't know who I am or understand what I've come to do.'

To hear me better, Najib had tilted his head so that he seemed to be examining the sky. His ear was almost against my lips.

'Still, it does hurt to stand in front of your own house as a stranger. The veranda door was always open before. And we never left our shoes there.' I pointed at the sorry heap of shoes that lay in front of the door. 'I was taught that those should be inside, out of sight.'

I took off my own shoes and crept up the stairs to the veranda. Najib stayed at the bottom of the steps.

I crouched in front of the closed door. Curious, I started counting. Two pairs of slippers, one pair of wooden mules and one pair of worn-out black sandals. The latter stood out because of their size. They had to belong to a man with extraordinarily large feet. I picked up one of the sandals and inspected the soft sole. It wouldn't be long before its owner would have to continue on bare feet.

The sandal gave off a stale smell. Even from a distance I had noticed that mildew and damp had got the run of the veranda.

The woman's mules were odourless, but here too worn patches showed on the sole, particularly on the inside, as if the woman put her entire weight on this part of the shoe as she walked. Knock-knees, I thought. I couldn't tell if the slippers were a boy's or a girl's. In any case it was clear that four people were living in our house. A man with large feet, a woman who had difficulty walking and their two children. I put the giant sandal back and pressed my ear to the door. It was silent inside.

'And? Is this what you were looking for?' asked Najib after I had returned to him.

'Yes, this is it, Najib. This is where my parents' love blossomed. In this house is the history of the lizard's tale. My mother was sitting here, on the veranda when she chose love. And my father, he was standing over there, in the middle of that square, under a large mulberry tree growing where that low building now stands. That's where he was waiting for the love of his life. I only came to realize much later how beautiful and unusual their love was for that time. My mother wasn't afraid. She didn't let herself be led by fear of what the outside world would say. She must have been an example to lots of young women, to young women who had to wait for their fathers to decide for them. I'm proud to be the daughter of a woman who, in a society where women's lives are determined by others, had the courage to follow her own heart. I'm proud to be the daughter of a woman who healed her soldier's wounds in a time of war. I'm here in her honour, and I'm here in honour of him, the man who loved this brave woman. I want to honour them. I want to honour the Thought Gallery. I want to honour love.'

'You should be ashamed of yourself. I've listened to you, but don't let anyone else hear this.'

'What do you mean?'

‘Because you act like a Westerner, even though you were raised here. What’s left of your upbringing? Only a Westerner would cross the seas to find a place where he once fell in love. Only a Westerner loses himself in the unimportant details of life, such as love. Only a Westerner seeks happiness in love to fill the emptiness in his life.’

‘Abti Najib, should I be ashamed to have become who I am? Should I be ashamed because in your eyes I think like a Westerner?’

I was shocked to have raised my voice. I glanced around nervously, but there was no one to be seen. All was as dark and as quiet as before, a little darker even, because a cloud had blotted out the moon.

‘In peace time, the people of Hardu sleep deeply,’ remarked Najib.

I noticed him shift his weight to the other foot.

‘I am an old man and I have experienced a great deal. I know what is important in life and what is less so. It is praiseworthy that you came to Hardu. You have dared to take that step. But you have to be careful not to lose yourself in absurd details. Did you bring anything with you that could be of use to us? I mean, have you learnt anything from which we could benefit? In other words, have you been thinking of us while you were in the West? Have you been thinking of our future at all? That’s what I want to ask. Take a good look at this square, take a good look around. And? What do you see?’

‘What do you want me to say?’

‘You’re an intelligent girl. I had that impression straight away. I should like to hear what you feel for your country and how you really think about it.’

‘My parents no longer being here... That loss, I feel that,’ I answered as if I hadn’t understood the meaning of his question. ‘At the same time I think of their love, the love they discovered for themselves. There was war everywhere when they met. They were perfect strangers to each other. And my father was a Southerner, which is why he was called the Stranger. Even my mother called him that for the rest of his life, incredible as that may sound. I can hardly imagine it myself, but that was how it was. Perhaps she deliberately called him

the Stranger because it created a distance and could have tempered her growing feelings of love. Perhaps she tried to suppress her feelings. But I never asked her, not even after my father disappeared.'

I covered my face with my hands and sniffed hard. 'Don't you think that we could follow their example? I myself have done so.'

'Now I understand.'

'What do you understand?'

'That I can't undo twenty-three years of Western influence in one evening.'

'It's not about Western influence, Abti Najib. It's about love. What would the world look like without love? Love heals, love binds. Perhaps that is what the people of Hardu miss.'

He sighed.

'Have you ever lost your heart to anyone?' I asked carefully.

'I have been married three times, if that's what you mean.'

'May I be a bit forward?' I continued.

'Go ahead,' he said cautiously.

'Have you never loved any of your women?'

'I cared about them, they cared about me too. We shared a life that was based on trust. That's very important, trust.'

'Have you never felt butterflies in your stomach?'

'That is indeed an impertinent question, a most impertinent question.'

'I cannot imagine that there's someone on this earth who has never known that intense, almighty feeling, that feeling called love. Love is part of life. It just happens to you, whether you want it or not. That's how love is. When you love, you live. When I look at you, and I'm sorry if this is impertinent, then I think you appreciate life. You understand women, you have a feeling for melancholy. That's why I cannot imagine that you have never loved, that you don't even know the feeling. You haven't come here with me for nothing. It's taken me a week to find someone who wanted and dared to do this.'

I took a deep breath, sucking in the air. That allowed Najib to formulate an answer.

‘It’s about what you do with that feeling. I, for example, will never let anyone look inside my stomach.’

I had to laugh.

‘But that feeling develops of its own accord, doesn’t it,’ I said, ‘and even though I spoke about butterflies, love is about the heart and not about the stomach, right? There’s a reason people say: “*Waxa calooscha ku jira afka kaa xada.*”’

‘Well said, dear, our language is rich, beautiful. That makes me happy.’

‘In Holland they have the saying too, it goes: “The mouth speaks of what fills the heart.” But I understand. You won’t let anyone look inside your stomach, not even now.’

‘What you feel you don’t share; it’s for yourself alone. Love is one of those feelings that you ought to keep to yourself, always. When you try to make the feeling known, to speak about it, it loses its value and its magic. But right now I believe that the time has come for a pipe,’ he said.