Sample translation from

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What if the hand that feeds you is a weapon?’

I was nine, and it was my first time returning to Liberia, my parents’ homeland, the land where we had lived with our whole family. The feeling of returning to a place you can’t remember, yet you nevertheless know, is indescribable. I saw the reddish brown sand that owed its hue to laterite, and the different tints of brown of the people. I smelled a familiar odour, a combination of firewood, blackened charcoal and rubbish. That probably doesn’t sound very nice, but to me it meant home. The smell is penetrating, earthy and redolent of the land of my forefathers. It triggered something in my mind, causing a flood of scenes from the past to wash over me. I pictured myself as a little toddler with a cloud of jet-black hair, dancing on our veranda, uninhibited and carefree. I had no way of knowing what was coming, or what kind of horrors war had in store for my family.

My father, Sayyuo James Martin Gargard – or SJM, as many people call him – picked us up at the airport. From that moment on I refused to leave his side. He was my hero, an engineer and philanthropist who put the greater good above himself and his own children. At least, that is what I had told myself all those years. I’d had to be without him ever since he had left my elder sister and four-year-old me behind in the Netherlands.

And now, five years later, I was back. After all those years, I really didn’t want to let him out of my sight for even an instant, and he for his part couldn’t bear not having me near. And so, it came about that on one of the hottest summer days of that holiday, I accompanied him to the home of his boss. In Liberia it is customary for the middle class to be chauffeur-driven, and so our driver picked us up.

We drove to the presidential residence along the busy, dusty road, passing adult market vendors with stalls selling spices, cooked meats, fruit and electronics, and children selling bags of ice water. The heat was merciless, even for the locals. From our comfortable air-conditioned vehicle, I saw the sweat glistening on their brown skin.

Through a set of iron gates the car swept into the estate and up to a stately mansion. In front stood armed guards in uniform. The men stoically stared straight ahead, as if they’d seen everything, and therefore didn’t think much of a lanky girl clinging to her father.

We stepped into the entrance hall. The tufts of the carmine red carpet nuzzled my flip-flopped toes. I had never felt anything as soft. Daddy went upstairs, and an assistant – I don't know if that was her actual job, or just one my child's brain had given her – turned and walked into a room, gesturing that I should follow her. I shuffled my feet along on the floor. Every step tickled. As we entered the salon, it felt as if I'd stepped into a chandelier, because everything sparkled. Beams of light fell in a criss-cross pattern through the wide windows.

"Would you like something to eat?" The assistant, whom I'll call Carol from now on, since every woman deserves at least a name, didn't wait for an answer and took out a red packet of butterscotch biscuits.

I have a terrible sweet tooth, and would sell my soul, so to speak, for a gram of sugar. Who knows – that summer I may indeed have done that.

I had devoured half the packet when my father returned downstairs. "My daughter," he said to Carol with a grin, seeing me greedily chomping on a biscuit. He turned to me: "Are you coming?"

Together we walked up the stairs, with a couple of guards close behind. Someone opened a door into a dark room; Daddy gently pushed me inside.

In the middle of the room was a chaise longue. The person lying on it didn't feel obliged to break the silence, or even to get up. There were bodyguards standing on either side of the sofa.

"Clarice, meet the President of Liberia," was how Daddy introduced me to Charles Taylor, president and warlord.

I took his hand and surreptitiously tried to catch a glimpse of the side of his head . Wasn't this the president whose ear had been cut off? I had seen the blood-curdling piece of film that had been shown on the news. You could see a man in military uniform, I believe, on his knees, snivelling. One of his tortures picked up a knife, cut off his ear, and ate it. That's the way I remembered it, anyway. As it turned out, it wasn't Taylor in that video, but his predecessor and arch rival, Samuel Doe, who was overthrown by a rebel group that backed Taylor. Taylor became president after that.

"Can you say something in Dutch?" he asked. Even despotic world leaders have a tendency to ask the most banal questions of anyone who can speak a foreign language.

"Such as?" I retorted. You don't meet the president of a country every day, but that wasn't impressive enough to make me check my smart-aleck reply.

"Say hello," Taylor ordered.

"Hallo," I said.

"No, in Dutch."

"That was Dutch."

My father seemed to hold his breath for a second. The president guffawed. I grinned. Daddy was now laughing too, and my grin grew wider.

"Are there any more biscuits? Give her some more," said the most powerful man of Liberia, and I was pushed out the door with my arms full of red packets of biscuits.

"I met the president," I said to Daddy as we walked away. "I'm never going to wash my hand again."

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Good and evil

In war, ordinary people commit atrocities that they would normally never think of doing. According to the Stockholm Centre for the Ethics of War and Peace, we can't apply the moral principles that we follow in our daily lives when it comes to such an exceptional situation as war. That is, exceptional at this time.

My father worked for the Liberian government under a number of different heads of state, some of whom were democrats, and others dictators. One of them was Charles Ghankay Taylor, who in 2012 was sentenced to fifty years in prison for crimes against humanity by the Sierra Leone tribunal in The Hague. He was found guilty of torture, rape and cannibalism, and was so skilled at creating child soldiers that he'd elevated it to an art.

But if today I ask my father, who is living in Liberia once again, if he thinks Taylor is a bad man, he'll say about the leaders he has worked for, "They were all bad." He'd have fit right in among the slick politicians of the Netherlands, who tend to answer questions without giving an answer.

At first, I was taken aback by the lack of an unequivocal reply. Did my father approve of the deeds of a despot? Was that why he had remained his right-hand man in the field of telecommunication? Later I realized that I had no concept of what life was like in a conflict zone. Here in the West, we have forgotten what war feels like. I fled in order never to have to find out what that's like, and so I was never a war-victim as such. But I did become a victim of war anyway, since the suffering I experienced as a refugee had its roots in war.

The first time back

The time I met Charles Taylor, I had travelled to Liberia with Nijay, her husband and their two children. We landed at Robertsfield Airport and drove to the capital, Monrovia. The roads were dark, without any street lighting. We passed women walking along the roads with washtubs or buckets on their heads, the contents of which were invisible to me.

Every now and then we'd drive through a small village. The red dust along the verge flew up as we rushed past. The closer we got to the city, the more urban the rural landscape grew. We saw gigantic billboards with native Liberian ads, but

also ads from Asian countries, like China. They touted cosmetics to lighten the skin, advertised noodles (West African are fond of instant ramen) and liquor, and we also passed civil messaging ads that sounded faintly threatening. "Run like the devil and you will meet him soon," one of them warned.

Liberians like metaphors, and tend to exaggerate. They are also fond of cynicism. Or perhaps I should call it a sharp sense of sarcasm. If you have a fright, for instance, a Liberian won't ask you what's the matter, but flippantly ask if you've murdered someone. And if a Liberian is asked, "You alright?" ("oil-rice?") the prompt reply is, "No, I'm dry rice." It's a way of communicating I unconsciously picked up, if to a lesser extent. In the city we passed restaurants, cafés and trendy ice cream shops with their names flashing in neon letters. All of them names that tasted sweet in the mouth. Like Sugar Beach or Creamery.

Whenever we drive around Monrovia, I like to put my head out the window, to take up the country's energy, so different from the country I "come from", and to feel the wind in my hair. In the Netherlands my hair was always in braids. Intricate hairstyles belong to African cultures. I regard them as a form of self-expression and adornment. But when I was in Liberia, I preferred to let my Afro do its own thing. The fact that my curls were in a sense constricted by my braids, was a thought that had never occurred to me before I felt the Liberian wind blow free through my hair.

Once we were settled, my Afro (as an independent entity) and I would explore Monrovia, filled with curiosity. We wandered through the alleyways next to the apartment building we were staying in, my arms and legs bare, kissed by the sun. My hair felt like the lush crown of the Famira tree, a kind of tree that grew in the surrounding villages.

Ours was a three-storey building in the busy heart of the city. Behind it ran a river, the "Sooniwen," as my brother Giah called it.

In the daytime, cars honked outside our apartment, and you heard the singing and shouting of the vendors below. They sold kola nuts, Fan Milk pops and Kool-Aid, as the children playing in the street secretly tried to make off with their wares. At night loud music was played. The streets were unlit, but at every corner there were clusters of aluminium-roofed shacks transformed into cafés. There were also brightly painted shipping containers that functioned as bars, restaurants, hair salons and electronics shops. Some shacks had Christmas lights blinking year-round.

On one of my exploratory expeditions, we stopped at my father's office. I was accompanied, as I often was when roaming the streets of Liberia, by a family member I didn't really know. My chaperone and I stopped at a stall to buy plantains. An old lady, let's just call her Mamie, was frying the bananas in a rickety metal frying pan blinking in the hot sun. The heat of the oil made the air

around it ripple. Mamie's skin was as smooth as a baby's bottom. Her wrinkles formed a pattern, the human equivalent of the rings of a tree.

"Fine geh" she said. Fine girl. It's an expression Liberians like to use to address girls or women, without any ulterior meaning. If you're walking innocently in the street and are hailed by those words, it isn't because the speaker is trying to pick you up, but because he or she is trying to get your attention. You should see it as an expression of appreciation of sorts for the beauty you radiate as a woman. Who could still feel ugly and unloved, when even strangers in the street appreciate your beauty?

I smiled and looked down at my toes, sticking out a few millimetres beyond the edge of my flip-flops.

"Is all that hair on that head yours?" said Mamie, nodding at me. Her eyes dropped down to my arms, to show that she also appreciated the hair on my arms. She stroked it gently. The black hairs contrasted with my lighter skin. I used to be embarrassed of my body hair. I would remove it with the help of hot wax or vicious razors that always left little cuts, as if I had to be punished for shaving something that flourished so naturally.

But in Liberia, lush body hair is regarded as an asset. Nowhere else have I ever experienced the freedom my hair was granted there to grow on my head as well as on the rest of my body.

"What's your name?" the banana vendor asked. When I replied, she cooed, "Gargard, as in SJM Gargard? Give him my regards."

I wasn't used to having my name recognized by strangers.

"You father is a good man. Good for Liberia," she said, fishing the plump banana slices from the oil one by one. She gave me a few extra.

The office was cool. The air-conditioning, always on in government buildings, made the air smell of a freezer, an icy, metallic sort of odour. I stepped from the blistering heat into the freezing cold.

Daddy's desk was made of dark wenge wood, the same colour as his dark brown two-piece suit, which was just a bit large for him. He hugged me when I approached, introduced me to some people, and then went on talking on the phone and composing emails. I nosed about a bit as he worked and observed him in his natural habitat.

Daddy isn't even five foot tall, but he towers above everyone else just the same. When he walks into a room, he draws all eyes on him, just as the sun attracts the planets. He has only to point at what he wants, and someone will rush to give it to him. He's the kind of man who walks without looking back, because he knows he's being followed no matter what.

In his younger days, people used to describe him as a tiger. Not because he was athletic, as is often meant when black people are compared to wild animals, but

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because of his cunning and commanding presence. A wild animal that is led by its intellect and its senses. Those are the qualities you need to be the king of the jungle. At the slightest sign of danger, the beast's muscles tense, ready to spring.

My father's brown eyes noticed everything. "Did you buy street food on the way here?" he asked suspiciously.

I swallowed. "I did."

I'd had it drummed into me by family members not to eat anything outside the house. Certain restaurants or relatives were the only ones given a pass by the strict members of the jury in charge of my eating habits. At the time, I didn't take the danger of infectious diseases all that seriously, but that changed once I'd been laid low by food poisoning as well as malaria.

Daddy turned with an accusing look at the one who'd accompanied me to the office.

"She... She herself wanted it, Sir," my escort stammered.

"She herself wanted it," Daddy repeated. "Did she grow up here, then, knowing what is and isn't good for her?"

Daddy wasn't the only middle-class Liberian to adopt an attitude of superiority towards the lower classes. Shouting at the help is quite common in Liberia, and even meting out physical punishment. An unpleasant consequence of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots.

I interrupted Daddy, who was on the verge of continuing his tirade. "I'd have bought it anyway, Daddy, whether he'd let me or not."

Daddy was quiet for a moment. Was he tensing his muscles, ready to jump? He turned to my companion, tapped him softly on the shoulder and said, "She's a headstrong one, isn't she. Just be more careful next time. OK?"

The man nodded and a sigh of relief escaped from his lips.

Daddy, the big boss

Daddy was trained as a meteorologist and engineer, with telecommunications as his speciality. When he was working in the United States, after studying at the famous University of Chicago, he was recruited by the Liberian government. He'd also had an offer from the American government, he told me, after attracting notice for the calculations he'd done for NASA. I wasn't born yet, but I do sometimes wonder what would have happened if he had stayed. Then I'd have grown up in the country of my birth, with the occasional trip to my home country. But then, alas, I'd never have come to know the Netherlands.

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My father was a genuine patriot, someone who believed fervently in his country and wanted to help advance its progress. So, when Liberia's President Tolbert came to see him in the nineteen-seventies and offered him a job, he couldn't say no. Tolbert was looking for professionals who had left the country but had a Liberian background; he wished to appoint them to posts in state-owned enterprises. My father was such a one.

Tolbert was a pragmatist, something you wouldn't be able to tell from his flashy way of dressing. He went about in an impeccable, snow-white suit and wore – as a devout Christian – a gigantic golden cross studded with gemstones around his neck. I can picture him scouring universities, businesses and government offices, in search of exceptional Liberians whom he might bring back home. Trying to find the diamonds the West was only too eager to keep to herself.

Tolbert was a man of reform and inclusiveness. He belonged to Liberia's dominant group, the descendants of former American slaves (enslaved people) who held both economic and political power. Unlike many other "Americos", however, he was dedicated to the equal treatment of all citizens, especially the original inhabitants.

Liberia Telecom already existed before Daddy was appointed managing director, but the company was being run on a small scale.

"It was my goal, in my job, to develop a better and more efficient method of communication," Daddy told us. "One that was accessible for everyone."

An effective communication system is an important public service, but it can also be used for nefarious purposes. If common folk have access to communication channels, a militant rebel leader has the chance to send out his propaganda. And that is precisely what happened in Liberia. When Daddy worked for President Amos Sawyer from 1990 to 1994, Sawyer accused him of treason: Daddy was suspected of sending secret information to the rebel leader Charles Taylor to facilitate a coup.

Liberia Telecommunications Corporation

In 2017 I again visited the Liberia Telecom offices where Daddy used to work. I was in Liberia with my film crew to make a documentary about my father.

We filmed in Daddy's former place of work, located in a quiet neighbourhood, very different from the area where he lived. There were vendors walking round with ice water, fruit and snacks, as elsewhere in Monrovia, but there were fewer houses, apartments or shacks, and more government buildings behind iron gates. Most of the buildings were the colour of sand, a shade of brown that did little to

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brighten the streets. That job was left to the trees and red flowers blooming as colourful bursts of surprise.

At first, we thought the old telecom building was deserted, but when we drove into the compound, we saw guards at the entrance.

We wanted to film Daddy in his erstwhile habitat, where he used to wave the sceptre and had snuggled his rump on the soft cushions of his throne.

A man emerged from one of the rooms. "What are you doing here?" he barked. "Do you have permission?"

"We certainly have," I replied. "And you are?"

I hurried after Daddy, who was entering the room the barking man had come from. There were people at work in there. Daddy gave an enthusiastic shout and started grilling them at random, as if he were in charge. "What are you doing here, exactly?"

As expected, he received plenty of answers. But I couldn't tell you now what they were.

The conversation was interrupted when a stout, bald man walked in. "Hey, don't you know who this is?" he shouted, walking up to Daddy with his hand outstretched. "SJM, how are you?" He gripped my father's hand firmly.

They snapped their fingers in salute. That's what Liberians do when they shake hands. Sometimes there's a longer version of the greeting, in which, before snapping your fingers, you let your fingers entwine, then let go. I never know when I'm expected to perform this more elaborate version. It seems that this salute stems from the Americo-Liberians' time of enslavement. The gesture is supposedly meant as a protest against the white slaveholders who broke black enslaved people's fingers.

Daddy grinned again, chuffed. He introduced me to the man, whom he had apparently trained when he was still in charge. The same man now held an important position in the company; he had many people working under him. They began enthusiastically talking about the past. From time to time the man would look at me, stressing over and over again how important Daddy had been to him. "He trained us, man, without him I wouldn't be here. He recognized talent and moulded it."

After our stop at his old office, the film crew, Daddy and I also went to the newest telecom headquarters, in the city centre. It was very busy there, teeming with office workers in suits, dress shirts or neat dresses wandering in and out of the swinging doors.

A guard at the entrance nodded at my father. "Welcome back, Sir."

My father smiled and asked him about his family. It surprised me that he never seemed to forget a person's name, whether they were high officials or service staff.

Although I did notice that people with advanced degrees or important positions rated greater esteem: African "respectability politics" par excellence. The higher up the ladder, the greater the respect.

Inside we bumped into Kromah, my father's former bodyguard. It was strange to think that Daddy had been important enough to need a bodyguard. But it also says something about the state of the country back then.

Kromah was a stooped old man himself now. His voice was soft, suggesting a mild-mannered man behind it. Despite his age and friendly demeanour, he had a sturdy, wide-legged stance.

Kromah started describing his adventures with Daddy for the camera. "During the war, on account of the violence, there was no way to communicate. People couldn't reach their relatives, we had no contact with people abroad, the outside world did not know about the hellfire blazing in Africa's first republic."

Daddy looked at me as if to say, "You see, without communication, you have nothing."

Internally I was rolling my eyes but kept myself stonefaced for the camera.

"It was your father who changed that. He had to install satellite dishes and get them working. Especially those that had been destroyed during the fighting. He risked his life going to the most dangerous zones to repair them. I'd always warn him, 'Sir, there are bullets flying there.' But then he'd say, 'I have to do this.'"

Daddy laughed.