Short Story

My father, the Englishman, and I

To Mina, all my love

I would have been as high, standing, as the knees of a full-grown pygmy sitting, when I first met a European, to wit an Englishman, the Administrator of the Ogaden, with whom my father worked as an interpreter. I wasn't quite three when, responding to an urgent summons, my father took me with him, well aware that I didn't want to meet up with the colonial officer. My mother's undisguised aversion to the white man was no secret, but this in and of itself could not explain why I declined the Englishman's offers of boiled sweets and other presents.

Being my mother's favorite child, I suspect I harbored resentments not only toward the Englishman but toward my father, what with my dad's unpredictable furies, his hopeless rages which I would encounter later in life, and his sudden loss of temper when he was not having his way with you. My father was kindness itself to non-family, temperamental with his dependents. But he cut the figure of a most obliging vassal to the Englishman. You might have thought he was the white man's general factotum, doing his bidding and never speaking an unkind word about him.

It was a feat of great magnitude to convince myself not to stuff the boiled sweets the Englishman had sent along with my father, because in those days mine was a mouth-centered universe. Not admitting to being tempted, I now had my right thumb shoved into my mouth and my left tight around the uneaten sweet, while I remained in contact with my father, who held on to my wrist, pulling me as though I were a sandbag. I had a great urge to eat the sweet but didn't in deference to my mother's unspoken wish. Later I would realize that a history of loyalties was being made then.

I remember my parents raising their voices over the matter earlier, my mother disapproving of my father's wretched acceptance of his lowly status in the hierarchy of colonial dispensation. When, years later, in a heated argument, my mother accused my father of "political pimping", my memory revisited this incident.

Anyway, I would have stayed with my mother if I could, my mother who had lately been incontinent of sorrow, something I was too young to understand. I left the house wrapped in sadness. Often, I had little difficulty getting my words out when in the company of my mother, whereas with others I had the habit of choking on my speech. Today it felt as though I had swallowed my tongue. I loved my mother, whom I thought of as my sanctuary, her silences generous as openings embracing my stammers.

I regret I do not have my mother to corroborate my version of these happenings. As fate would have it, I was not able to exchange my memories with her before she died.

Above all I remember hands: hands pulling me, hands pushing me. I see the Englishman reaching, striving to take hold of me. My father's open palm pushes me from behind, urging me forward toward the white man's looming face. Or are we dealing with memory as a rogue, memory willfully vandalizing the integrity of a remembrance and reshaping the past so as to confirm the present? Perhaps not. Because I am not the only one who associates my father with hands — hands not giving but reaching out to hit. One of my older brothers whom my father often struck for being mischievous reiterates that one did not know if our father's hands were about to make a monkey of one or, in a bid to encourage one, pat one on the head.

If I went with my father to be with the Englishman, it was because I was given little choice. I had to make do with the makeshift emotions which I had built around myself, emotions meant to protect me
from psychological harm. For I had wised up to this before my third year and knew, as though by instinct, that my father might punish me for my lack of deference toward the Englishman. Too clever by half, I took a step forward if only to humor him and made sure not a truant tear would betray my genuine feelings. By Jove, it was difficult not to submit to the desire to weep or to cringe with embarrassment as the Englishman embraced me.

It was such a relief to see that my father appeared pleased! There was a pattern to the relationship between my father and the Englishman, my father speaking only when spoken to or after he had been given the go-head. It struck me as if my old man stood in relation to a student repeating what a teacher had said. What I could not have known was that in his capacity as a vassal to the British Empire, my father translated into Somali whatever the Englishman had uttered in Swahili.

No sooner had the Englishman sat me on his lap than I sensed a change in my surroundings. For we were joined by the stifled murmurs of a dozen or so men, preceded by the noise of jaamuus — sandaled feet being dragged heavily across the floor. And I was suddenly heir to the sad expressions on the newly arrived men’s faces, the sorrow of the eunuched. I might have thought that my sense of powerlessness was no different from theirs had I known then, as I know now, that the clan elders were gathered in the Englishman’s spacious office to sport with the tangles of history, putting their thumbs to a treaty Ethiopia and Britain had prepared with the connivance of the Americans. I’m not certain of the future date in the same calendar year 1948 when the fate of the Ogaden was decided and put in the hands of expansionist Ethiopia.

What was my role in this ignoble affair? I lay in the embrace of the Englishman; I felt the remorse of words dressed in the garb of authority coming into contact with my heartbeat before they were translated into Somali by my father; and I did nothing. If I had resisted being the Englishman’s booty, which he received without firing a bullet, would matters have been different? If I had fussied so as to prevent my father from translating the ignominious words of the Englishman into Somali, would the Ogaden have been dealt a fairer hand?

I remember the elders of the clan entering into a cantankerous argument with my father, who in all likelihood was discouraging them from standing up to the Englishman. Left out of the debate altogether, the Englishman rose up to ride the high horse of rage the powerful so often mount: and there was silence. It was then that I entered the fray, letting out a shriek of outrage wrung out of the primeval beginnings of all my years. Apologizing to me, the Englishman adjourned the meeting till another day.

At subsequent meeting, the clan elders placed their thumbs over the allotted space in the treaty they signed. Had I been present, or had my mother been consulted, maybe this would not have occurred.

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Nuruddin Farah, born in 1945 in Somalia, currently resides in South Africa. He is one of the most prolific – and most influential – novelists from Africa. His first novel, From a Crooked Rib was welcomed by feminists as a groundbreaking work. Secrets, his latest novel, is the third in a trilogy with Maps (1986) and Gifts. His other works include: A Naked Needle, Sweet and Sour Milk and Close Sesame.

Farah was born in the Italian Somaliland, in Baidoa, in 1945, and grew up in Kallafo, under Ethiopian rule in the Ogaden. The ethnically and linguistically mixed area of his childhood contributed to his early fascination with literature. He spoke Somali at home but at school learnt Amharic, Italian, Arabic, and English: “We learned that one received other people’s wisdom through the medium of their writing…”

Sweet and Sour Milk won the English Speaking Union Award (his second novel to do so), but made him persona non grata in Somalia and resulted in his exile of twenty years. He describes his life as a ‘nomadic existence’.

Farah articulated his ambivalence about the American troop “rescue” of his country in an article in the New York Times, saying: “The crisis in Somalia is one of its people’s making and is native to the country’s ill-run clan patronage…” In an interview with Maya Jaggi, he further explained: “If you take the Somalia nation as a family, the betrayal is no longer that of colonialism, it is no longer from
outside but from within." More than anything else, he bemoaned the failure of Pan Africanism, the inability of other African nations to deal with the crisis in his country.

In another context, in an essay entitled “Childhood of my schizophrenia”, published in The Times Literary Supplement in 1990, Farah stated: “Colonial childhood such as mine is discontinuous: the child grows up neither as a replica of his parents, nor of the colonial ruler. I have remarked on my people’s absence from the roll-call of history as we were taught it, to the extent that we envied our Ethiopian, Kenyan and Arab neighbours the passing mention given to them in the textbooks we studied at school. It was with this in mind that I began writing – in the hope of enabling the Somali child at least to characterize his otherness - and to point at himself as the unnamed, the divided other, a schizophrenic child living in the age of colonial contradiction.”