

## *THE WALLED GARDEN*

### I

The boy first. His name was Yusuf, and he left his home suddenly during his twelfth year. He remembered it was the season of drought, when every day was the same as the last. Unexpected flowers bloomed and died. Strange insects scuttled from under rocks and writhed to their deaths in the burning light. The sun made distant trees tremble in the air and made the houses shudder and heave for breath. Clouds of dust puffed up at every tramping footfall and a hard-edged stillness lay over the daylight hours. Precise moments like that came back of the season.

He saw two Europeans on the railway platform at that time, the first he had ever seen. He was not frightened, not at first. He went to the station often, to watch the trains come noisily and gracefully in, and then to wait for them to haul themselves out again, marshalled by the scowling Indian signalman with his pennants and whistle. Often Yusuf waited hours for a train to arrive. The two Europeans were also waiting, standing under a canvas awning with their luggage and important-looking goods neatly piled a few feet away. The man was large, so tall that he had to lower his head to avoid touching the canvas under which he sheltered from the sun. The woman stood further back in the shade, her glistening face partly obscured by two hats. Her frilled white blouse was buttoned up at the neck and wrists, and her long skirt brushed her shoes. She was tall and large too, but differently. Where she looked lumpy and malleable, as if capable of taking

another shape. he appeared carved out of a single piece of wood. They stared in different directions, as if they did not know each other. As he watched, Yusuf saw the woman run her handkerchief over her lips, casually rubbing off flakes of dry skin. The man's face was mottled with red, and as his eyes moved slowly over the cramped landscape of the station, taking in the locked wooden storehouses and the huge yellow flag with its picture of a glaring black bird, Yusuf was able to take a long look at him. Then he turned and saw Yusuf staring. The man glanced away at first and then looked back at Yusuf for a long moment. Yusuf could not tear his eyes away. Suddenly the man bared his teeth in an involuntary snarl, curling his fingers in an inexplicable way. Yusuf heeded the warning and fled, muttering the words he had been taught to say when he required sudden and unexpected help from God.

That year he left his home was also the year the woodworm infested the posts in the back porch. His father smacked the posts angrily whenever he passed them, letting them know he knew what game they were up to. The woodworm left trails on the beams that were like the turned-up earth which marked the animal tunnels in the bed of the dry stream. The posts sounded soft and hollow whenever Yusuf hit them, and emitted tiny grainy spores of rot. When he grumbled for food his mother told him to eat the worms.

'I'm hungry,' he wailed at her, in an untutored litany he had been reciting with increasing gruffness with each passing year.

'Eat the woodworm,' his mother suggested, and then laughed at his exaggerated look of disgusted anguish. 'Go on, stuff yourself with it any time you want. Don't let me stop you.'

He sighed in a world-weary way he was experimenting with to show her how pathetic her joke was. Sometimes they ate bones, which his mother boiled up to make a thin soup whose

surface glistened with colour and grease, and in whose depths lurked lumps of black spongy marrow. At worst, there was only okra stew, but however hungry he was Yusuf could not swallow the slimy sauce.

His Uncle Aziz also came to visit them at that time. His visits were brief and far between, usually accompanied by a crowd of travellers and porters and musicians. He stopped with them on the long journeys he made from the ocean to the mountains, to the lakes and forests, and across the dry plains and the bare rocky hills of the interior. His expeditions were often accompanied by drums and tamburis and horns and siwa, and when his train marched into town animals stampeded and evacuated themselves, and children ran out of control. Uncle Aziz gave off a strange and unusual odour, a mixture of hide and perfume, and gums and spices, and another less definable smell which made Yusuf think of danger. His habitual dress was a thin, flowing kanzu of fine cotton and a small crocheted cap pushed back on his head. With his refined airs and his polite, impassive manner, he looked more like a man on a late afternoon stroll or a worshipper on the way to evening prayers than a merchant who had picked his way past bushes of thorn and nests of vipers spitting poison. Even in the heat of arrival, amid the chaos and disorder of tumbled packs, surrounded by tired and noisy porters, and watchful, sharp-clawed traders, Uncle Aziz managed to look calm and at ease. On this visit he had come alone.

Yusuf always enjoyed his visits. His father said they brought honour on them because he was such a rich and renowned merchant – *tajiri mkubwa* – but that was not all, welcome though honour always was. Uncle Aziz gave him, without fail, a ten anna piece every time he stopped with them. Nothing was required of him but that he should present himself at the appropriate time. Uncle Aziz looked out for

him, smiled and gave him the coin. Yusuf felt he wanted to smile too every time the moment arrived, but he stopped himself because he guessed that it would be wrong for him to do so. Yusuf marvelled at Uncle Aziz's luminous skin and his mysterious smell. Even after his departure, his perfume lingered for days.