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Nadine Gordimer

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What were you dreaming?

Abstract

I'm standing here by the road long time, yesterday, day before, today. Not the same road but it's the same — hot, hot hke today. When they turn off to where they're going, I must get out again, wait again. Some of them they just pretend there's nobody there, they don't want to see nobody. Even go a bit faster, ja. Then they past, and I'm waiting. I combed my hair; I don't want to look like a skolly. Don't smile because they think you being too friendly, you think you good as them. They go and they go. Some's got the baby's napkin hanging over the back window to keep out this sun. Some's not going on holiday with their kids but is alone; all alone in a big car. But they'll never stop, the whites, if they alone. Never. Because these skollies and that kind've spoilt it all for us, sticking a gun in the driver's neck, stealing his money, beating him up and taking the car. Even killing him. So it's bugged up for us. No white wants some guy sitting behind his head. And the blacks — when they stop for you, they ask for money. They want you must pay, like for a taxi! The blacks!

What Were You Dreaming?

I'm standing here by the road long time, yesterday, day before, today. Not the same road but it's the same — hot, hot like today. When they turn off to where they're going, I must get out again, wait again. Some of them they just pretend there's nobody there, they don't want to see nobody. Even go a bit faster, *ja*. Then they past, and I'm waiting. I combed my hair; I don't want to look like a *skolly*. Don't smile because they think you being too friendly, you think you good as them. They go and they go. Some's got the baby's napkin hanging over the back window to keep out this sun. Some's not going on holiday with their kids but is alone; all alone in a big car. But they'll never stop, the whites, if they alone. Never. Because these *skollies* and that kind've spoilt it all for us, sticking a gun in the driver's neck, stealing his money, beating him up and taking the car. Even killing him. So it's bugged up for us. No white wants some guy sitting behind his head. And the blacks — when they stop for you, they ask for money. They want you must pay, like for a taxi! The blacks!

But then these whites: they're stopping; I'm surprised, because it's only two — empty in the back — and the car it's a beautiful one. The windows are that special glass, you can't see in if you outside, but the woman has hers down and she's calling me over with her finger. She ask me where I'm going and I say the next place because they don't like to have you for too far, so she say get in and lean into the back to move along her stuff that's on the back seat to make room. Then she say, lock the door, just push that button down, we don't want you to fall out, and it's like she's joking with someone she know. The man driving smiles over his shoulder and say something — I can't hear it very well, it's the way he talk English. So anyway I say what's all right to say, yes master, thank you master, I'm going to Warmbad. He ask again, but man, I don't get it — *Ekskuus?* Please? And she chips in — she's a lady with grey hair and he's a young chap — My friend's from England, he's asking if you've been waiting a long time for a lift. So I tell them — A long time? Madam! And because they white, I tell them about the blacks, how when

they stop they ask you to pay. This time I understand what the young man's saying, he say, And most whites don't stop? And I'm careful what I say, I tell them about the blacks, how too many people spoil it for us, they robbing and killing, you can't blame white people. Then he ask where I'm from. And she laugh and look round where I'm behind her. I see she know I'm from the Cape, although she ask me. I tell her I'm from the Cape Flats and she say she suppose I'm not born there, though, and she's right, I'm born in Wynberg, right there in Cape Town. So she say, And they moved you out?

Then I catch on what kind of white she is; so I tell her, yes, the government kicked us out from our place, and she say to the young man, You see?

He want to know why I'm not in the place in the Cape Flats, why I'm so far away here. I tell them I'm working in Pietersburg. And he keep on, why? Why? What's my job, everything, and if I don't understand the way he speak, she chips in again all the time and ask me for him. So I tell him, panel beater. And I tell him, the pay is very low in the Cape. And then I begin to tell them lots of things, some things is real and some things I just think of, things that are going to make them like me, maybe they'll take me all the way there to Pietersburg.

I tell them I'm six days on the road. I not going to say I'm sick as well, I been home because I was sick — because *she's* not from overseas, I suss that, she know that old story. I tell them I had to take leave because my mother's got trouble with my brothers and sisters, we seven in the family and no father. And s'true's God, it seem like what I'm saying. When do you ever see him except he's drunk. And my brother is trouble, trouble, he hangs around with bad people and my other brother doesn't help my mother. And that's no lie, neither, how can he help when he's doing time; but they don't need to know that, they only get scared I'm the same kind like him, if I tell about him, assault and intent to do bodily harm. The sisters are in school and my mother's only got the pension. *Ja*. I'm working there in Pietersburg and every week, madam, I swear to you, I send my pay for my mother and sisters. So then he say, Why get off here? Don't you want us to take you to Pietersburg? And she say, of course, they going that way.

And I tell them some more. They listening to me so nice, and I'm talking, talking. I talk about the government, because I hear she keep saying to him, telling about this law and that law. I say how it's not fair we had to leave Wynberg and go to the Flats. I tell her we got sicknesses — she say what kind, is it unhealthy here? And I don't have to think what, I just say it's *bad, bad*, and she say to the man, *As I told you*. I tell

about the house we had in Wynberg, but it's not my grannie's old house where we was all living together so long, the house I'm telling them about is more the kind of house they'll know, they wouldn't like to go away from, with a tiled bathroom, electric stove, everything. I tell them we spend three thousand rands fixing up that house — my uncle give us the money, that's how we got it. He give us his savings, three thousand rands. (I don't know why I say three; old Uncle Jimmy never have three or two or one in his life. I just say it.) And then we just kicked out. And panel beaters getting low pay there; it's better in Pietersburg.

He say, but I'm far from my home? And I tell her again, because she's white but she's a woman too, with that grey hair she's got grown-up kids — Madam, I send my pay home every week, s'true's God, so's they can eat, there in the Flats. I'm saying, *six days on the road*. While I'm saying it, I'm thinking; then I say, look at me, I got only these clothes, I sold my things on the way, to have something to eat. *Six days on the road*. He's from overseas and she isn't one of those who say you're a liar, doesn't trust you — right away when I got in the car, I notice she doesn't take her stuff over to the front like they usually do in case you pinch something of theirs. Six days on the road, and am I tired, tired! When I get to Pietersburg I must try borrow me a rand to get a taxi there to where I live. He say, Where do you live? Not in town? And she laugh, because he don't know nothing about this place, where whites live and where we must go — but I know they both thinking and I know what they thinking; I know I'm going to get something when I get out, don't need to worry about that. They feeling bad about me, now. Bad. Anyhow it's God's truth that I'm tired, tired, that's true.

They've put up her window and he's pushed a few buttons, now it's like in a supermarket, cool air blowing, and the windows like sunglasses: that sun can't get me here.

The Englishman glances over his shoulder as he drives.

'Taking a nap.'

'I'm sure it's needed.'

All through the trip he stops for everyone he sees at the roadside. Some are not hitching at all, never expecting to be given a lift anywhere, just walking in the heat outside with an empty plastic can to be filled with water or paraffin or whatever it is they buy in some country store, or standing at some point between departure and destination, small children and bundles linked on either side, baby on back. She hasn't said anything to him. He would only misunderstand if she explained why one

doesn't give lifts in this country; and if she pointed out that in spite of this, she doesn't mind him breaking the sensible if unfortunate rule, he might misunderstand that, as well — think she was boasting of her disregard for personal safety weighed in the balance against decent concern for fellow beings.

He persists in making polite conversation with these passengers because he doesn't want to be patronizing; picking them up like so many objects and dropping them off again, silent, smelling of smoke from open cooking fires, sun and sweat, there behind his head. They don't understand his Englishman's English and if he gets an answer at all it's a deaf man's guess at what's called for. Some grin with pleasure, and embarrass him by showing it the way they've been taught is acceptable, invoking him as *baas* and *master* when they get out and give thanks. But although he doesn't know it, being too much concerned with those names thrust into his hands like whips whose purpose is repugnant to him, has nothing to do with him, she knows each time that there is a moment of annealment in the air-conditioned hired car belonging to nobody — a moment like that on a no-man's-land bridge in which an accord between warring countries is signed — when there is no calling of names, and all belong in each other's presence. He doesn't feel it because he has no wounds, nor has inflicted, nor will inflict any.

This one standing at the roadside with his transistor radio in a plastic bag was actually thumbing a lift like a townee; his expectation marked him out. And when her companion to whom she was showing the country inevitably pulled up, she read the face at the roadside immediately: the lively, cajoling, performer's eyes, the salmon-pinkish cheeks and nostrils, and as he jogged over smiling, the unselfconscious gap of gum between the canines.

A sleeper is always absent; although present, there on the back seat.

'The way he spoke about black people, wasn't it suprising? I mean — he's black himself.'

'Oh no he's not. Couldn't you see the difference? He's a Cape Coloured. From the way he speaks English — couldn't you hear he's not like the Africans you've talked to?'

But of course he hasn't seen, hasn't heard: the fellow is dark enough, to those who don't know the signs by which you're classified, and the melodramatic, long-vowelled English is as difficult to follow if more fluent than the terse, halting responses of blacker people.

'Would he have a white grandmother or even a white father, then?'

She gives him another of the little history lessons she has been supplying along the way. The malay slaves brought by the Dutch East

India Company to their supply station, on the route to India, at the Cape in the seventeenth century; the Hottentots who were the indigenous inhabitants of that part of Africa; add Dutch, French, English, German settlers whose backyard progeniture with these and other blacks began a people who are all the people in the country mingled in one bloodstream. But encounters along the road teach him more than her history lessons, or the political analyses in which they share the same ideological approach although he does not share responsibility for the experience to which the ideology is being applied. She has explained Acts, Proclamations, Amendments. The Group Areas Act, Resettlement Act, Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Act. She has translated these statute book euphemisms: people as movable goods. People packed onto trucks along with their stoves and beds while front-end loaders scoop away their homes into rubble. People dumped somewhere else. Always somewhere else. People as the figures, decimal points and multiplying zero-zero-zeros into which individual lives — Black Persons Orderly-Moved, -Effluxed, -Grouped — coagulate and compute. Now he has here in the car the intimate weary odour of a young man to whom these things happen.

‘Half his family sick ... it must be pretty unhealthy, where they’ve been made to go.’

She smiles. ‘Well, I’m not too sure about that. I had the feeling, some of what he said ... they’re theatrical by nature. You must take it with a pinch of salt.’

‘You mean about the mother and sisters and so on?’

She’s still smiling, she doesn’t answer.

‘But he couldn’t have made up about taking a job so far from home — and the business of sending his wages to his mother? That too?’

He glances at her.

Beside him, she’s withdrawn as the other one, sleeping behind him. While he turns his attention back to the road, she is looking at him secretly, as if somewhere in his blue eye registering the approaching road but fixed on the black faces he is trying to read, somewhere in the lie of his inflamed hand and arm that on their travels have been plunged in the sun as if in boiling water, there is the place through which the worm he needs to be infected with can find a way into him, so that he may host it and become its survivor, himself surviving through being fed on. Become like her. Complicity is the only understanding.

‘Oh it’s true, it’s all true ... not in the way he’s told about it. Truer than the way he told it. All these things happen to them. And other things. Worse. But why burden us? Why try to explain to us? Things so

far from what we know, how will they ever explain? How will we react? Stop our ears? Or cover our faces? Open the door and throw him out? They don't know. But sick mothers and brothers gone to the bad — these are the staples of misery, mmh? Think of the function of charity in the class struggles in your own country in the nineteenth century; it's all there in your literature. The lord-of-the-manor's compassionate daughter carrying hot soup to the dying cottager on her father's estate. The 'advanced' upper-class woman comforting her cook when the honest drudge's daughter takes to whoring for a living. *Shame*, we say here. Shame. You must've heard it? We think it means, what a pity; we think we are expressing sympathy — for them. *Shame*. I don't know what we're saying about ourselves.' She laughs.

'So you think it would at least be true that his family were kicked out of their home, sent away?'

'Why would anyone of them need to make that up? It's an everyday affair.'

'What kind of place would they get, where they were moved?'

'Depends. A tent, to begin with. And maybe basic materials to build themselves a shack. Perhaps a one-room prefab. Always a tin toilet set down in the veld, if nothing else. Some industrialist must be making a fortune out of government contracts for those toilets. You build your new life round that toilet. His people are Coloured, so it could be they were sent where there were houses of some sort already built for them; Coloureds usually get something a bit better than blacks are given.'

'And the house would be more or less as good as the one they had? People as poor as that — and they'd spent what must seem a fortune to them, fixing it up.'

'I don't know what kind of house they had. We're not talking about slum clearance, my dear; we're talking about destroying communities because they're black, and white people want to build houses or factories for whites where blacks live. I told you. We're talking about loading up trucks and carting black people out of sight of whites.'

'And even where he's come to work — Pietersburg, whatever-it's-called — he doesn't live in the town.'

'Out of sight.' She has lost the thought for a moment, watching to make sure the car takes the correct turning. 'Out of sight. Like those mothers and grannies and brothers and sisters far away on the Cape Flats.'

'I don't think it's possible he actually sends all his pay. I mean how would one eat?'

'Maybe what's left doesn't buy anything he really wants.'

Not a sound, not a sigh in sleep, behind them. They can go on talking about him as he always has been discussed, there and yet not there.

Her companion is alert to the risk of gullibility. He verifies the facts, smiling, just as he converts, mentally, into pounds and pence any sum spent in foreign coinage. 'He didn't sell the radio. When he said he'd sold all his things on the road, he forgot about that.'

'When did he say he'd last eaten?'

'Yesterday. He said.'

She repeats what she has just been told: 'Yesterday.' She is looking through the glass that takes the shine of heat off the landscape passing as yesterday passed, time measured by the ticking second-hand of moving trees, rows of crops, country-store stoeps, filling stations, spiny crook'd fingers of giant euphorbia. Only the figures by the roadside waiting, standing still.

Personal remarks can't offend someone dead-beat in the back. 'How d'you think such a young man comes to be without front teeth?'

She giggles whisperingly and keeps her voice low, anyway. 'Well, you may not believe me if I tell you...'

'Seems odd ... I suppose he can't afford to have them replaced.'

'It's — how shall I say — a sexual preference. Most usually you see it in their young girls, though. They have their front teeth pulled when they're about seventeen.'

She feels his uncertainty, his not wanting to let comprehension lead him to a conclusion embarrassing to an older woman. For her part, she is wondering whether he won't find it distasteful if — at her de-sexed age — she should come out with it: for cock-sucking. 'No-one thinks the gap spoils a girl's looks, apparently. It's simply a sign she knows how to please. Same significance between men, I suppose... A form of beauty. So everyone says. We've always been given to understand that's the reason.'

'Maybe it's just another sexual myth. There are so many.'

She's in agreement. 'Black girls. Chinese girls. Jewish girls.'

'And black men?'

'Oh my goodness, you bet. But we white ladies don't talk about that, we only dream, you know! Or have nightmares.'

They're laughing. When they are quiet, she flexes her shoulders against the seat-back and settles again. The streets of a town are flickering their text across her eyes. 'He might have had a car accident. They might have been knocked out in a fight.'

The confident dextrous hand is moving quickly down in the straw bag bought from a local market somewhere along the route. She brings up a

pale blue note (the Englishman recognizes the two-rand denomination of this currency that he has memorized by colour) and turns to pass it, a surreptitious message, through the open door behind her. *Goodbye master madam*. The note disappears delicately as a titbit finger-fed. He closes the door, he's keeping up the patter, *goodbye master, goodbye madam*, and she instructs — 'No, bang it. Harder. That's it.' *Goodbye master, goodbye madam* — but they don't look back at him now, they don't have to see him thinking he must keep waving, keep smiling, in case they should look back.

She is the guide and mentor; she's the one who knows the country. She's the one — she knows that too — who is accountable. She must be the first to speak again. 'At least if he's hungry he'll be able to buy a bun or something. And the bars are closed on Sunday.'