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Map of the Invisible World

Written by Tash Aw

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TASH AW

Map of the Invisible World

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Did I not *once upon a time* have a lovable childhood, heroic and fabulous, to be written on leaves of gold, an excess of good fortune? RIMBAUD, *Matin*

His voice lasted just a few moments. A fleeting tremor, never to be repeated. PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER, 'Yang Sudah Hilang'

'My dreams are like other people's waking hours … My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap.' BORGES, 'Funes, His Memory'

1

When it finally happened, there was no violence, hardly any drama. It was over very quickly, and then Adam found himself alone once more. Hiding in the deep shade of the bushes, this is what he saw.

The soldiers jumped from the truck on to the sandy soil. They dusted themselves off, straightening their hitched-up trouser legs and tucking their shirts into their waistbands. Their long sleeves were rolled up thickly above their elbows and made their arms look skinny and frail, and the belts they wore were so wide they seemed to stretch their waists to their chests. They laughed and joked and aimed pretend-kicks at one another. Their boots were too big and when they ran they looked like clowns. They were just kids, Adam thought, just like me, only with guns.

They hesitated as they approached the steps going up to the veranda, talking among themselves. They were too far away; he couldn't hear what they were saying. Then two of them went up to the house and when they emerged they had Karl with them. He was not handcuffed; he followed them slowly, walking to the truck with his uneven gait before climbing up and disappearing under the tarpaulin canopy. From a distance he looked small, just like them, just like a child too, only with fair hair and pink skin.

Stop. Adam wanted to call out, to scream for Karl to come back. Don't leave, he wanted to shout. But he remained silent and unmoving, shrouded by the dense thorny foliage. He could do this now: he held his breath and counted slowly from one to ten. A long time ago, he had learnt this way of controlling his fear.

The truck reversed and then drew away sharply, kicking up a cloud of sand and dust; on its side there was a crude chalk drawing of a penis next to the words YOUR MOTHER—. Overhead the skies were rich and low and black, pregnant with moisture. It had been like this for some days; it had not rained in a long time, but now there was a storm coming. Everyone wanted rain.

In truth it did not surprise Adam that the soldiers had come. All month there had been signs hinting at some impending disaster, but only he seemed to see them. For weeks beforehand the seas had been rough, the ground trembling with just the slightest suggestion of an earthquake. One night Adam was awakened from his sleep by such a tremor, and when he went to the door and looked outside the coconut trees were swaying sinuously even though there was no wind; the ground felt uncertain beneath his feet and for a while he could not be sure that it wasn't he who was swaying rather than the trees. The ginger-and-white cat that spent its days bounding across the grass roof in search of mice and lizards began to creep slowly along, as if suddenly it had become old and unsteady, until one morning Adam found it dead on the sand, its neck twisted awkwardly at an angle, its face looking up towards the sky.

Then there was the incident in town. An old man had cycled from his village in the hills, looking to buy some rice from the Chinese merchant. He'd just come back from the Hajj, he said; the pilgrimage is an honour but it isn't cheap. The crops had not been good all year; the dry season had been too long, and now there was no food left. He asked for credit, but the merchant refused point-blank. Last year there was a plague of rats, he said, this year there is a drought. Next year there will be an earthquake and the year after there will be floods. There is always something on this shit-hole of an island. No one has any money, everyone in town will tell you the same thing. Prices are high, but it's no one's fault: if you don't have cash there's nothing anyone can do for you. So the old man went to the pawnshop with his wife's ring, a small gemstone that might have been amber, set in a thin band of silver. The Chinese pawnbroker peered at it through an eyeglass for a few seconds before handing it back. A fake, he said,

shrugging, a cheap fake. An argument ensued, a scuffle; insults of a personal, and no doubt racial, nature were exchanged. Later that evening, when the hot heavy night had descended, someone – it is not clear who – splashed kerosene on the doors of the pawnshop and took a match to it. The traditional wooden houses of this island (of which not many survive) burn easily, and within half an hour it was engulfed in flames. There were no survivors. The Chinese shops stayed closed for three days; no one could buy anything. Suddenly there were fist-fights all over town. Communists were arriving from the mainland to capitalise on the unrest, everyone said. Gangs of youths roamed the streets armed with machetes and daubing graffiti on houses. *Commies DIE. Foreigners Chinese go to hel.*

It was like an article from the newspapers played out for real, the static images rising from the newsprint and coming to life before Adam's very eyes. The charred timber remains of burnt-out buildings, the blood-red paint on walls. The empty streets. Adam knew that there were troubles elsewhere in Indonesia. He had heard there was a revolution of some sort – not like the ones in France or Russia or China which he had read about, but something fuzzier and more indistinct, where no one was quite sure what needed to be overthrown, or what to be kept. But those were problems that belonged to Java and Sumatra – at the other end of this country of islands strung out across the sea like seaweed on the shore. That was what everyone thought. Only Adam knew that they were not safe.

Karl had refused to do anything. He did not once consider leaving.

'But –' Adam tried to protest. He read the newspapers and listened to the radio, and he knew that things were happening all across the archipelago.

'Why should we?'

'Because of your … because we are, I mean, you are *different*.' Even as he spoke he knew what the response would be.

'I am as Indonesian as anyone else on this island. My passport says so. Skin colour has nothing to do with it, I've always told you that. And if the police come for me I'll tell them the same thing. I have committed no crime; I'm just like everyone else.'

And so they had stayed. They had stayed, and the soldiers had come. Adam had been right all along; he knew the soldiers would come for them. He had imagined himself being in jail with Karl in Surabaya or somewhere else on the mainland, maybe even Jakarta, but now he was alone. It was the first time in his life he had been alone – the first time in *this* life at least.

He waited in the bushes long after the truck had gone. He didn't know what he was waiting for but he waited anyway, squatting with his backside nearly touching the ground, his knees pulled up to his chin. When it was nearly dark and the sea breeze started up again he walked back to the house and sat on the veranda. He sat and he waited until it was properly night, until he could see nothing but the silhouettes of the trees against the deep blankness of the sea beyond, and he felt calmer.

Night falls quickly in these islands, and once it arrives you can see nothing. If you light a lamp it will illuminate a small space around you quite perfectly, but beyond this pool of watery brilliance there is nothing. The hills, the scrubby forests, rocky shoreline, the beaches of black sand – they become indistinguishable, they cease to exist as independent forms. And so, sitting motionless in the dark, only his shallow breaths reveal that Adam is still there, still waiting.

2

This is Adam. He came to live in this house when he was five years old. Now he is sixteen and he has no memory of his life before he came here.

Sometimes he wakes with a start – not from any nightmare, but from an uncomfortable sensation that he is staring into a huge empty space, something resembling a yawning bottomless well, and that he is engulfed by its vastness. It is at this point that he wakes up, for he cannot bear this great emptiness. Scenes of his childhood do not come back to him, not even when he closes his eyes and tries to recreate them in his mind's eye. In those moments between awakeness and sleep, when he has laid his head on his pillow, he tries to let his mind drift, hoping that on this night his past life will finally burst through the cracks and fill his dreams like warm swirling floodwater, thick with memories. It never happens, though, and his nights are clear and completely dreamless.

Occasionally – very occasionally – he has glimpses of a single image, something that flickers dimly for a few seconds and then fades away again: black moss on a bare concrete wall, splinters of wood on the legs of a desk, the ceiling of a long dark room, a piece of canvas, a tabletop riddled with the pinpricks of wormholes that seem to form the very surface of the table so that when he runs his fingers over them he feels only holes, nothing solid. There are some noises too. Rain clattering on a zinc roof like nails in a giant tin can. And a curious sort of murmuring, a monotonous hum of low voices half-whispering, half-talking. All he can discern are the sibilant s's or sometimes sh's, like a

chorus of hushing. These sounds take place in a big room, something like a dormitory, which, needless to say, Adam cannot visualise. And once in a while, when he is doing something perfectly ordinary – cycling into town or feeding the chickens or swimming over the reefs looking at the remains of the shipwrecks – a single word will light up brilliantly in his head, just for an instant, like a flashbulb. Shell. Easter. Snow. He will know, instantly, that this word has come from his past life in the orphanage.

But these fragments of words and images never mesh together to form anything bigger or more intricate; they remain bits of broken mosaic that mean very little now to Adam. There are never any people nor faces nor bodies, nor even animals in his memories, if you can call them memories.

There have been times in the past when this lack of recollection has been very frustrating for Adam. A few years ago, when his pubescent hormones made him angry and confused and a bit crazy, he wanted to find out about his birth family. He accused Karl of withholding information, of taking away his former life, of shielding him from the truth. Whenever visitors asked him what his name was he replied, 'My name is Adam and I have no surname.' At the time he enjoyed Karl's silence and inability to respond; the smile on Karl's face would set and he would not speak, and the guests would pretend to laugh, to find this funny. But Adam realises that he was wrong to have done that, and it is he who is embarrassed whenever he remembers this awkward period in his life. There were no secrets to be found out, he knows that now. Life had to be lived in the present, Adam had learnt.

And this is what he tells himself, sitting on the steps of the porch of this dark and newly lonely house. When he first came to this place he had to learn how to live in an alien environment. Now he must re-learn how to do so. Looking into the house, the inside of which seems strange and distant once more, Adam tries to remember his first days here, how Past detached itself from Present and very quickly ceased to be relevant. Ten, eleven years – it was not so long ago. If he could remember how it happened then, maybe he could replicate it.

The whole of Adam's life began to take shape the day Karl brought him here from the orphanage. Images sharpened, smells became pungent, emotions articulated themselves and the murky darkness of his past began to recede, slowly, into the distance.

Like a pet in a new home, Adam did not venture far from his room for the first few days (much later, Karl would indeed liken Adam's early appearance to that of a hatchling, or a newborn kitten, which Adam did not like, but only because he knew it was true). There was too much to take in, too much that was alien and unconnected with what he had known before. The continuous crackling of the wireless; the distant voices speaking in languages he did not understand. The colourful spines of enormous books. The bizarre gadgets scattered around the house (things which he would soon learn were entirely prosaic – a typewriter or a pair of binoculars – but which at that time seemed surreal, even threatening). And above all, this foreign man who walked with a slight limp and seemed as wary of Adam as Adam was of him. He did not dare come too close to Adam, and although he smiled in a gentle manner Adam sensed an awkwardness in his regard, almost as if he was scared of Adam. Three times a day he left Adam's food for him on the table next to the bed. 'Thank you, sir,' Adam would say as the man retreated, leaving him alone to contemplate his new surroundings.

One day this man (who was called Karl, Adam learnt) hesitated as he placed Adam's dinner on the little square table. The smell of peppery vegetable broth filled the room and made Adam feel hungry. Karl said, 'Please don't call me sir. Call me *father*.' And he left the room, even more swiftly than usual, as if terrified of what he had just said.

Ridiculous, thought Adam. He could not think of this man as his father; he *would* not do so. He looked so strange, unlike anyone Adam had ever seen before – a character out of some far-fetched myth: fair hair that was almost the same colour as his skin, eyes of an indistinct hue (sometimes green, sometimes grey, always translucent, like a mineral brought to life), a nose that seemed unreasonably and bizarrely triangular and cheeks that had a pink blush to them.

These were features born of a cold climate, Adam knew, even then. He dismissed the thought and began to eat. No, Karl was *not* his father.

For long stretches during those early days, Adam would sit cross-legged on his bed, his back resting against the wall, and listen to the unfamiliar noises of this new house: to Karl's footsteps padding gently on the floorboards; to the sound of music coming from the living room (he could not remember ever having listened to music before – certainly not music like this, so dense and foreign his ears could not process it). He lay in bed and listened to the insistent mewing of the cat which sat watching him from the top of the cupboard; and he listened, above all, to the distant, hypnotic washing of the waves on the rocks that lulled him to sleep.

He understood why he was here. He understood, too, that he was one of the lucky ones. He had been taken away to start a better life here. But at this point in time he did not feel lucky, nor did he really know what *a better life* would entail.

As he drifted off to sleep he wondered if he missed the orphanage, and wondered if it was this that made him sad. But he experienced no nostalgia or longing; instead he found that his recollections of the orphanage were already thick and hazy, opaque in his mind's eye. Lying in bed listening to the constant wash of the waves he began to realise that the sadness he felt would not last forever; it was a different kind of sadness from anything he might have experienced previously. Somehow, he knew that in this new house, with this frightened, frightening man, he could overcome these sensations of sorrow. He had much to fear in this new life, but fear was no longer something huge and undefined and terrifying. It was something he could master. He knew that now. And so he would fall asleep. He slept a lot during those first days.

Eventually he began to explore the house, timidly at first, venturing from his room only when he could hear that Karl had gone out. As his fear of the objects in the house subsided he began to pull books from the shelves and look at the pictures. He could not read (that would come soon afterwards) but he spent much time looking at pictures of lakes and forests that he knew were far away in cold countries, for the

trees and hills did not look anything like the ones he saw around him. The fair-haired children in these pictures wore nice thick clothes and looked strong-boned and happy, unlike the children Adam had known, who had not been very happy. They had been skinny, like Adam himself, and constantly tired, and some of the smaller ones had distended stomachs even though they had nothing to eat. Maybe it was easy to be happy if you had nice clothes and food and parents, Adam thought; maybe it would be easy for him to be happy from now on. He liked these pictures because they made him feel that he was like these children and not like the ones in the orphanage. These healthy European children looked like immature versions of Karl, and as Adam watched Karl working in the yard outside, he could imagine Karl skating on frozen ponds or walking in pine forests; and Adam realised that Karl, too, was a long way from home.

Adam also found books with pictures of pictures – paintings of women who looked almost like local women, but not quite: they were fleshier and their eyes were brighter, not tinged with jaundice or cataracts. They wore flowers behind their ears and looked straight at Adam, as if questioning him: Where was he from? Was he one of them, or something else? He did not like these pictures so much.

Gradually he allowed Karl to read to him. They would sit on the narrow cane sofa in the last light of the afternoon, in the hour before dusk took hold of the island, and Karl would read magical stories from across the islands of Indonesia. Adam learnt about brave little Biwar who killed a terrifying dragon; about the ungrateful Si Tanggang, who left his fishing village and rose from humble roots (such as *ours*, Karl had said) to become rich and famous, and finally refused to acknowledge his poor mother; and about the beautiful Lara Djonggrang, turned to stone by the covetous Bandung after she had tricked her way out of marrying him. As Karl read these stories Adam would gaze out at the retreating tide; the waves were always flat at this hour, barely a ripple, and pools of calm water would begin to form in the recesses of the reef. He liked the stories – he can remember each one to this day – but most of all he wished that Karl would read him stories about those fair-skinned children who were full of laughter. In their world people

were not turned into statues or animals, and night demons were not called upon to take sides in ancient feuds. It was safer over there, he thought.

But still, he was lucky to be where he was. He knew he should not ask for anything else.

Adam also discovered music, played on the record player which he soon learnt to operate. The small box was made of chocolate-brown wood on the outside, light-coloured wood on the inside, and Adam would lift its lid and select (purely at random) six records which he would stack carefully on the tiny mast that rose from the platter. Every piece of music made him realise how devoid of it his life had been before he came to this house. As he listened to a woman's lilting voice or a jolly melody played by a trumpet, he tried to remember if the children at the orphanage had ever sung the folk tunes that Karl often hummed, but he could recall nothing: a blanket of silence would fall over his memories, and suddenly the landscape of his past would become still and colourless, as if mist had drifted in from the sea on one of those cool days after rain when you can see nothing, just the faint outline of trees here and there.

Sometimes Karl would put his arm around Adam and squeeze his shoulders – a brief, warm hug to praise him for having chosen the records and starting up the player; he would see the edges of Karl's eyes pinched into fine wrinkles by a smile and he would feel better, as though he had done something good and new and surprising. He had never known that he was capable of causing happiness.

Adam cannot recall the precise moment when he began to think of Karl as his father and not as some alien with skin the colour of dry sand and freckles on his face and arms. But he suspects that it took him a mere few weeks to ease into his new world, one in which this white man was no longer a foreigner but someone who was always present, who made Adam feel that this place was safe and unchanging and unconnected to the past.

My name is Adam de Willigen, he would say to himself during those first months, for it comforted him to do so. He would repeat the words aloud because he loved the sound and the rhythm they created;

he loved contorting his lips into unfamiliar shapes in order to say them. It soothed him to hear his own voice too, and gradually he stopped thinking about what his surname might once have been. Nowadays whenever he hears his name he thinks, Adam de Willigen sounds just right.

Goede avond, mijn naam is Adam de Willigen. You see? He can speak Dutch too. Only rudimentary expressions, however, because Karl is opposed to the speaking of Dutch in this house. He believes that it is the language of oppression and that Adam should not grow up absorbing the culture of the country that colonised his own. 'We are independent now,' he explained, 'we need our own culture.' English was their compromise – Karl deemed it 'useful to know' – and Adam had daily lessons in it. On the rare occasions they had European visitors, English was the lingua franca, and on these occasions Adam surprised himself by feeling quite at ease speaking the language. His fascination for Dutch, however, continued for a very long time, his curiosity made stronger by the fact that Karl resolutely refused to speak it. Once, they received unexpected visitors, a Dutch couple who were fleeing their home in Flores and trying to make their way back to Holland. They had heard of Karl and his house when they arrived on the island and knew they would find a safe place to stay for a few nights while they arranged their passage back to Jakarta and beyond. They arrived with a single suitcase, looking sunburnt and dusty. Karl welcomed them courteously and surrendered his own room to them, but for two whole days there was a strained silence, for the man spoke little Indonesian (he had learnt only the unhelpful dialect of the Ngada of Flores) and his wife could speak none at all, save a few words of instruction to the cook before mealtimes. When they spoke Dutch it thrilled Adam to hear the sound of the rich, rasping words, but Karl responded briskly in English or else ignored them altogether. So that's what it sounds like, Adam thought, and all of a sudden the individual words and short phrases he had learnt from looking at the Dutch books on the shelves began to make sense. He was upset by Karl's refusal to speak Dutch and by his refusal to be more hospitable. Adam did not understand why Karl could not be friends with these

people, for they were just like Karl. In those days he did not yet understand that Home was not necessarily where you were born, or even where you grew up, but something else entirely, something fragile that could exist anywhere in the world. Back then Adam was merely angry with Karl because he did not understand this, and many other things.

The night before the couple left to take the ferry, Adam saw the woman sitting alone on her bed, folding clothes and arranging them into her open suitcase. She smiled when she saw Adam and said, 'Come.' Adam sat with her while she continued packing her belongings into the case. A pile of thin cotton shirts lay next to her, and Adam watched as she picked them up one by one and folded them carefully before rearranging them into the case. They were tiny, made for an infant, and decorated with pale pink-and-red flowers. She began to speak, very softly, in Dutch, even though Adam couldn't respond. As she spoke Adam thought of those healthy blond children in the picture books; somehow he knew that she was speaking of children. When she finished she touched his cheek very lightly and stroked his hair. She said something and shook her head; her smile was weak. 'No understand?' she said in Indonesian. She was right, Adam could not understand. He said, *'Onthaal aan mijn huis.'* He had seen the words in a book and thought that he knew roughly what it meant. She broke into a deep, warm laugh. 'Thank you, Adam de Willigen,' she said, wiping her eyes. 'Thank you.'

These scenes from his Present Life are re-enacted in his mind's eye whenever he wishes. He is able to recall them with absolute clarity, the details as sharp and true as the day he witnessed them; he enjoys the power he wields over these memories, his ability to control them and carry them with him wherever he goes, whether walking in the ricefields or swimming in the sea. Even now, as he walks in the dark from the porch to the bedroom (he does not have to put on any lights – he knows this house too well), he finds that every episode in his life in this single-storey cement-and-timber dwelling can be summoned at will.

From time to time he still attempts to conjure up something from his time at the orphanage, to piece together the fragments that float

in his head; but nothing materialises and he feels immediately chastened – he should never have been so foolish. He knows that, however hard he tries, the first five years of his life will continue to elude him, that he should stop trying and simply let go. And yet, now and then, he cannot resist the temptation. It stays with him like a splinter embedded deep in his skin, which niggles him from time to time but is otherwise invisible, as if it does not exist at all. And when that tingle begins he has to reach for it and scratch it, even though it will unearth nothing. In moments of quiet and solitude, such as this – stretched out on his bed, alone and frightened – he will sometimes delve into that store of emptiness.

Why does he do it?

Because amidst the fogginess of his non-memory there is one lonely certainty, one person whom he knows did exist, and it is this that lures him back.

Adam had a brother. His name was Johan.

The only problem is that Adam cannot remember the slightest thing about him, not even his face.