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# Abyssinian Chronicles

MOSES ISEGAWA

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**ACCLAIM FOR MOSES ISEGAWA'S  
ABYSSINIAN CHRONICLES**

“Epic, sprawling, brimming with life—and death, Moses Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles* blasts open the tidy borders of the conventional first novel and redraws the literary map to reveal a whole new world.... Eloquent, harrowing, and compulsively readable.”

—Francine Prose, *Elle*

“The first richly imaginative treatment of contemporary Uganda in fiction.... It is in parts haunting, and grippingly good.”

—*The Hartford Courant*

“There are few first novelists who write with the assurance and authority of Isegawa. This is a young writer who will command attention from the literary world for many years to come.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“As Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* was for modern India, *Abyssinian Chronicles* will likely prove to be a breakthrough book for Uganda.”

—*Time Out New York*

“Isegawa’s style is an intriguing and at times baffling mixture of exuberance on the one hand, and, on the other, a hard, journalistic realism, which dramatises its scornful insights in language rarely less than elegant.”

—*The Independent* (London)

“Black Americans should read Isegawa not only as a great storyteller in the African tradition but as a great textbook writer of the struggle for personal freedom in the face of a society fractured by the slavery of colonialism. All Americans should read him—frankly, for the same reason.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Overall, one of the most impressive works of fiction to have ever come out of Africa.

A spectacular debut performance.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“Bewitching.... *Abyssinian Chronicles* is, in every sense, a big book, exploding with big themes and a rich cast of colourful characters.... A funny, gripping, angry epic.”

—*The Observer* (London)

“Very few novels have its exuberance; still fewer hit their marks with Isegawa’s assurance and poise.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“One of the most sensitive and encompassing portraits of a modern African society to date. At this novel’s conclusion, the lingering question concerns what more its gifted author might have to tell us.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement*



MOSES ISEGAWA

## **ABYSSINIAN CHRONICLES**

Moses Isegawa was born in Kampala, Uganda. In 1990, he left Uganda for the Netherlands and is now a Dutch citizen. This is his first novel.



# ABYSSINIAN CHRONICLES

MOSES ISEGAWA

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## MAIN CHARACTERS

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- Mugezi*: narrator and principal character  
*Serenity*: Mugezi's father (*also called Sere or Mpanama*)  
*Padlock*: Mugezi's mother (*real name Nakkazi, also called Virgin or Sr. Peter*)  
*Grandpa*: Serenity's father  
*Grandma*: Grandpa's sister, Serenity's aunt  
*Tiida*: Serenity's eldest sister (*also called Miss Sunlight Soap*)  
*Dr. Saif Ssali*: Tiida's husband  
*Nakatu*: Serenity's other sister  
*Hajj Ali*: Nakatu's second husband  
*Kawayida*: Serenity's half-brother  
*Lwandeka*: Padlock's youngest sister  
*Kasawo*: Padlock's other sister  
*Mbale*: Padlock's eldest brother  
*Kasiko*: Serenity's concubine  
*Nakibuka*: Padlock's aunt, Serenity's mistress  
*Hajj Gimbi*: Serenity and Padlock's neighbor in Kampala  
*Lusanani*: Hajj Gimbi's youngest wife, Mugezi's lover in Kampala  
*Loverboy*: client of Padlock's (*real name Mbaziira*)  
*Cane*: Mugezi's friend in primary school  
*Lwendo*: Mugezi's friend at the seminary  
*Fr. Kaanders*: librarian at the seminary  
*Fr. Mindi*: treasurer at the seminary  
*Fr. Lageau*: Fr. Mindi's successor  
*Jo Nakabiri*: Mugezi's lover in Kampala  
*Eva and Magdelein*: Mugezi's lovers in Holland

## AFRICAN WORDS

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*boubou*: a kind of wide garment for a man (West Africa)

*busuti*: a kind of woman's garment (central Uganda)

*kandooya*: torture method whereby one's elbows are tied together behind one's back

*Katonda wange!*: My God!

*kibanda*: black market

*Kibanda Boys*: Kampala mafia

*mamba*: poisonous snake

*matooke*: plantain

*mpanama*: hydrocele

*mtuba*: an African tree

*muko*: brother-in-law

*muteego*: AIDS

*nagana*: a tropical cattle disease

*panga*: large cleaver

*posho*: corn bread

*shamba*: plantation

# **BOOK ONE**

## ... 1971: VILLAGE DAYS

THREE FINAL IMAGES flashed across Serenity's mind as he disappeared into the jaws of the colossal crocodile: a rotting buffalo with rivers of maggots and armies of flies emanating from its cavities; the aunt of his missing wife, who was also his longtime lover; and the mysterious woman who had cured his childhood obsession with tall women. The few survivors of my father's childhood years remembered that up until the age of seven, he would run up to every tall woman he saw passing by and, in a gentle voice trembling with unspeakable expectation, say, "Welcome home, Ma. You were gone so long I was afraid you would never return." Taken by surprise, the woman would smile, pat him on the head, and watch him wring his hands before letting him know that he had once again made a mistake. The women in his father's homestead, assisted by some of the villagers, tried to frighten him into quitting by saying that one day he would run into a ghost disguised as a tall woman, which would take him away and hide him in a very deep hole in the ground. They could have tried milking water from a stone with better results. Serenity, a wooden expression on his face, just carried on running up to tall women and getting disappointed by them.

Until one hot afternoon in 1940 when he ran up to a woman who neither smiled nor patted him on the head; without even looking at him, she took him by the shoulders and pushed him away. This mysterious curer of his obsession won herself an eternal place in his heart. He never ran up to tall women again, and he would not talk about it, not even when Grandma, his only paternal aunt, promised to buy him sweets. He coiled into his inner cocoon, from whose depths he rejected all efforts at consolation. A smooth, self-contained indifference descended on his face so totally that he won himself the name Serenity, shortened to "Sere."

Serenity's mother, the woman who in his mind had metamorphosed into all those strange tall women, had abandoned him when he was three, ostensibly to go to the distant shops beyond Mpande Hill where big purchases were made. She never returned. She also left behind two girls, both older than Serenity, who adjusted to her absence with great equanimity and could not bear his obsession with tall women.

In an ideal situation, Serenity should have come first—everyone wanted a son for the up-and-coming subcounty chief Grandpa was at the time—but girls kept arriving, two dying soon after birth in circumstances reeking of maternal desperation. By the time Serenity was born, his mother had decided to leave. Everyone expected her to

have another son as a backup, for an only son was a candle in a storm. The pressure reached a new peak when it became known that she was pregnant again. Speculation was rife: Would it be a boy or a girl, would it live or die, was it Grandpa's or did it belong to the man she was deeply in love with? Before anybody could find out the truth, she left. But her luck did not hold—three months into her new life, her uterus burst, and she bled to death on the way to the hospital, her life emptying into the backseat of a rotten Morris Minor.

As time passed, Serenity crawled deeper into his cocoon, avoiding his aunts, his cousins, and his mother's replacements, who he felt hated him for being the heir apparent to his father's estate and the miles of fertile clan land it included. The birth of Uncle Kawayida, his half-brother by a Muslim woman his father was seeing on the side, did not lessen Serenity's estrangement. Kawayida, due to the circumstances of his birth, posed little threat to Serenity's position, and thus attitudes remained unchanged. To escape the phantoms which galloped in his head and the contaminated air in his father's compound, Serenity roamed the surrounding villages. He spent a lot of time at the home of the Fiddler, a man with large feet, a large laugh and sharp onion breath who serenaded Grandpa on the weekends when he was home.

Serenity could not get over the way the Fiddler walked with legs wide apart. It would have been very impolite to ask the man why he walked that way, and Serenity feared that if he asked his children, they would tell their father, who in turn would report him to his father for punishment. Consequently, he turned to his aunt with the question "Why does the Fiddler have breasts between his legs?"

"Who said the Fiddler had breasts between his legs?"

"Have you never noticed the way he walks?"

"How does he walk?"

"With legs spread wide apart as if he were carrying two jackfruits under his tunic." He then gave a demonstration, very exaggerated, of the way the man walked.

"It is very funny, but I have never noticed it," Grandma said, humoring him the way adults did to get out of a sticky situation.

"How could you not have noticed? He has large breasts between his legs."

"The Fiddler has no breasts between his legs. He is ill. He has got *mpanama*."

Serenity's sisters somehow got wind of the duckwalk and could not resist telling their village peers and schoolmates about the Fiddler, his breasts, and the little clown who portrayed him in silly mimics. As a result, Serenity got the nickname *Mpanama*, a ghastly sounding word used out of adult hearing that dropped from gleeful lips with the wet slap of dung hitting hard ground from the rear of a half-constipated cow. Once again he was cured of an obsession, though he continued with his visits to the poor man's home, faintly hoping to catch him pissing or, better still, squatting on the latrine, for he really wanted to see if the Fiddler's breasts were as large and smooth as those of the women in his father's homestead.

Apart from his secret fantasy, Serenity also wanted to learn how to play the fiddle. He could not get over the one-stringed moans, groans, sighs, screams, grunts and other peculiar sounds the Fiddler conjured, squeezed and rubbed out of the little instrument. The Fiddler's visits formed the high point of his week, and the music was the only thing he listened to with pleasure uncoerced or influenced by adults or peers. He wanted to learn how to hold the instrument proudly against his shoulder and tune the

string with a knot of wax. His aim was to charm strange women into his magic circle and keep them rooted there for as long as he wanted. In school he was known for his beautiful pencil drawings of fiddles. His wish never came true.

Grandpa, a Catholic, was unseated and replaced by a Protestant rival in a contest marred by religious sectarianism. As the fifties ended, his power gone and the heart taken out of his life, Grandpa's homestead shrivelled as relatives, friends and hangers-on left one by one or in little groups. The women dropped out of his life, and the Fiddler took his talent elsewhere. By the time I was the age Serenity was when he ran up to strange tall women, Grandpa was living alone, sharing his house with the occasional visitor, relative or woman, a few rats, spiders and the odd snake that sloughed behind his heaps of coffee sacks.

Grandma, his only surviving sister, was also living alone, three football fields away. Serenity's bachelor house, a trim little thing standing on land donated by both Grandpa and Grandma, separated the two homesteads. It was a sleepy little house, now and then kicked from the slumber of disintegration, swept and cleaned to accommodate a visitor, or just to limit the damage wreaked by termites and other destroyers. It only came alive when Serenity's sisters or Uncle Kawayida visited and hurricane lamps washed it with golden beams. The voices and laughter made the rafters quiver, and the smoke from the open fire wound long spectacular threads round the roof and touched off distant memories.

The exodus of wives, relatives, friends and hangers-on had left a big howling lacuna which wrapped the homestead in webs of glorious nostalgia. The fifties and sixties were spanned by that nostalgia and provided us with stories pickled, polished and garnished by memory. Every migrant soul was now a compact little ghost captured in words, invoked from the lacuna by the oracle of Grandpa and Grandma and made to inject doses of old life into our present truncated existence. The hegemony of lacuna'd ghosts in their stories was broken only when the characters, like resurrected souls, braved the dangerous slopes of Mpande Hill and the treacherous papyrus swamps to come and state their case in person. The Fiddler never returned, but was most prevalent because he was immortalized by the poor rendition of his songs Grandpa showered on his homestead as he shaved, as he toured his coffee plantation—the *shamba*—to supervise work, as he reminisced in the shade and as he wondered how to get a young girl with an old soul to see him through his last days.

Late in the sixties, no one's visit was awaited more eagerly than Uncle Kawayida's: the man was a wizard, a gold mine full of fascinating and sometimes horrifying tales, a fantastic storyteller endowed with a rare patience who answered my often tedious questions with a cheerful, reassuring face. When he stayed away too long, I became restless and worked out the days and months he was most likely to come. On such days I would climb into the branches of my favorite tree, the tallest jackfruit in the three homesteads, and fix my eyes on the distant Mpande ("Manhood") Hill. If I was lucky, I would see his motorbike, a blue-bellied eagle encased in silver flashes, glide down the notoriously steep slope and disappear into the umbrella-shaped greenery of the papyrus swamp below. With "Uncle Kawayida, Uncle Kawayida!" on my tongue, I would speed down the tree—dry, sharp sticks pricking my skin, the sweet hypnotic

smell of jackfruit in my nose—and rush into Grandma’s courtyard to break the good news.

Uncle Kawayida was a meter reader for the Ugandan National Energy Board. His job was to visit people’s homes and take readings used to calculate the monthly energy bills customers had to pay. Courtesy of his travels and, I believe, of his large imagination, he told stories of women who used sugared promises to try to bribe him into under-reading their meters, and of men who tried to impede his work by accusing him of flirting with their wives. He amazed us with stories of people living in congested urban squalor, ten to a little house, with parents fucking in the vicinity of children who cleverly feigned sleep. He spoke of women who committed garage abortions by slipping stiff leaf stalks or bike spokes up the condemned birth canals of unfaithful wives or sneaky daughters, an occasional fatal or near-fatal hemorrhage the price for puncturing the wrong things. He told tales of men who beat their wives with electric cables, sticks, boots or fists and afterward ordered them to serve their dinner or to fuck them, and of women who drank and fought like men, cracked open men’s heads with beer bottles and subsequently emptied their pockets. In those places were wild children who did not go to school and got into a life of crime: stealing, robbing, mugging, sometimes even killing people. In the same places lived rich people’s children who went to school in big cars, laughed at teachers and wrote love letters in class. There were also people who could hardly make ends meet, who ate one meager meal a day after doing backbreaking work. In that world roamed fantastic football hooligans who fought their rivals in epic battles in which rocks, piss bottles, shit parcels, clubs and even bullets were exchanged to the point where police had to intervene with tear gas or bullets. There were men and women, devout churchgoing Catholics and Protestants, who worshipped the Devil and offered blood sacrifices during nocturnal orgies; and people of different religious denominations who deposited featherless, headless hens, dead lizards, frog entrails and other ritual garbage in other people’s yards, outside shopfronts or at road junctions. He once told us of a skinless lamb left to roam the streets encumbered with unknown curses and armies of greedy flies. I remembered the story of a man who kept three sisters: he started with the one he had married, progressed to her next younger sister and ended up with their youngest sister, who needed accommodation near a reputable school. As with all his stories, the last one was open-ended, game to all kinds of endings and interpretations.

When Uncle Kawayida came, I made myself indispensable around the house, making sure that I was not sent away on long errands. When I suspected that he had some particularly juicy information about a relative or someone we knew and that Grandpa was going to send me away, I would voluntarily go off to play, double back, hide behind the kitchen and listen. Many times, however, Grandpa and Grandma were so enthralled that they forgot all about me, or just ignored my existence and intelligence, and I would listen to the story as if the future of the entire village depended on it.

Uncle Kawayida pricked my imagination so much that I wanted to verify some of his stories by visiting the places and the characters he talked about. For example, what sort of parents did whatever they did in bed with children snoring, falsely, on the floor? Were they Catholics? If not, did Protestantism, Islam or traditional religion allow such behavior? Were such people educated and well-bred? Unable to tame my

raging curiosities and doubts, I begged Uncle Kawayida to take me with him, at least just once, but each time he refused, bolstered by Grandma and Grandpa. Most annoying were their weak excuses. Later I found out the real reason why: Kawayida's wife, a woman from a very large, polygamous household, was not on good terms with my mother, who came from a very Catholic family, and none of the trio was ready to risk Padlock's anger by sending her son to the house of a person she disliked and disapproved of so much.

The tension between their wives had driven the brothers apart. My mother despised Kawayida's wife's background because she believed there was no morality and no salvation in a household with thirty girls and ten boys born of so many "whore" mothers in a climate of perpetual sin. Kawayida's wife despised Padlock for the poverty of her parental home, and for her guava-switch-wielding propensities. A cousin called her disciplinary activities "beating children like drums." She also accused Padlock of standing in the way of Kawayida's progress by stopping Serenity from helping his brother to get loans from the bank and able individuals. Kawayida's ambition was to own a business and make and spend his own money, but he lacked capital and needed his brother's recommendation. The truth was that Serenity, who had helped Kawayida get his current job, did not believe in retail business, hated it for personal reasons, and would not help anyone get into it. Because he had remained very laconic about his stand, Serenity's position got interpreted ad libitum by each of the warring parties.

Nowadays, the brothers met at weddings, funerals and when Muhammad Ali fights took place. Uncle Kawayida conveyed to us the details, wreathed in the sheen of his saliva, redolent with tricks of his imagination, on the wings of the blue-bellied eagle. Grandma listened to the endless accounts with the same vague irony that had entertained Serenity's revelations about the Fiddler's burden, and the same sparing laugh that had rewarded the famous duck walk. Kawayida took us through Ali's flashy arsenal of jabs, hooks and wiggles with the same appetite that animated his usual stories. Behind his back Grandma called him "Ali," a name which never stuck because, apart from us, only one family, the Stefanos, knew of Muhammad Ali's exploits, and they could not see the appeal of this lanky substitute.

Aunt Tiida, Serenity's eldest sister, was the most unpopular, albeit imposing, visitor we received all year round. Her visits put everyone on edge, especially when she first arrived. In order to blunt the arrogance of his eldest child, Grandpa would greet her with generous, half-mocking cheer. Grandma, a great believer in countering vanity with candor, would receive her with an indifference which diminished only in direct proportion to Tiida's arrogance. Both strategies had their limitations, for as soon as Tiida opened her bags, she made sure that things were done her own way. I always had the impression that we were being visited by a government health inspector in mufti.

Tiida was like a member of an endangered species threatened with extinction, her life made more precarious by this inevitable contact with our backward village environment. She never came unannounced. Days before her arrival, Serenity's house

had to be aired all day, swept, and the bed doused in insecticide. I had to combat the prolific spiders, dismantling their nets, puncturing their webs, destroying their eggs. I broke the veins the termites built on doors and windows. I scraped bat shit from the floor and windowsills with a knife. It was my duty to smoke the latrine with heaps of dry banana leaves, a duty I detested most of all because it reminded me of my first proper thrashing at the hands of Padlock.

During these visits, Aunt Tiida bathed four times a day, and I had to make sure that there was enough water for all her ablutions. This was a record performance in a place where one bath a day was enough, and where some went through the seven days of the week with only foot, armpit and groin washes. Little wonder that the villagers called her Miss Sunlight Soap or Miss Etiquette. Tiida was not happy with the first name because of its insinuation of odor, and also because the only other fanatic bather from the village, an air hostess, was only called Miss Aeroplane.

Unlike Miss Aeroplane, Tiida was very elegant, very attractive and very articulate, and despite her fussiness, I felt proud when I was with her. If the Virgin Mary had been black, it would not have been hard for Tiida to claim that they were sisters. At night I saw her wrapped in frothy muslin clouds, her white nightie blowing softly in the breeze, her long slim fingers intertwined below the belly, her regal grooved neck bent in the direction where dreams merged with reality. But my awe did not last long: it became dented courtesy of Grandma and Grandpa's after-lunch conversations. Tiida had not been a virgin when she married. She had lost her virginity to a married village friend. This man's daughter was famous for sitting with her legs open and letting passersby see her exposed genitalia. Grandpa was angry with the man for jeopardizing his daughter's marriage chances. I remember that Aunt Tiida once asked me whether this man was still married to the same ugly wife. I said yes and she laughed victoriously. I wanted to tell her that I knew her secret, but those were adult matters—I could not insinuate with impunity. As I boiled her bathwater, the smoke getting into my eyes, I would try to imagine what she had looked like at the time when men had rejected her. How did she fight back? I could see her telling a man that he'd refused her because he was impotent and not because he preferred virgins.

It was logical that Tiida got married to a doctor who, we found out years later, was only a medical assistant. Grandma had her on the run on a number of occasions. "He is not a real doctor, is he?" she would prod for the umpteenth time. "He could not prescribe a cure for my sugar."

"You and your sugar," Tiida, chafed, would fire back. "It is as if everyone was going to put it in tea and drink it."

"Don't get angry, Tiida. You are the one who started it. Why did you lie to us that he was a doctor?"

"A medical assistant with his experience is as good as any doctor. My man can do everything a doctor does. He also wears an immaculate white gown. Who can tell the difference?"

"You mean *you* cannot tell the difference!"

"My man is progressive, admit it. He is always looking for chances to improve his lot. That is more than you can say for many men who married into this family."

"I know, but still we would have accepted him as he was. He did not have to pull that snobbish stuff on us."

“He is always looking for the edge.”

“Let him not try too hard.” Grandma relented and then laughed. “Poor devil, how can you be married to Miss Sunlight Soap and not look for edges?”

“Don’t start, Aunt,” Tiida said uneasily.

The strange thing about Tiida’s visits was that by the time they ended and she departed in a cloud of bottled perfume, I got the feeling that we had lost something.

This time a year passed without hearing any news from Tiida. Grandpa missed her, not least because she resembled her mother very much. She was the only daughter who, in his mind, reflected the nebulous shades of a love that had ended with so many unanswered questions. He talked about her almost every day. It was Uncle Kawayida who solved the riddle of the missing Tiida. Dr. Ssali, Tiida’s husband, had converted from Protestantism to Islam! In the sixties, this was considered downward mobility, because in the political scheme of things, the Christians were on top, with the Protestants having the lion’s share of the cake, the Catholics the hyena’s, and the Muslims the vulture’s scrawny pickings. With the phantoms of his defeat at the hands of a Protestant rival reawakened by this bizarre conversion, Grandpa fumed, “Impossible. How could he do that?” He got the feeling that his daughter was going to tumble down into the abyss. After all, the doctor now had license to marry four wives, and Tiida was most likely going to have to contend with younger co-wives, jealousy and witchcraft. If it had been in his power, Grandpa would have precipitated her divorce. Tiida did not seem the type of woman to share a husband. The whole conversion nonsense did not seem the kind of phenomenon that would occur in her world. Loyalty was not a quality I associated with her, and I still expected to see her gliding down Mpande Hill in a car loaded with her rich leather bags. We were all wrong: Tiida remained at her husband’s side.

If the convert had any plans of taking on three more wives, in the near future or thereafter, it was the least of his worries. His biggest concern was the ulcerated circumcision wound which made his penis very painful and very hard to handle. Banal functions like urination had become a living hell, an ordeal to psych himself up for. Long and pendulous, the penis rubbed against the cloth of his skirt or sometimes of his wrapper; thread bit into the wound, and hairs somehow got embedded in the crust. Consequently, sitting, sleeping and standing became endless torture sessions. Sometimes a scab formed round the edges of the ulcer, covering the terrible pink and angry red, giving him surges of hope, and then, devil of devils, he would get a nocturnal erection and the scab would burst. Painful urination would begin all over again, thread would bite into the wound and caustic medicine would bring tears to his eyes. He shaved every other day, and the itching of incipient pubic hair added to the ulcer made his hours trickle with murderous sloth. He had himself tested for blood poisoning and various blood cancers, but the doctors returned negative results each time. He was as healthy as a bull. The doctors ascribed his ulcer to age, although he was only in his forties.

On top of all that came the flies. Tiida went out one morning and let out the scream

of her life. The two avocado trees behind the house were full of flies, large green things the size of coffee beans. She dropped the basinful of soaked clothes in her hands on the ground. Ssali came to the door and his skin crawled as if it were being peeled off. It was as if a goat or a pig were rotting at the foot of the trees. The connotation of putrescence made Tiida vomit onto the clothes. Ssali, who had been about to make her go find out what was happening, decided to do it himself. With legs spread wide apart, he hobbled to the foot of the trees. There he found a large heap of chicken entrails.

Normally, the flies would have clustered on the entrails, and maybe on the lower reaches of the trees, but now they were high up in the leaves. With a sick feeling in his stomach, Ssali returned to his bedroom and sent for a laborer. The man dug a pit and buried the entrails. The flies lingered on for a day and disappeared with the dusk.

Four days later Tiida saw the flies again. This time a heap of dog entrails was buried, and the flies went away. A week later another heap of dog entrails was buried. This was very worrying to Ssali: somebody was sacrificing dogs to bring disaster on his house at such a difficult moment in his life. Goat and sheep were understandable sacrifices, but dogs! With blood-caked dog heads left on the heap of entrails to make sure that he knew which animals were being killed! This was a warning, a naked act of terrorism. And it could only be coming from one person: the mother of the man who had sold him the land on which he had built his house.

He had bought the land five years before with the intention of raising cattle. At the time he did not know of the disputes inside the land-seller's family. The purchase had been aboveboard, with no bribery or any form of corruption involved. It was only after the purchase had been ratified that the troubles surfaced. The mother of the seller appeared, with claims that her son had stolen the title deed and changed his father's will to suit his greedy ends. The claims did not stand in court, and the woman had threatened to fight to her death to regain the land. That she had chosen this particular moment to strike back irked the convalescent very much. Did she think that he was too enervated to fight back? That he would just surrender or lie down and die? He sent her a delegation asking for peace, but she dismissed it out of hand, offended that he could even think her capable of sacrificing dogs to the gods of terrorism.

Ssali employed a guard to look out for whoever brought the heads and the entrails, but in vain. The terrorist struck with impunity. Some said it was a curse, a punishment meted out by a dead relative to avenge Ssali's defection to Allah. The convert was at his wits' end. He tried running away for weeks. But the heads kept coming, and the ulcer kept crusting and bursting. The mere presence of flies and their insinuation of filth made his medical mind sick. Putrescence! When he had devoted his entire life to its eradication!

As if that was not enough, some tongues put religious significance on the curse of the dog heads and the flies. They said that the heads and the entrails and the flies had started coming seven, others said six, days after his rebirth as Saif Amir Ssali. Seven was a cursed number among many peoples. Three sixes was the number of the Antichrist. Now he had become something between a walking curse and a demon, and he deserved the terrorism! As a former Christian he could not entirely scoff at these nebulae, but to make sure he was safe, he invited some sheikhs and two famous imams to offer prayers and sacrifice. Two days afterward, a new head and a heap of entrails

appeared. This was a concerted effort to drive him out of his house and off the land.

At the same time a new fear struck him: the possibility of Tiida's leaving him. He agonized about asking her what she thought about the situation. He could, however, not broach the subject directly for fear of annoying her by appearing to doubt her. What if it was all in his mind and she had never contemplated quitting? How long would she put up with this? A woman who bathed four times a day staying in a house besieged by entrails and dogs' heads? It seemed unthinkable.

It was well known that older converts were more susceptible to penile cancer, everyone told him, as if it helped. He wondered how long would this go on. His children were now being severely teased by schoolmates using words like "fly-man," "sick penis" and "skirt-daddy."

I was impressed by the siege of flies. It must have made Ssali feel like he had shit on him all day. What a turnaround! He had visited us twice looking like a real doctor. On both occasions he consented to take tea, but I had to wash the cups three times in very warm water and a mountain of soap suds which climbed up to my elbows. He sat there watching me and Grandma, saying nothing, bored by everything and everyone. He was wearing gray trousers, a white shirt, a blue tie and very black, very shiny shoes. He had a gold watch which cut the air like a yellow blade when he raised his hand to feel his neatly parted hair. Tiida was beside herself with pride. She was all over the place directing things, looking at him now and then as if seeking tacit approval or covert gratitude. I must have dried the tray six times, the spoons four times. There was always a little speck or a minute drop of wet left. In a bid to mend fences, she said, "Dr. Ssali has got such a delicate stomach!" I figured she was now saying, "He has got such a delicate penis! It should never have got cut in the first place."

Fourteen months after his circumcision, the skies cleared and the ulcer healed. But that was not the end of his troubles. The prize he had been anxiously awaiting, and indeed one of the things which had kept his sanity intact, was denied him. The representative of the Conversion Committee informed him that he was no longer eligible for a brand-new Peugeot because he had not fulfilled all the stipulations of the contract. His fellow converts, he was told, had spent the past year campaigning all over the country, addressing people in mosques and schools, at public grounds and community centers, fighting for the spread of Islam. He, on the other hand, had missed all that, spending his time in hospital wards getting treatment. The Committee was going to pay his medical bills and offer him a consolation prize: a 125cc scooter.

"You gave your word, sheikh," he pleaded.

"Look at this mountain of bills! You broke your word too, and never participated in the jihad."

"It wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't ours either. Do you want to go on a solo tour now?"

"I have to go back to work."

"Don't forget your skullcap, you have to wear it everywhere you go. Be proud of your new religion, Saif."

The story ended with Ssali collecting his prize: an overtly feminine Italian-made Vespa scooter. I awaited more twists to the tale, but Uncle Kawayida never mentioned