

By Tayeb Saleh Short story published, originally in Arabic in 1964, in a collection of stories "The Wedding of Zein". The action of this story, as with many of the stories written by El Tayeb Salih, occurs in the fictional setting of the village of Wad Hamid, which is in Central Sudan. This short story is told through the eyes of a young boy as he experiences an epiphany, a critical moment of awareness that perhaps marks his passage from a child to an adult. The boy's love and admiration for his grandfather is diminished as the boy listens to his grandfather describe Masood and observes the treatment of the man, for whom the young boy feels a likeness. I must have been very young at the time. While I don't remember exactly how old I was, I do remember that when people saw me with my grandfather they would pat me on the head and give my cheek a pinch – things they didn't do to my grandfather. The strange thing was that I never used to go out with my father, rather it was my grandfather who would take me with him wherever he went, except for the mornings, when I would go to the mosque to learn the Koran. The mosque, the river, and the fields – these were the landmarks in our life. While most of the children of my age grumbled at having to go to the mosque to learn the Koran, I used to love it. The reason was, no doubt, that I was quick at learning by heart and the Sheik always asked me to stand up and recite the Chapter of the Merciful whenever we had visitors, who would pat me on my head and cheek just as people did when they saw me with my grandfather. Yes, I used to love the mosque, and I loved the river, too. Directly we finished our Koran reading in the morning I would throw down my wooden slate and dart off, quick as a genie, to my mother, hurriedly swallow down my breakfast, and run off for a plunge in the river. When tired of swimming about, I would sit on the bank and gaze at the strip of water that wound away eastwards, and hid behind a thick wood of acacia trees. I loved to give rein to my imagination and picture myself a tribe of giants living behind that wood, a people tall and thin with white beards and sharp noses, like my grandfather. Before my grandfather ever replied to my many questions, he would rub the tip of his nose with his forefinger; as for his beard, it was soft and luxuriant and as white as cotton wool – never in my life have I seen anything of a purer whiteness or greater beauty. My grandfather must also have been extremely tall, for I never saw anyone in the whole area address him without having him look up at him, nor did I see him enter a house without having to bend so low that I was put in mind of the way the river wound round behind the wood of acacia trees. I loved him and would imagine myself, when I grew to be a man, tall and slender like him, walking along with great strides. I believe I was his favorite grandchild: no wonder, for my cousins were a stupid bunch and I – so they say – was an intelligent child. I used to know when my grandfather wanted me to laugh, when to be silent; also I would remember the times for his prayers and would bring him his prayer rug and fill the ewer for his ablutions without his having to ask me. When he had nothing else to do he enjoyed listening to me reciting to him from the Koran in a lilting voice, and I could tell from his face that he was moved. One day I asked him about our neighbour Masood. I said to my grandfather: I fancy you don't like our neighbour Masood? To which he answered, having rubbed the tip of his nose: He's an indolent man and I don't like such people. I said to him: What's an indolent man? My grandfather lowered his head for a moment; then, looking across the wide expanse of field, he said: Do you see it stretching out from the edge of the desert up to the Nile bank? A hundred feddans. Do you see all those date palms? And those trees – sant, acacia, and sayal? All this fell into Masood's lap, was inherited by him from his

father. Taking advantage of the silence that had descended on my grandfather, I turned my gaze from him to the vast area defined by words. I don't care, I told myself, who owns those date palms, those trees or this black, cracked earth – all I know is that it's the arena for my dreams and my playground. My grandfather then continued: Yes, my boy, forty years ago all this belonged to Masood – two-thirds of it is now mine. This was news for me, for I had imagined that the land had belonged to my grandfather ever since God's Creation. I didn't own a single feddan when I first set foot in this village. Masood was then the owner of all these riches. The position had changed now, though, and I think that before Allah calls me to Him I shall have bought the remaining third as well."Then I remembered his three wives, his shabby appearance, his lame donkey and its dilapidated saddle, his galabia with the torn sleeves.<http://www.arabworldbooks.com/Readers2004/articles/handfulofdates.html>We'll be harvesting the dates today, said Masood