Gabriella Ghermandi

In the shade of the shameless branches laden with bright red flowers

We are stories
of stories in history.
Corners or centres
of the warp and woof
of the fabric of the world.
Folds within
the weave of events.
We are the stories,
we are history.

In the end, grandma Berechtì – grandma Blessing – was right.

When I look at her in the photo hanging in the living room she smiles at me, still ready to say, "listen to me, my experiences, I've already lived so long in this world, for you and all the ones who will come after you, and if you can pass on my experiences and then yours along with mine…!"

"Nothing, I tell you, nothing of what happens to us, whether wonderful or catastrophic, do we keep wholly or wholly throw away. And in the terrible things that happen there is always some piece of the cloth, some fold in the fabric, that we will want to hold on to."

She said this while I, we, everyone, were crying and plotting against the regime.

And again, "The things of man are not made to be unstable forever, sooner or later they adjust themselves and find their own equilibrium!"

Nowadays I often find myself thinking over these words, and I discover a bit of cloth, a small fold from those years, that I hold on to with a happy smile.

Something from that catastrophic time that I'm not throwing away is my bicycle.

Ah, yes!

I learned to ride my bike by pedalling down dirt tracks, back streets, market alleys, between stalls and piles of vegetables heaped on the ground, determined as only children are, dead set on learning, without letting myself be daunted by falls, skinned knees, bumps and bruises....

I learned to ride during the years of the regime, thanks to the regime.

But maybe it would be better to tell you the whole story from the very beginning.

It was September, the smiling month of September when the great rains come to an end.

One day there was a strike, the first in Ethiopia's history. Taxi and lorry drivers occupied the city streets with their vehicles to protest against the rise in the price of petrol.

The next day, suddenly, without any warning, we found ourselves trying to keep afloat in the unfamiliar waters of a new government. Before we could understand the meaning of the word, before we could roll it correctly on our tongue, we were struck by the coup, which turned our whole world upside down.

My family and I spent the first few days in hiding inside our house, listening to the machine-gun shots and peeking out from the veranda at the armoured cars driving up and down the streets all around our neighbourhood.

My father and grandma Berechtì were the only ones who weren't afraid of the guerrilla warfare just beyond our front gate, because they had been through the big war! While the shooting was taking place outside, grandma Berechtì walked back and forth in the living room going about her usual business, and at every machine-gun shot she repeated, "*Wai! Ghena ai dechmoun iziatom?*" (What! aren't these people fed up yet?)

The strange routine of the dictatorship, which lasted 17 years, was established in only a few weeks. When some sort of normality was set up and people had grown used to the new leaders' faces, we once again returned to the pattern of everyday life.

And then came the Thursday evening when my father got up from the table to perform an action that belonged to the realm of habit: he went over to turn on the TV.

Before the 'upset', every Thursday night my large family – all except my grandma, who wasn't very interested in the box, as she called it – used to gather about on the sofas to watch the next episode of *The Fugitive*.

That night my father turned the knob and the TV came on, but instead of images the screen was lit up by black and white stripes and an irritating noise invaded the room.

My father went behind the TV set, trying again and again to push the knobs, move the wires of the antenna..., but nothing happened; "kisch kischschsch", the television continued its grating sound, rasping against our ears.

The curfew had already begun, so we couldn't go onto the roof to try to adjust the antenna, nor could we go to Atò Iemane's, the only other person besides ourselves in the neighbourhood who had a TV.

"Well! No TV today!" said my father. "Tomorrow! Tomorrow we'll fix the antenna and we'll watch *Bonanza*. You'll see, it's sure to be the antenna"; at which my grandmother intervened, with her hands on her hips and a challenging note in her voice: "Let's hope it's broken forever. With all the stories we could tell each other, here we are spending our time staring at the box with empty eyes..., turning ourselves into idiots, bah! It's unbelievable."

"But grandma" – said my cousin Daniel, defending television, "they tell good stories, with lots of images."

"I can tell you good stories, too, if you want! I know as many as you could wish for and you could ask me questions if you didn't understand, think about that, and I would answer, something the box certainly wouldn't do!"

"Come on grandma, the TV is a different thing altogether, it's better."

And she, moving off into another room, "Huh! The past is behind us and the future is coming, full of trouble! Watching a box instead of talking to each other!"

But the TV had stopped working, and it wasn't because of the antenna. It was the new government's politics: no more American television series. And, again because of the new government's policy, luxury goods also disappeared, as did imported cars, private houses, private property, landowners... and, to the sorrow of us children, anything that could pollute the minds of the young. No more toys, cookies, candies, or chocolates....

In the gaps left free by everything that was being cancelled even from the simple world of ordinary conversation new words were being inserted.

"Imperialist and capitalist": what had to be definitively eliminated from the country, in every possible shape and form.

"The people's well-being": what had to be created or strengthened.

"Ideology": a big word, smelling of ideas, reasoning, squaring off and hard lines.

"Protecting ideology": soldiers on every corner of the city, neighbourhood control centres, check points and curfew from seven p.m. to six a.m.

And when the new words came to life, becoming part of our everyday phrases and expressions, the "Allies of Ideology" arrived: Russians, Bulgarians and multicoloured Cubans poured into our country. Last of all came "our allies' merchandise" and the hot, dusty Ethiopian lowlands were full of men's bicycles from Mao's China.

"But the things of man are not made to be forever unstable, sooner or later they adjust themselves and find their own equilibrium!" Grandma used to say. The stitching that held things together was too tight even for the new government and soon, despite the Protection of Ideology, it grew looser and we were able to find a fold in it for ourselves. Threads with which to weave a piece of cloth, arranging its woof and warp according to our own desires.

My father found it difficult to bear the claustrophobic climate of the city suffocated by the curfew, the continual military checks, the night-time roundups, so my grandmother sent out a call for help to all the members of her family and even to eee… Abba Alem (the father of the world).

One day Gebremeskel, a cousin of my mother's, arrived at our door. Crossing the courtyard, he waved a piece of paper with a satisfied look on his face and shouted, "Berechtì, Berechtì." As soon as he was in front of my grandmother he put the piece of paper in her hands, saying, "Here you are" and she, "Dummy, you know I can't read," so he took the paper back and began reading.

It said: "The provisional military government of the People's Socialist Republic grants permission to Mr...., to his only automobile and all the members of his family that can fit in said automobile, to pass the first road block and continue as far as the second, where...." In short, we could go to Nazareth, a small town a hundred km. south of Addis Abeba, to relax and detoxify ourselves from the capital city's climate of repression.

Nazareth, or Adama, as it had been renamed by the regime, was in the lowlands. Being so flat, it had been invaded by the famous bicycles from Mao's China, to my great joy. Every corner of every street was full of them. Bicycles and government-appointed hirers waited calmly in the shade of a tree for customers to arrive.

I repeat – to my joy!

Ah! Bicycles!

As far back as I could remember they had been one of my great passions. The kind of passion that gallops through your blood, blurring your sense of danger.

At one point there had been one in our house that belonged to my brother. I'd never learnt to ride it though I'd tried time and time again.

Every afternoon, trying not to be noticed, I'd go down into the courtyard to Aberrah, our guard, who had received the order *"be biskilitu ai agsuat"* ("don't help her with the bicycle"), an order that I managed to convince him not to obey, with the same trick, every day... "Aberrah," I would say, "How does it go? Right turn!" and I would turn left; "Left turn!" and I would turn right. And, his hands in his hair, he would begin to shout: "*Ere! Ere! Ere*! *Indezi adelem icco*"– It was too much for him, it was something that went against his nature, those mixed-up orders had to be put right at once: "No! That's not right. Left turn means turn to the left and right turn means to the right!" "And then?" I would spur him on. "And then: forward, march! at ease! attention… !" and when he had correctly performed a series of military commands, he would start up with the usual litany: "Eh! We're only young once. When I think of how I ended up with the Italian soldiers... . Have I ever told you? I'd gone to Jimma, on foot. When I arrived in the town, I saw the Captain in front of the coach station, with a suitcase by his side. He said something to me in Italian, I didn't understand his words, but I understood his gestures. I went up to him. Communicating by gestures, he asked me to carry his suitcase. I put it on my shoulder and followed him to his house. That's how it all began. At first I was his wife's odd-job man. Ah! Italian women. Lord, how she hollered. 'I made a mistake, pardon ma'am' was a phrase I had to say every day."

Then the story went on to tell about when he was enlisted in Mussolini's army. "That was when I learned to smoke. The sergeant would say, 'have a smoke, Aberrah' – and he would give me cigarettes: *Nazionali* without filters or *Terzilli* or *Indigeno*. Ah! Those were the days! Who knows why I miss them so much, why I miss the Italian army. To think it wasn't even my army, it was the army of the colonizers.

Each time I let him talk until his heart, softened by the emotions the memories called up, opened completely. Then I would give him a honeyed look and ... "Aberrah, would you help me get on the bike" and before he could say a word, "Please, just this once." *"Anci guraghe, ulle be milasishign ti gejignallesh"* ("you bad gurage" – the gurage people are the traders of Ethiopia) "every time, you win me over with your clever tongue. Please, just this once…" he would say, mimicking me. "Every day is your just this once. Well… ok, go and get that dratted piece of tangled iron. But it really is just this once." Then I would run to the shed to get the bicycle out, open the gate in front of the house, prop up the bike and get on while Aberrah held the saddle. When I was in the right position, I would give the command, "let go," and throw myself down the steep slope that started below our gate.

And from behind, all at once mindful of the order he'd been given, he would shout, "Mind now, when you get to the bottom put on the brake this time, else your father will murder me tonight."

But braking wasn't my aim. That whole race was just to allow me to face the challenge of the steep climb that was waiting on the other side of the slope.

Each time my ambition was thwarted. At the bottom of the slope the bike would stop short and throw me into the shop of Alem the hairdresser, my legs sprawling amongst the jars and chairs, my hands and knees bleeding and the bike outside the door. Finally, one night in March, I heard noises. I used to get confused by the mixture of Italian and Ethiopian festivities, I never knew whether it was one or the other we were celebrating. Thinking it was Santa Claus, arriving with his gifts, I kept quiet. But it was thieves, and they stole my cousin's blankets hanging on the line, and the bicycle.

After some days, malicious rumours went round the neighbourhood that the "thieves" were friends of the hairdresser's who was fed up with my daily visit, and the theft of the blankets was a mask to hide the real reason for the break in: to save Alem's flourishing business.

In any case, whatever the reason was, I was left without a bicycle until the memorable Saturday when, once we had got past the second military check-point, the small city in the lowlands lay spread out before our eyes, sending ripples of surprise up and down my veins.

Nazareth, or Adama, as the new government had renamed it, was a cross-roads of three tarmac streets amidst a sea of dust raised this way and that by the Gari or taxi trucks. Behind the three streets were dirt roads, small markets, fruit-shake stalls spilling over with fragrant green pawpaws, and then the Franco Hotel, formerly the property of an Italian – a capitalist – nationalized now by the government, and the Warush Hotel, where we lived, which was made up of a central building surrounded by a row of rooms buried under gaily-coloured bouganvilleas, and two towering acacias laden with bright red flowers, whose shameless branches reached out over the garden wall throwing their shadow onto the other side.

And Ghrma, the bicycle hirer, with his halo of uncombed hair, a wooden comb stuck in the middle of the halo and a brilliant, white-toothed smile, standing under the shade of the shameless branches laden with bright red flowers. And beyond, in the sunlight, with their shiny black leather saddles, the bicycles. All rigorously green and black, and all rigorously men's bicycles.

In front of them was a large clearing bordered by a row of pepper trees, my training ground.

Persuading my parents to hire a bike for me for an hour every day wasn't that hard. I put into practice a trick that I'd learnt worked well: insist. They almost always got tired before I did.

With Ghrma there was no problem. He adopted me in less time than it takes to say it, and under the sweltering sun of the Ethiopian lowlands he taught me to ride, holding onto the saddle and running behind me for the whole of the hour.

Where I come from, everything is done as a community and even my cycling lesson was a community event and had its spectators – the hotel waiters.

Comfortably seated in the shade where Ghrma had stationed himself, they shouted out advice and slowed down the occasional passing car, "Go slow, there's a little girl who's learning to ride a bike."

There was a great deal of bustle surrounding my lesson. Every passer-by, whether on foot, on horseback or in a car, felt obliged to make a comment. "Huh! now we have to see a girl doing boys' things!"; or "Look what progress, thanks to the new government girls ride around like boys!"

Ghrma's rapid marathons alongside my bicycle bore positive fruits, and before the month was up I'd learnt to keep my balance by pedalling fast round the clearing, under the attentive eyes of Ghrma and the Warush waiters.

At that point I could have launched out to explore the corners and byways of Nazareth, but there was still a problem. The bicycle was too high. I could hardly reach the pedal when it was down all the way to the bottom, even if I pressed my groin against the crossbar and the tip of my toes on the pedal. Should I have to stop suddenly or get off, I wouldn't be able to.

This worry held me back for a while, and so I stayed in the clearing and counted the stones, but as I grew more confident about my balance and speed an irresistible curiosity and desire to explore began to torment me, like a fly that keeps you from sleeping, and the worrisome voice that had been holding me back grew weaker.

Good teacher that he was, Ghrma followed my inner impulses, and when he thought I was ready he unveiled a secret to me, "You'll be able to ride around here! This is the old Italian neighbourhood and all the houses have low garden walls. If you need to, you can use them to stop yourself." And with these words, he almost pushed me out of the protected space of the clearing.

My first push on the pedal shot a thrill up my spine. I turned right to go along the Warush garden wall. The thrill grew keener. I kept on pedalling…

It was a dirt street full of holes and carts driving around wildly. I kept on going, as my teacher had taught me to. I rode all round the hotel wall and showed up on the opposite side of the clearing. Covered in sweat!

Ghrma was waiting for me. "Well?"

"I was scared."

"Where there is fear, there is also courage! Tomorrow you'll go farther!"

Every day I added another stretch of road, discovering low walls and other places I could use for sudden stops, but my muscles were rigidly tense, trying to control every movement. I couldn't relax, and I only paid attention to myself and my bicycle and to keeping it under control.

The move beyond this, which finally allowed me to turn my eyes outwards, happened suddenly.

I was riding as always close to the Warush wall. A bouganvillea appeared on the other side. On its orange flowers, reaching up towards the sun, fluttered clouds of white butterflies. A flurry of them came down toward me. Without thinking, I stretched out my hand to touch them and went on pedalling. When I realized I was riding with only one hand, a thrill of excitement shook me from head to foot. I went on riding, holding on with one hand and looking at the free hand in wonder, reached the clearing and, hand in the air, started shouting, "Ghrma! Ghrma! Look, I've learnt, look! I'm riding with only one hand!" and stopped, throwing myself, bicycle and all, into his arms. His uncombed halo waving, "Brava! Brava!" he rejoiced as he kissed me. "Brava! Brava!" and he went on kissing my cheeks, his halo still waving until the comb fell out onto the ground.

"Brava! Brava!" the waiters said, and our bodies joined together in one enormous hug.

Then Johnson, the oldest waiter, pushed into the tangle and made room for himself. In between the arms of the others, first I saw his forehead appear with seven deep wrinkles in its brown skin; then his grizzled, pomaded hair, pushed back in small waves down to the nape of his neck; and finally his tender eyes, searching for mine before he spoke the words, "I've saved some butter for you, I knew this was the right day, if you come now there are slices of hot bread and strawberry jam…"

"Butter!" I exclaimed, "Yes! Yes, I've put aside a bit of butter."

After lunch, Mekonnen, one of the younger waiters, came to call me. "Ghrma is looking for you." Outside, under the shameless branches, Ghrma and all the waiters were waiting for me. Ghrma picked a small twig of bright red flowers and put it in my hair. "And now you must pay back the favour, to all of us – we taught you and now you … you will be our telalaki," our errand boy.

I felt my heart grow into a smile so big that it flowered on my lips.

Telalaki, telalaki! I would do errands for them all day, without having to pay for hiring the bike.

"Agreed?"

Telalaki! Telalaki!

I nodded so hard the twig fell to the ground, but he picked it up, blew the dust off the red flowers, and put it back in my hair.

Most of my errands were for the cook. Every day he sent me to rummage through the kerefa, kosserath, betsobilia and kororima stalls. Every day he sent me to a market farther away, and one morning, during one of these frequent expeditions, as I turned round after buying white lilies at the flower market for his wife's coffee ceremony, I suddenly found myself in front of a yellow sign hung crookedly over the dusty window of a tiny, almost invisible shop.

Painted on the sign in smudgy black brushstrokes were the words, "All that's left from dot dot dot." The dots stood for capitalism, imperialism.

The sign roused my curiosity, and I went in.

I found myself inside a narrow tunnel, infinitely long and dark, which immediately excited my sense of smell. Sweet stuff, there was a smell of sweet stuff, of ... a smell of ... cookies, and … candies and… and while I was trying to identify the other smells, my sight got used to the dark.

The "All that's left from dot dot dot" was a long, narrow tunnel full of all of God's blessings – little cookies, candies, chocolates, sugared almonds….

I was breathless with wonder.

I went out again, picked up the bike and flew towards the Warush, dropped the bike with Ghrma and ran to my father, "Papàyou'llneverbelieveme Ifoundashopfullofcookiescandiesandchocolate," and I stretched out my hand. Every molecule of my face was shouting as loud as it could. "It's heaven come down to earth" – and he smiled at me, touched, and handed me a few dollars.

I ran back to the shop. I spent half an hour rummaging around to make my choice and in the end I chose a box of delicious English oatmeal cookies. While I was walking out, satisfied, my fingers already busy opening the packet, I found myself in front of another wonder: a cinema.

A cinema that was open and still working and showing films.

And do you know what they were showing? An Italian western, *Per un pugno di dollari*.

I picked up the bike, flew back again to the Warush, left the bike with Ghrma and once again ran to my father.

"And what have you found this time?"

The overload of wonder was so great that I almost stuttered, "A movie-house, a real movie-house, they're showing a western in Italian – *Per un pugno di dollari*." He turned white, "It's a film by Sergio Leone." I stared at him, puzzled. "He's a great director." I stared at him again, still puzzled. "It doesn't matter. Tell mamma that tonight we're going to the cinema."

The socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-Americanist ideology was like liquid poured out in a single jet. It soaked deeply into a small area of the ground where it fell and then spread unevenly into the surrounding area, losing its strength and leaving large gaps as it moved farther away from the soaked area in the middle.

And Nazareth with its little "All that is left from dot dot dot" shop and its cinema was there to prove it.

And the Nazareth cinema?

There would be a lot to say about the Nazareth cinema. The films it showed were always the same. A dozen westerns or so, full of scratches and bubbles, but which were shown in a context that was never the same. That was the real fun, the life that animated the cinema as if another film were being projected.

There were those who participated by taking an active part in the life and adventures of the main character: thunderous applause and shouts of encouragement, advice as to the love story… . There were those who chatted about other things because they'd already seen the movie hundreds of times but still ducked instinctively to avoid the shot whenever a pistol was pointed in their direction. Then there were those who came to occupy the best seats so they could sell them to wealthier spectators at the last minute. There were boys who came to spy on the long-legged girls with seductive eyes and older ones who were already flirting, hidden behind the red velvet curtains. And then there was a constant coming and going of people who had come to look for someone and who came in and went out, accompanied by the usher who lit their way with a small, feeble torch, and shook the curtain as they entered, revealing the young couples hidden behind it, and commenting, each and every time, "My goodness! Your turn has already come! My goodness, how time passes! You're already grown up, too." And then there were stories, stories and yet more stories.

When my father tired of seeing the same films over and over again, I started going to the cinema with grandma Berechtì, whose curiosity had been aroused by my accounts and by my father's expression of disgust, "They make so much noise that even if you've seen a film 20 times, you never understand what's happening and how it ends!"

With her it was even more fun.

The films at the Nazareth cinema were divided into four parts, with tickets that cost less as the film went on. Between one part and the next there was a long pause during which the spectators who had just come in asked the others what had happened up to then, and grandma Berechtì, who loved telling stories, always tried to convince someone that, although it was the same film as last month, this time the story had taken another direction because the camera operator had added something new. Something that had been cut during the previous showing.

And she invented endless stories that captivated the audience, until they were rudely interrupted by the operator shouting through the projection hole: "Berechtì I want to get home before dawn! And you idiots, stop listening to her, the film ends just like all the other times".

And in the end?

After I'd seen the same westerns at the Nazareth time and again, one day the son of signor Iemane arrived in Addis Abeba, out of breath. He'd been sent by his father.

"The TV is back on!" he shouted.

It was Thursday. "Maybe tonight they'll show *The Fugitive*" said my father. That evening, as in times past, my father got up from the dinner table and went over to the TV. He turned the knob while we all waited in trepidation.

Before our wide-open, incredulous eyes, the screen lit up without any stripes or noise. At that point we were convinced that in a few seconds the images of *The Fugitive* would appear, and you can imagine our dismay when instead of the American TV series we found ourselves watching the pirouettes of a Russian gymnast participating in a gymnastics contest.

Unluckily for us, that was the new TV, the TV of the People's Government. Just gymnastics, piano concerts, military parades and political propaganda.

When we all complained that we'd been tricked, my grandmother commented with satisfaction, "Huh! TV! It always belongs to the regime, conceived and created to make you stupid! However I put it you still don't believe me, but that's the way it is. Before we were allied with the Americans and we only had American programs, now we are allied with Russians and we only have Russian programs. Huh! It's all controlled by the regime."

"But you go to the cinema when you're in Nazareth" said Daniel.

"Yes, but that's different, there you have the film but you also have real life. Believe me, children, leave the box alone, it's better to be together, amongst ourselves, and tell each other stories."

Translated by Brenda Porster and Jane Wilkinson