

# Fiction by Nadine Gordimer

## *Tape Measure*

No one of any kind or shape or species can begin to imagine what it's like for me being swirled and twisted around all manner of filthy objects in a horrible current. I, who was used to, knew only, the calm processes of digestion as my milieu. How long will this chaos last (the digestion has its ordained program) and where am I going? Helpless. All I can do is trace back along my length – it is considerable also in the measure of its time – how I began and lived and what has happened to me.

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My beginning is ingestion – yes, sounds strange. But there it is. I might have been ingested on a scrap of lettuce or in a delicacy of raw minced meat known as, I believe, Beefsteak Tartare. Could have got in on a finger licked by my human host after he'd ignored he'd been caressing his dog or cat. Doesn't matter. Once I'd been ingested I knew what to do where I found myself, I gained consciousness; nature is a miracle in the know-how it has provided, ready, in all its millions of varieties of eggs: I hatched from my minute containment that the human eye never could have detected on the lettuce, the raw meat, the finger, and began to grow myself. Segment by segment. Measuredly. That's how my species adapts and maintains itself, advances to feed along one of the most intricately designed passageways in the world. An organic one. Of course, that's connected with perhaps an even more intricate system, the whole business of veins and arteries – bloody; our species has nothing to do with that pulsing about all over in narrow tubes.

My place was warm and smooth-walled, rosy-dark, and down into its convolutions (around thirty coiled feet of it) came, sometimes more regularly than others, always ample, many differ-

ent kinds of nourishment to feed on, silently, unknown and unobserved. An ideal existence: The many forms of life, in particular that of millions of the species of my host who go hungry in the cruel light and cold my darkness protected me from (with the nourishment comes not only what the host eats but intelligence of what he knows of his kind's being and environment) – they would envy one of my kind. No enemy, no predator after you, no rival. Just your own winding length, moving freely, resting sated. The nourishment that arrived so reliably – years and years in my case – was even already broken down for consumption, ready-mashed, you might say, and mixed with sustaining liquids. Sometimes during my long habitation there would be a descent of some potent liquid that roused me pleurably all my length – which, as I've remarked, had become considerable – so that I was lively, so to speak, right down to the last, most recently added segments of myself.

Come to think of it, there were a couple of attempts on my life before the present catastrophe. But they didn't succeed. No! I detected at once, infallibly, some substance aggressive toward me concealed in the nourishment coming down. Didn't touch that delivery. Let it slowly urge its way wherever it was going – in its usual pulsions, just as when I have had my fill; untouched! No thank you. I could wait until the next delivery came down: clean, I could tell. Whatever my host had in mind, then, I was my whole length aware, ahead of him. Yes! Oh, and there was one occurrence that might or might not have had to do with whatever this aggression against my peaceful existence might mean. My home, my length, were suddenly irradiated with some weird seconds-long form of what I'd learnt secondhand from my host must have been light, as if some –

Thing – was briefly enabled to look inside my host. All the wonderful secret storage that was my domain. But did those rays find me? See me? I didn't think so. All was undisturbed, for me, for a long time. I continued to grow myself, perfectly measured segment by segment. Didn't brood upon the brief invasion of my privacy; I have a calm nature, like all my kind. Perhaps I should have thought more about the incident's implication: that thereafter my host knew I was there; the act of ingestion conveys nothing about what's gone down with the scrap of lettuce or the meat: he wouldn't have been aware of my residency until then. But suspected something? How, I'd like to know; I was so discreet.

The gouts of that agreeable strong liquid began to reach me more frequently. No objection on my part! The stuff just made me more active for a while, I had grown to take up a lot of space in my domain, and I have to confess that I would find myself inclined to ripple and knock about a bit. Harmlessly, of course. We don't have voices so I couldn't sing. Then there would follow a really torpid interval of which I'd never remember much when it was over...

A contented, shared life; I knew that my host had always taken what he needed from the nourishment that came on down to me. A just and fair coexistence, I still maintain. And why should I have troubled myself with where the residue was bound for, when both of us had been satisfied?

**O** how I have come to know now!  
How I have come to know!

For what has just happened to me – I can only relive again, again, in all horror, as if it keeps recurring all along me. First there was that period, quite short, when no nourishment or liquid came down at all. My host must have been abstaining.

Then –

The assault of a terrible flood, bitter burning, whipping and pursuing all down and around down into a pitch-black narrow passage filled with stinking filth. I've become part of what is pushing its path there – *that* was where the nourishment was bound for all the years, after the host and I had done with it, a suffocating putrefaction and unbearable effusions.

Jonah was spewed by the whale.

But I – the term for it, I believe – was shat out.

From that cess I've been ejected into what was only a more spacious one, round, hard-surfaced, my segments have never touched against anything like it, in my moist-padded soft home space, and I am tossed along with more and many, many kinds of rottenness, objects, sections of which I sense from my own completeness must be dismembered from organic wholes that one such as myself, who has never before known the outside, only the insides, of existence, cannot name. Battered through this conduit by these forms, all ghostly, lifeless, I think I must somehow die among them – I have the knowledge how to grow but not how to die if, as it seems, that is necessary. And now! Now! The whole putrid torrent had somewhere it was bound for – it discharges (there is a moment's blinding that must be light) and disperses into a volume of liquid inconceivable in terms of the trickles and even gouts that had fed me. Unfathomable: I am swept up in something heady, frothy, exhilarating; down with something that flows me. And I am clean, clean the whole length of me! Ah, to be cleansed of that filth I had never suspected was what the nourishment I shared with my host became when we'd taken our fill of it. Blessed ignorance, all those years I was safe inside . . .

My host. So he knew. This's how he planned to get rid of me. Why? What for? This's how he respected our coexistence, after even sharing with me those gouts of agreeable liquid whose happy effects we must have enjoyed together. It ends up, him driving me out mercilessly, hatefully, with every kind of ordure. Deadly.

**B**ut I'm adapting to this vastness! Can, at least, for a while, I believe. It's not what I was used to and there's no nourishment of my habitude, but I find that my segments, the entire length of me still obeys; I can progress by my normal undulation. Undulating, I'm setting out in an element that also does, I'm setting out for what this powerful liquid vastness is bound for – nature's built into my knowledge that everything has to move somewhere – and maybe there, where this force lands, one of my eggs (we all have a store within us, although we are loners and our fertilization is a secret) will find a housefly carrier and settle on a scrap of lettuce or a fine piece of meat in a Beefsteak Tartare. Ingestion. The whole process shall begin over again. Come to life.

*Tape  
Measure*