VOICES AT THE JUNCTION: A NOVELLA AND STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The stories in *Voices at the Junction* are set in late 20th and early 21st century Kenya, take place within the home and show family conflicts and also discuss political issues. In the novella “Voices,” four first-person narrators present different perspectives on the childlessness and adultery in a family. Chacha refuses to face the fact that he may be responsible for the lack of a child in his marriage; his wife conceives through one moment of adultery with her brother-in-law and she has to decide whether to keep the child or abort. She stays with the pregnancy and leaves the family.

In “Conversing” Mogesi receives a letter written to her husband by another woman, and this leads Mogesi to contemplate the significance of a girl-child vis-à-vis a boy-child. Her two children collaboratively erect a toy house, but this does not fully satisfy Mogesi because in her thinking, the responsibility of construction should be her son’s alone, but the boy happens to suffer from cerebral palsy. “The Lamp” and “The Story” also tackle the symbol of house—Rioba and Nyangi respectively regard the buildings they are in as unsafe and inhibiting.

The political stories, “Counting” and “Deadline,” depict the government as insincere. In the former story the old woman sees the darkness in her hut as the administration—now represented by the census officer—which has intruded into her space and peace. The census exercise is meaningless to her because no benefits have ever come from the past counts. In “Deadline,” Weisiko sees the new I.D. as a rite of passage that will be useful to her, but she is unable to get the card because of her way of telling time and also due to government forces. The walking stick, which is a campaign symbol for Uncle who is a councilor, is like a hook that fishes the citizens to their death.
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Weisiko looked at the sky; today was the final time to register for the new identity card. She sat on a goatskin, her short slender legs stretched full-length. She leaned against the wall outside her grandmother's round, dung-smear hut, and peeled cassava roots that she had harvested from her mother's farm this morning. The knife was sharp, and Weisiko worked quickly as she hummed a song she had heard during the last circumcision season. She briefly moved her feet away from the heat of the sun; she thought she needed to shift to another part of the building.

She stood up, walked a bit from the house, and peered up. She nodded—there was still a lot of time. She used the movement of the sun and the stretch of tree shades to tell what hour it was, and she was always right about this. Later today she would go to Ikerege chief's headquarters to enroll in order to get a new generation I.D., and she did not want to be late.

She picked a little stick, walked back, stood against the smooth wall, and scratched a mark just above her head. She moved two steps from the hut and looked at the point she had indicated. She was rather short, nearly diminutive, but she hoped that this would not be used to deny her the card; after all, she had always had a small body. She put her hand around her leg close by the ankle and was not impressed with the circumference of what she held.

She went back to her work; for now she would remain here. It was quiet everywhere except for some chirping birds around. She resumed singing. After a moment, she heard footsteps from her left.

"You scared me, Grandmother!" Weisiko said.

"You should know the way I walk," her grandmother said. Grandmother adjusted her hold on the walking stick that she had. She pushed back bangles at the wrist. She
walked with a stoop and placed her left hand on the back near the waist. She moved slowly, and her big feet took each step as if she feared that the next one might not reach the ground at all.

"You are only leading a choir and not peeling the cassava," Grandmother said. She released her hand from the back, and stretched herself. There were deep wrinkles round her huge biceps.

"Are you a member of the choir?" Weisiko asked.

"You." She lifted her walking stick and pointed it close to Weisiko's face.

"Grandmother, you want to injure me?"

"I see that even a rat can scare you." She laughed and revealed the gap in the front of her lower teeth. After a moment she said, "Remember that you have to go to the chief's headquarters. Today is the last day to get that new thing."

Weisiko rose, pulled the goatskin from the sunlight, and sat.

"Did you hear what I said?" Grandmother asked.

"I know," Weisiko said. "I still remember."

Such a significant matter as the I.D. must have been broadcast on the radio, and even if Weisiko's family did not listen to one, people in the village had so frequently talked about the card issue that Weisiko could not forget about it. She believed that everyone around knew about it. With the card she would be an important person in the area, and she would carry it everywhere. She would enroll as a voter for the coming elections. She would not bother herself with the presidential race—the candidates were strangers from far off places, whom she had only seen in posters and occasionally heard women mention at the shopping center. While Nairobi people would concern themselves with such aspirants, she would dwell on those competing for parliamentary and civic positions. Her own uncle was vying for a councilor's seat. With the card, she would be present when the contestants came to Ikerege market to buy salt for women, and she would pull her I.D. from the pocket and show it to the candidates and demand to get something too. She would not want the salt—her mother would take that for the family. With the document, she would be a citizen and entitled to what she asked for. She was
not yet eighteen, which was the required age for one to obtain an I.D., but one or two years less would cause no harm since people as old as her already had the card. There would be no problem in just one more person entering the house of citizenship at one year less. She smiled and touched the deep cleft below her nose. Her grandmother always told her that this was the most beautiful part of her body.

Weisiko held the knife more firmly and cut into the cassava. She would have to wash thoroughly before going to register for the new document. She had to look new and neat. At the chief’s Camp her passport size photograph would be taken, and her yellow nylon dress was ready for the occasion. Her father had bought it for her the Christmas vacation before he was arrested and sent to prison. She had washed the cloth yesterday, dried it, and put it below her mattress at the head and therefore “ironed” it. This morning she examined it and was satisfied. She had also shortened and cleaned her hair. An excitement now passed through her—the kind of joy she imagined a bride experienced on her wedding day.

“You'll cut yourself,” her grandmother said. “That knife is as sharp as the circumciser’s razor.” She moved closer to the hut and stood below the eave, to Weisiko’s left. “This type of heat deceives.” The old woman considered the sky. “I’m not sure that this temperature can bring rain.” She peered with her round eyes that shone like the moon, which reminded Weisiko of her own father.

Weisiko had been sad that her father was absent at her circumcision two years ago. She had left the Church in order to go through the rite. She pitied her friend, Boke, who was not initiated. The pastor preached that circumcised women had difficulties at childbirth, but Weisiko had not seen such problems; instead, she saw initiated women bear healthy babies daily. The government seemed to support the pastor and at the baraza, the chief had announced that the administration had prohibited the ceremony for girls, but he sent his own daughters to live among relatives in Tanzania and undergo the practice. Weisiko’s grandmother told her that nobody would marry a woman who was not circumcised. Maybe an uninitiated woman from another tribe, but not a Kuria
uncircumcised woman. The uncircumcised were ridiculed and Weisiko felt sorry for them for missing such a great occasion. When else would they get presents?

"You will hurt yourself," her grandmother warned again.

"A little injury is nothing," Weisiko said.

"You're joking, girl. You have not witnessed the sight of blood."

Weisiko even increased her speed. She had shed a lot of blood at circumcision, but had taken this bravely and the women escorts sang that she was now mature and that men should bring bride price to her father.

"What time is it, Grandmother?"

"How can I tell?" The old woman blinked. "I never went to school." She moved her foot briefly and seemed to be stepping harder on the ground with the big toe that curved away from the others.

"Grandmother, tell me. I do not want to be late!"

When Weisiko's father was around, Weisiko could tell the time since their radio was almost always on. With no one to buy batteries, she had not seen the radio for a long while; perhaps it was now rusty and abandoned in her younger brother's room. With an ID, she could earn enough to purchase batteries, and the equipment would tell her the precise minute when she wanted to know it.

She stood up and walked some distance away from the hut. She gazed at the sun. "It's about midday," she said. "There are still plenty of hours."

"Where is your mother?" her grandmother asked.

"I don't know. Go round to her house and find out. You should know where she is—I left you together when I went to dig out the cassava."

Besides her grandmother's hut and her mother's house there was the kitchen and a building where one of Weisiko's paternal uncles stayed with Weisiko's younger brothers. The huts were joined by a cattle enclosure.

Weisiko walked back to the goatskin. "Grandmother, why don't you sit?"

"Have you given me a chair?" Grandmother asked, and laughed and showed off the space in her gums.
Weisiko started working. It seemed that the old woman did not want to rest. Weisiko had spent most of her life with her grandmother. For some years after being weaned, she shared the same bed with Grandmother, and now they slept in the same room in this hut that she now leaned on. Weisiko had continued to wet the bed—her grandmother’s bed—long beyond the age at which most of her friends ceased. One night she had urinated an amount that could have filled an ocean, her grandmother said. The old woman said that she felt something crawl from her legs to the neck, and when she woke up Weisiko’s bladder was still releasing more waste. Her grandmother slowly stepped down to let the girl relieve herself—she did not interrupt Weisiko, as this would anger the girl’s ancestors. Grandmother lit the candle and sat in a stool nearby and soon she heard drops fall on the floor; the urine had overpowered the two-inch mattress and when Weisiko finished, there was a pool under the wooden bed. Feeling uncomfortable in the wet place, Weisiko woke up, and jumped from the beddings. Weisiko blinked at the candlelight and when Grandmother asked her why she had moved, she said that she was going outside for a short call. Her grandmother escorted her, and Weisiko released more urine, stretched her hands, and yawned. They returned inside and Grandmother sat back in her chair. Weisiko pulled her usual stool and sat next to Grandmother.

“Go back to bed,” her grandmother had told her.

Weisiko did not move.

“I said you climb back.”

Again, Weisiko sat still. “Grandmother, that place has water,” Weisiko said, pretending that she had not been responsible for putting the “water” there.

“Who poured it there?”

“I don’t know,” Weisiko said, and looked at the ground.

Her grandmother gripped her and pinched her thighs, and she burst out crying. The old woman cursed and warned her against inviting night-runners from the dark with her howls. For some time after, Weisiko did not share the bed with the elder woman; rather, her grandmother spread a cowhide on the floor for Weisiko to sleep on. She trained Weisiko and after about six months, the girl resumed her place in bed, but her
grandmother continued to occasionally wake her up to take her out to relieve herself. No man would court someone who urinated in her bedding, the old woman persistently told her. I do not want to be wooed, Weisiko retorted. She finally stopped wetting the bed when she was thirteen.

It was her grandmother who had shown Weisiko how to collect firewood and how to balance a pot of water on the head and in most cases, her grandmother knew things about Weisiko before her own mother did. Two years ago, Grandmother had found her standing by the path to the river and whispering into the ear of a boy whom she admired. Weisiko told her that he was her friend who helped her with math problems in school, and was surprised when the old woman would not tolerate anything about a math classmate. The teenager had all along thought that grandmothers understood these things and did not object to them. Grandmother told her to tell her schoolmate to come home and declare what he wanted; “furthermore, I do not think that you are ready for that kind of friendship,” Grandmother said. Weisiko was happy that nothing bad had occurred between her and this colleague, as had happened to some girls in Ikerege village who had allowed boys to touch their bodies, tickle them, and ruin their lives.

“Grandmother, have you enrolled to get the new I.D?” Weisiko now asked.

The old woman seemed not to have heard Weisiko’s question; she moved slightly away from the hut and stared ahead. She picked up a small stone and threw it at hens that walked on the cassava Weisiko had spread out on a cowhide to dry some distance away. The pebble missed its target, and the chickens continued pecking at the crop. “Do you think that we have harvested for you?” Grandmother shouted. She got another stone and this time hit a white pullet. The others jumped away. “Look at you!” She laughed and licked her lips. “I got you!” She walked back to the eave and murmured something.

“Grandmother, what are you saying?”

“Take care of the knife,” her grandmother said.

“I said that you need an ID!”

“Who told you that I do not have one?”
Weisiko giggled. She was sure that if her grandmother had obtained the new generation card, she would have already displayed it to Weisiko; in fact, Weisiko would have been the first other person to see it. Only a few of those who applied in the early days of the registration period six months ago had the I.D. One could hold the item, which was much smaller than the old generation one, in one’s fist. It would last longer because the material used to make it was tougher. According to the government, the old generation card had to be renewed every ten years as the administration estimated that that was the duration the item would survive. On the other hand, the modern one would have no life limit. Weisiko was excited that she would have the more durable—the everlasting—advanced one as her first and only document. She would never talk of having had the ancient one that, despite what the authorities claimed, went to pieces just after two years. Like the latest ID, she would be endless.

A tiny fly now buzzed at her ear. Surely it was not a mosquito at this time of the day, she thought. She put the knife aside, set her hands and waited. She swung her arms and the hands met. She opened the palms; there was nothing. She clicked her tongue. After a moment, the fly passed in front of her face. She was ready again. This insect was wasting her time, she thought. She lifted her hands, but immediately relaxed, bent, and wiped her face with her dress. Maybe her sweat attracted it. She sat upright, alert, timing.

Her grandmother burst into loud laughter. “You’ll not kill that thing,” Grandmother said. “It’s not foolish.”

“Grandmother, stop howling like a mad woman. Prepare yourself and go register.” “What are you saying?” her grandmother said. “Look at me. Look at me.” Weisiko did not face her, but instead intently waited for the insect; however, the fly was nowhere—it likely had sensed death.

“Look at me!” the old woman changed her tone, and Weisiko could not ignore her anymore and turned her head. Grandmother had undone the chest buttons of her dress and out hung a dirty old purse. She slowly unzipped the purse, pulled her first generation I.D., and leisurely waved it at Weisiko as a child would show off a piece of bread that she
refused to share with her playmate. Weisiko smiled and went back to her waiting for the fly.

“Stop chasing small things and watch here,” Grandmother said. “Now, look here.” She enticingly lowered her voice as if inviting Weisiko to take part in some conspiracy. Because the two had shared many secrets before, Weisiko paid attention now. The old woman stood right beside Weisiko and she looked larger than Weisiko knew her to be. She dangled the shriveled card.

Weisiko grimaced at the rag-like thing, quickly relaxed her look, and laughed. She stood up and blurted, “Everyone, come and see! My grandmother has become mad!” She turned back and looked at her grandmother, who had now stopped brandishing the I.D. Nevertheless, the old woman seemed unmoved by the shouting and the talk about insanity.

“It’s you who is abnormal,” Grandmother said. “You who seek new papers are unsound.”

“That one will not be accepted,” Weisiko said and sneezed.

“Keep coughing,” the other said. “You’ll kill yourself over this thing that you have never even set your eyes on.”

Weisiko calmed down. “That is not what is required, Grandmother.” She sneezed again and held her mouth. “No, not that!” She shook her head. “Not that torn piece.” With the back of her hand, she wiped tears of laughter and coughing that trickled down her cheeks. “I’m talking about a new card; a card that will enable you vote for your M.P, councilor …”

“I’ll use this one,” Grandmother said.

Weisiko jumped and attempted to grab it from the old woman.

“You crow, take care,” her grandmother warned. She probably saw Weisiko as the scavenger bird flying low and watching the movement of chicks on the ground, and she as Mother Hen with one eye monitoring the sky and the other directing her young ones.

“I will use this one,” Grandmother said. She wagged it, but all the while kept her vigil over Weisiko. Still standing, Weisiko gave the I.D. a sideways glance and waited.
“If they do not accept it, I’ll not vote.” Grandmother paused. “I don’t care,” she said, and seemed to hold the card a bit carelessly. Weisiko swung her hand and missed it.

“Crow, go get your own food,” the old woman said and laughed. “Crow, crow, crow,” she shook her shoulders in a slow dance and waved the card. “Crow, go hunt your own. Hatch your chicks and the crow will come for them.”

“Even if you sing about crows, I’ll get a new beautiful I.D. that will last forever.”

Grandmother stopped her crow-dance. “Go get that which will never die,” she said and winked.

“Grandmother, I want you to vote, and you’ll not do so with that outdated rag. Uncle said so. Get another one.” Weisiko’s uncle, who lived about twenty-minutes walk away, was the area councilor, and since Weisiko could not get news through her family’s radio, she relied on Uncle who listened to his and sometimes read newspapers. She did not ask her uncle about the news, but happened to hear something once in a while when he told someone such as her mother, or as he talked to some elderly people by the roadside. However, Uncle sometimes volunteered information to Weisiko.

“That your uncle said so!” Grandmother frowned. “Forget what Uncle says. He is a politician, and all he wants now is votes.”

“You’ll regret it,” Weisiko said.

“There is nothing that I have not seen,” the other replied. “I have witnessed many elections; I was even there for those of the colonialist. I am an old woman who will not leave Ikerege anymore. I stay here; I die here. And I remain with this.” She still clasped the card between her index and thumb fingers although Weisiko was no longer interested in playing the crow-game. Her grandmother held the I.D. as if to still protect it from some scavenging bird of prey. When she realized that Weisiko was not keen on flying away with the item, she displayed it closer to Weisiko’s face, the way one meticulously spread clothes on the washing line. It was as if Weisiko was required to study the card’s inner layers and absorb its contents. Grandmother appeared satisfied that Weisiko had had a good look at the I.D., and the manner in which she put it back into her pouch, then the
purse into her chest—at her convenience, her pleasure—seemed to say that she did not want to know of any other paper except this. Weisiko shook her head and smiled.

Weisiko sat back to her work—she had a deadline to meet. At least her grandmother had something; she, Weisiko, had nothing. She would get her own, grasp it, and parade it in front of the old woman. Her card would enable her do many more things than her grandmother did with hers.

* * *

Weisiko had completed the peeling of cassava early enough and bathed, and waited for her friend, Mokami, to come and pick her at home. Mokami, who too had not registered for the new I.D., had promised to pass by so she could accompany Weisiko to the Camp. But when Weisiko realized that it was getting late, she left without her.

Weisiko was now running to Ikerege chief’s headquarters. She took a glance at the sky, which assured her that there was still time for her to arrive and register. “I’ll defeat you,” she muttered to the sun, clenched her fists, and took a bend on the footpath. Even if it was now about two years since she left school, the athletics that she had been forced to do there had given her good practice. Today she would trust her short legs and small feet in this one final race; after this, she would rest and wait to beam at her I.D.

With the card she would be a different person and would use it to get a job, earn, and hire someone—a lawyer—to appeal her father’s case and have him released early to come home and take up his responsibilities as father. Her uncle had played the role of father at her circumcision—a substitute father was good for only one occasion. She wanted her own father to be present at her wedding. Her circumcision ceremony had been a poor one; people did not bring enough gifts, and she had no neat dress to wear at the end of the seclusion period. In fact, it seemed as if she had no clothes at all. Although she had put on one she had used before the rite, she was ashamed to be seen by her age-mates. So she stayed indoors and did not join the dance of the graduating initiates. Things would be different at her marriage because her father would be present.

Her father was charged with killing someone; he was sent to prison for this offense, which the authorities said had occurred due to unavoidable circumstances.
Weisiko was not sure why her father had smothered the other man; her grandmother, who was usually free with her talk with her, never mentioned the reason for her father's crime, and her mother had murmured something about "women's lives" and told Weisiko that she would know when she became older. With an I.D. and her acquired maturity Weisiko would go home and urge her mother to tell her. Even though her grandmother and her mother did not speak about the issue, other people still talked, and she heard whispers that her father had slain the man because he tried to snatch her mother from her father. Did Mother want to run off with the other person? Weisiko had asked her grandmother. Her mother would not go away, the old woman replied, and shook her head.

Weisiko wondered whether her father could vote. Did prisoners get new generation cards? She would ask Uncle the next time they met. During her last visit with her father in prison, he looked sickly, and Weisiko was sure he was not being fed well. He had staggered, with hands cuffed in front of him. Two warders escorted him, and Weisiko's mother accompanied her. Her father almost shed tears, but assured Weisiko that he would be released soon. One guard moved forward and pulled him back into the cell as her father mumbled a goodbye that Weisiko could barely hear through the iron bars. As her father was led away he attempted to move his hands to his face, but he could not touch whatever he wanted to reach. Finally, he seemed to have gotten there and brushed something away. Then he disappeared into the prison corridors, deep into darkness. Weisiko forgot that her mother was beside her, turned away, and wept, but she quickly realized that she was in public, bent down and wiped her face with her dress. This was the yellow nylon garment that her father had bought for her during the Christmas holidays before he was arrested.

Even though almost three years had passed since her father's imprisonment, Weisiko had not outgrown this outfit, and it was the very same one that she wore on this day as she ran to beat the deadline for the new I.D. Other girls of her age, who seemed to grow fast while Weisiko remained stump-high, slighted her because of her tiny body. Her friend, Mokami, was nearly twice as tall as Weisiko.
Weisiko now slowed down to remove a particle of stone stuck between her toes. Since the rubber shoes she once owned were torn to several pieces, she had to run barefoot. At least the ground now was not very hot. She looked at the sky, increased her speed, and the undergrowth next to the way seemed to quiver as she passed. She had to be at the chief’s Camp before the sun reached the top of the baobab tree that was at the far end to the left across the grazing field. She did not know exactly what time it was now, but by looking at the position of the sun in relation to the baobab she could estimate that it was about 4pm. In the past she had used that tree and the sun to get back home on time when her mother sent her to the market. She had heard people say that the registration exercise would end at 5pm; in any case, five was when the government offices closed.

She was now on a straight path. She felt like she was competing in the cross-country race. In front of her, a boy about four years old was defecating; she jumped over him and disappeared down the track. A wind swayed the tall grass beside her and a light breeze blew across her neck and chest and she felt her energy resurge. She would not be late.

“What is your name, girl?” the registration officer would ask her when she arrived at the chief’s headquarters, and she would look him straight in the eye and answer.

“How old are you?”

She would confidently reply, “18,” and produce the chief’s letter. Since she had no birth certificate, she had obtained the letter that stated she was qualified for the card.

“But you look small for 18?”

“Even my father is not big,” Weisiko would say.

The officer would then go through Weisiko’s papers—about her mother, her father, and a letter she had obtained from the headmaster of her former school that said she had attended up to Class Seven. The officer would look at her again, and tell her to enter a room to have her passport size photograph taken. She would rub her face, walk in, smile, and walk out. And stroll home—there would be no need to run back. She would move with pride like one who has just had her hair plaited.
She glanced at the sun and picked up momentum for the race. On both sides of the path was low grass with little bushes here and there; to her left cattle and goats grazed, and slightly farther ahead a woman collected firewood. Weisiko did not bother with the sweat that streamed from her face to the neck and shoulders. Two more turns and she would be on the road to the Camp.

She had had no particular plan to get an I.D. until her uncle mentioned it to her. She was delighted when he said that she was mature enough to get the card; he whispered to her as if he were confiding some secret that only they two should keep to themselves. He told her that there was a new something—a modern I.D.—coming, and that everyone needed it to vote in the next elections. It would be a long time before the government issued I.D.s again, so she had better make use of this opportunity, her uncle told her. Those with the old one would not enroll to vote. He told her to be wise and get the item now even if it meant lying about her age and increasing it by a few months.

She listened attentively as her uncle explained to her that after she had gotten the thing, she needed to calculate her moves shrewdly so that after the elections she would sleep on something better than a dirty-torn-old goatskin. Weisiko guessed that her uncle was talking about one being paid to vote for a candidate. He said that she could even get a husband during this season of elections' confusion; that she could tell someone to marry her so she would vote for him; that she could even declare to someone that if he married her, she would vote for his brother so-and-so or his cousin so-and-so or his brother-in-law’s nephew so-and-so. Weisiko did not want a husband as yet because she wished to be with her mother and assist her since her father was in prison, but she listened as her uncle planned for her and drew lines on the ground with his walking stick. The end of the walking staff had a metal cap that made some noise even when the stick touched the bare earth. Weisiko sometimes wondered what would happen if that tip came into contact with a cement floor. Weisiko followed the movement of the staff as Uncle drew zigzag lines in the soil and warned her against consulting her grandmother about anything since these were modern matters that the old woman would not understand.
Weisiko now saw undergrowth disappear beside her as she ran down the footpath. Behind her, she raised whirls of dust and some of it gathered in her feet and legs. Her chest heaved. She panted. Wind blew her dress up; she pushed the garment back. And the wind propelled her. She scooped sweat from her face. She removed more sweat, and the way ahead became clearer. She moved on. She recalled the game she had played with other children when they slid down hillock fields before their mothers planted vegetables in the plots. The children called it the rolling sport. The activity was a refreshing experience until one day a child dislocated her elbow and split her lip.

Uncle had told her that many political parties meant many channels and one could fill one’s stomach from these in numerous ways. As he talked of many routes, Weisiko actually thought that she saw the many trails in the zigzag lines in the ground. This would be the second time multi-party elections were being held in Kenya. Uncle told her that this was her moment to be wiley like one among those tracking animals in the bush; as a finder of game, she had to change course now and again. Her uncle was a knowledgeable person and even learned people got advice from him, but the more she listened to him the more lines he made in the dust so that Weisiko could not see the initial paths whose direction she had wanted to follow.

Some force pushed her now; she had to reach the headquarters on time. Uncle’s zigzag columns in the soil appeared to be drawn in front of her on this footpath. She took a long jump to avoid being entangled in the contours that her uncle’s image seemed to be now curving. Suddenly, the weather became cooler. Some of the people she met asked her where she was going; the only answer they received was getting nearly knocked off the narrow way. They moved aside and she imagined them twist their necks and look over their shoulders only to see a yellow dress turn a bend. They must have shaken their heads; some probably muttered that something urgent was in Mogosi’s granddaughter’s mind.

Weisiko broke twigs and overhanging branches, cleared the passage, and leaped forward.

Her uncle had reminded her that he wanted to be re-elected councilor. He told her to vote for him without condition since she and he were of the same bone and her father
and Uncle had lain in the same womb. He told Weisiko to polish her certificates, and continued to demarcate tiny spaces in the ground; he promised to get her a job after he was re-elected.

“I’ve no certificates,” she said.

Uncle stopped setting boundaries in the dust, and raised his head. “Didn’t you complete primary school?” He seemed surprised; he patted his big stomach.

“No,” she said. She looked at the hand that held the walking stick.

“Look at me, Weisiko,” he touched her arm, and distracted her from what she saw and remembered. She recalled how the leopard’s skin now on the handle had been obtained.

“I wanted to finish school,” she said. “I even wished to go farther…”

“I’ll give it to you,” her uncle said, and peered down at the lines as if to pull the next words from there. He looked up. “Just vote for me,” he said.

“Give me what?” With ears up like a rabbit’s, she became more alert. “What will you give me?” He would offer her an education, she thought.

“Just make your certificates ready,” he assured her. “Eh, eh … I mean report forms. The ones you got while at school. Have all your items—the leaving certificate, the testimonials, the credentials.”

Weisiko stared at her uncle who had stopped constructing figures for a moment to rattle out things that Weisiko did not understand. He should have known that since she did not complete primary school she had no leaving certificate; she would obtain such a document only if she accomplished her primary education. She had left at Class Seven—one year before conclusion. Why couldn’t Uncle say that he would pay for her to clear primary school? In primary eight she would do the examination and get a national certificate to give her a salaried job, even if it were only to sell nails in a hardware store. She looked at her uncle and hoped that he would mention primary school.

“And also inform your grandmother…” He paused.

“What should I tell her?”
"Tell her to vote for the walking stick," he said. He held the middle of the stick’s leg, and pointed the staff’s head at Weisiko. Weisiko pulled her head back.

"Don’t move away," her uncle said. "This is me," he gestured the handle at Weisiko and she still withdrew—she thought that Uncle was baiting her to eat something. He wanted to catch Weisiko’s neck, haul her forward, and throw her over his shoulder. The skin of a leopard covered the handle and a bit of the leg of the walking stick. Her uncle had owned the staff for close to ten years, but the head’s cover was still new since he rarely used the stick. He brought it out mainly during election time, and after that he cleaned it and hid it to wait for the next campaigns. Sometimes on one or two other occasions, he carried it to a public celebration such as Jamuhuri Day. He feared that someone—likely Weisiko’s father—could steal or snatch it from him since Weisiko’s father believed that the walking stick belonged to him. Her father was present when Weisiko’s grandfather speared and killed the leopard, and was also by his side as he stuck the wild animal’s black-white skin on the staff’s head. Her father therefore felt that he was entitled to inherit it, but when Weisiko’s grandfather died, Uncle claimed the stick and said that as the eldest son it belonged to him.

"Who is the walking stick?" Weisiko asked Uncle. She had retreated far away from the jaws of the leopard whose mouth was open and its canines stood out waiting. "Are you the crooked walking stick?" Weisiko said. She wished that her father were the one who owned it; she did not like the way her uncle brandished it. She longed to get hold of the staff and hurl it into the bush.

"What have you said?" He looked at the stick in his hand. "Isn’t it straight?" He contorted his face. "Is this tool twisted?"

Her uncle held the staff properly for Weisiko’s examination and she looked at it again. Her heart beat fast. She ought to grab it and disappear with it, she thought. Her uncle, with his protruding belly, would never catch up with her. She would throw the thing into the river.

Uncle moved it away.
"This is my campaign symbol," he said. "When you look at a walking stick, it's me that you see."

"Will Grandmother also get employed?" Weisiko asked. Her uncle did not answer, probably because it was a stupid question, or more likely he had no answer.

Weisiko's cross-country race was coming to an end. She was now on the earth road and the chief's Camp was within earshot. She stopped. She bent, held her knees, took a deep breath, and straightened herself. She slapped the lower part of her dress to clear dust. She moved to a nearby shade, sat on the ground and gazed at the long shadows of the tree's branches that stretched far. She looked at the sun. With the back of her hand, she wiped sweat from the forehead. She sneezed. She calmed down and rested for about ten minutes. Then, she breathed in and out, stood up, and moved.

She walked majestically to claim her identity, her significance, her worth. She made the last turn and she saw the fence of the chief's headquarters. Her heart jolted. Excitement. She looked straight ahead.

The compound was deserted. She glanced at the sun. Another shake of her heart. From somewhere in the courtyard emerged a figure, a human being—huge, tall, with a wide face, broad shoulders, long hands—a watchman, holding a baton in one hand and a whip in the other. Her father in prison. Iron bars. Chains clanging. Two warders.

Like a contented choirmaster, the guard gently tapped the stick against his right thigh. He was the trainer giving the band the last drill on the eve of a competition he was almost sure to win. Weisiko kept moving. She was on time to meet the guard at the gate.

"What is it, girl?" He tapped the rod at the iron-bars of the gate. "What is the problem?"


"No, girl." He gave a sympathetic smile. "The exercise is over." He touched the strap of his wristwatch. "You are late."

"But it is not yet time," she said and looked at the sun.

The sun. The radio.
The man laughed.

Weisiko rubbed her dry lips and held her position. This was the last day.

The other looked at his watch, fiddled with the band, and turned at Weisiko. He yawned with his mouth wide open.

“I’ve said that the exercise is over,” he said condescendingly. “We completed it successfully about an hour ago when people stopped coming.” He made as if to move, then stopped.

One hour late. The sun. The watch.

“Didn’t the radio announce that the activity would end at that time?” he asked. He shook his head seemingly in disbelief of the ways of the ignorant. It would be useless to tell him that she never listened to the radio. He made another attempt to walk away. “I’ll go once round the compound,” he said. He peered at his watch. “When I come back, let me not find you here.” He knocked the baton at the bars and moved away.

Weisiko still clung to the metal gate. Was this visit really over? She should have asked him if there would be a chance for another registration. The man had just edged her aside. What difference was there between her and her father? What difference was there between her and her grandmother? Her father and her grandmother would not participate in the next elections, and she, Weisiko, had no power to vote.

She tightened her nerves, steadied herself, and walked home.
The Return of the Lamp

As Rioba approached his father’s straight-walled mud house he doubted the reason for which the old man had asked him to come home. He knocked and a voice told him to go in. He bent, placed his hand at the knee on his wrinkled blackish polyester trousers, and entered. Inside the building, Rioba cautiously straightened himself and feared that, at slightly six feet tall, he might hit the low roof. He narrowed his eyes, looked around; this place seemed dark. He stretched his right hand and groped with his long fingers. He lifted his leg slowly from the earth floor and touched a pole. He moved forward and held onto the post.

Rioba could not see where his father was, although it was not yet five and it was bright outside. Rioba squinted; his eyes needed some more time to get used to being in here. His father had to be somewhere quietly watching him, nodding, and feeling pleased at Rioba’s struggles to become familiar with this house. His father was certainly laying traps on him. The old man had sent for Rioba from the city, Nairobi, and he hoped he would be quick with the reason he had asked him to come instead of playing games of observing Rioba stumble on a floor he had never stepped on before, a building that he was visiting for the first time. The person delivering a message to Rioba had talked about an illness, but Rioba thought that the call had to do with the ox that his father mentioned every time Rioba came home. Today Rioba would settle the bullock issue forever.

In a slight stoop, Rioba still stood by the pole and expected his father to say something, to invite him, to welcome him. This attitude of delay was not new in his father; he did this to Rioba while Rioba was a child. The old man ought to understand
that his son was not a boy any more, Rioba thought. He would not allow his father to treat him the way he handled him thirty or thirty-five years ago. The old man likely wanted Rioba to utter the first word, give a greeting; and Rioba hoped that his father would say where he was in this little room. Then, Rioba would go to him and shake his hand.

Rioba leaned on the post, crossed his legs, and waited.

Through all of Rioba’s nearly twenty years in Nairobi, he had been unable to replace his father’s ox, Kerera, sold to get him employment. Two decades ago, a neighbor—the only person from Gwikonge village working in Nairobi at the time—had told Rioba’s father that there were opportunities in the capital. The fortuneteller, for that was what Rioba’s father called him, said the job-givers needed something placed in their palms so that they could release the vacancies. Rioba’s father listened attentively to this story of prosperity; he nodded, and said nothing.

None of his father’s sons had been to the city; the old man himself had not gone beyond Migori town, forty kilometers away. After several days, Rioba’s father asked for the neighbor and said that he would “destroy my plow” in order to fulfill the prophecy of his grandmother, on his father’s side. The old woman had foretold that a family member would journey to the abode of huge lamps and return with strong flames for the rest of his kin. The only place he knew of that had big bulbs was Nairobi, which Rioba’s father had been told never became night, never became dark. The prophetess must have been talking about electric lights, Rioba thought. As the eldest son, Rioba got the offer to leave home and was asked to beat the dew and prepare the path for his younger brothers to join him. In a way he had hit the dew for twenty years, but no sibling had followed him—the route never became dry enough for the others to pass. His position was so junior that he could not create any opening for any of his relatives and to him the prophecy had been a gamble; his father had chanced on Rioba’s life.

The old man was sure that within a short duration Rioba would replace the plowing ox and even achieve much more; evidence of what people who worked in the city did was all over in the surrounding villages. Rioba would become the second person from Gwikonge to work in the capital. His father was pleased and, as a harp player and
poet, he naturally recited praises of his ancestors and chanted about his lineage of lamps that cast rays as powerful as those of the sun. He called Rioba the lamp itself, and for some time Rioba referred to himself as a lamp when among his friends. Rioba seemed to have believed that he was actually the living testimony of the prophecy. He would bring light to his family and village; after all, didn’t his name mean “sun”?

So at twenty-one Rioba left and was happy to go away, earn a salary, and be an independent young man. Even though he worked hard, the pay was small; still he saved and did a few projects here and there. And every time he thought he had enough money to replace the ox, something else cropped up which needed his immediate attention. On one occasion he had to finish the payment of his wife’s bride price, at another instance it was the sickness of his father-in-law, and at another he bought iron-roofing sheets for his wife’s house. And, of course, there were the usual fees needed for the children. Year after year, Rioba’s father asked him to “put the plow back” on the farm, but he did not. The animal sold was one of the two that tilled the field and for some time no work had been done. Later, a young bullock was trained and the cultivation continued. But Rioba’s father still recalled his Kerera, traded off to send his son to the city and he wanted Rioba to buy another ox. His father had recited poems in praise of Kerera—Kerera of crooked, clashing horns, horns of an antelope, Kerera with the energy of a tractor. Kerera was becoming weak at the time he left the family; sometimes he stopped in the middle of the farm field and refused to move. But despite this, Rioba’s father lamented and still sung in adoration of Kerera even long after the animal’s departure.

Now after almost two decades of employment Rioba was home without the ox. He was also home without work since he had been retrenched and there was no possibility of him getting another job. He would never replace Kerera. Was he still the lamp that lighted valleys and ridges?

Rioba’s eyes were now getting used to the place where he was and he could see that this building had two rooms. He straightened the ragged collar of his nylon shirt. In front of him was a small round wooden table and to the left of where he stood were three hearthstones. He wondered how anyone in his right mind could make a fire in a house
roofed with iron sheets. He looked at the beams above the fireplace; the sheets were getting rusty from the heat and smoke of the fire. Who had built this cubicle of a house? It was not here when he was home four years ago. He doubted that his younger brother would have constructed it; his sibling would not afford even such a tiny thing. And his father would not think of such luxury if he were as sick as the messenger had told Rioba. If it was his father’s idea, then this was a great pity, Rioba thought. The old man should have put the money into some other investment; he should have even bought the ox that he had pestered Rioba about for all these years. He should have purchased another Kerera. And another. This room was so miniature and he thought that if he stood at the center he would touch all the walls with little effort. Such a thing, the size of a carton box, had to be the work of his wife, Boke. If someone wanted to put up a house, that person should erect something of significant stature or nothing at all, Rioba thought. This bird’s nest had to be his wife’s idea. In the span of the last four years, Boke had changed in many ways, but Rioba would soon put her in her proper place. First he would deal with the issue of his father’s summons; then, he would handle Boke.

Earlier today, Rioba could not believe his eyes when he saw Boke. At the time he arrived this afternoon Boke was not at home, and the children told him that their mother had gone to collect money owed her by people she had sold second-hand outfits to. Boke selling clothes! Rioba was perturbed. When Boke came, Rioba was not sure whether he saw the same woman he had seen four years ago. He sat by the granary about twenty meters away from Boke’s house as she passed and she did not see him. She is pretending, Rioba muttered. She entered the building, and soon returned to greet her husband, Rioba.

“Rioba, I didn’t recognize you,” Boke said. “So that’s you?” She wore red leather shoes and a brown glittering dress. Bracelets and a wristwatch. Rioba lowered his head. So Boke lived in luxury while he, Rioba, starved in Nairobi? A perfume hit his nostrils; that was what he had smelled in the women he had affairs with in the capital. What business was Boke doing? Hawking garments, the children had said. What did cosmetics have to do with vending second-hand dresses? How had she obtained that watch? And the armlets? And for whom did she lotion herself?
“Yes, I am the one,” Rioba replied without raising his head further. “Were you expecting someone else?” Did he have to tell her that he was coming? He always came without sending any prior message.

They had wedded fifteen years ago. At the beginning of their marriage, Rioba came home from Nairobi at least three times in a year. Then he came less regularly when the cost of living rose in the capital and even fare was difficult to get and instead he sent the money home to pay children’s fees. Now he had not been in the village in four years. During his last visit, Boke conceived and later gave birth to a son, whom Rioba saw for the first time this afternoon. The boy did not know him, and Boke was to blame for this, Rioba thought. She had not told the boy about his father who worked in the city.

Boke was now silent and Rioba thought that she was watching him and despising him; she must have been examining his ruffled shirt and looking at the torn collar. She was comparing herself to him and seeing him unworthy of her; she was contrasting him to those who gave her bangles and for whom she powdered herself. Rioba thought that she did not want him back home because he could from now on curtail her freedom and stop her from manicuring herself and dangling wristlets.

Boke wiped some dust from her ankle. “Come into the house,” she said. She did not want even a little dirt on her, Rioba thought. Her legs were smooth—she must have applied the ointments Rioba saw the town women use. In Nairobi it was a creamy woman like this, Lena, who had cleared his house of its belongings. Rioba had left her in his room, and returned to find the place virtually empty—she had taken his radio cassette, chairs, a table. She had carried everything, even forks, and his clothes, and left him with only tatters like the ones that he now wore. When he returned to the compound, the neighbors told him that his wife had moved. The other tenants thought that that was his spouse; after all, he had lived with her for six months. He entered the room, stood in the middle of the vacant space, and stared at the roof. He was surprised that Lena had left since they had had a good relationship and at one time Rioba even thought of marrying her as his second wife. Since he rarely went home, he needed someone to keep him company in the lonely life of the city and Lena had been one of his best mates in Nairobi.
Rioba had not thought that she was the type who would leave with his belongings; she must have gone because she realized that Rioba’s money was coming to an end.

“Come inside,” Boke now said again, and walked back to the house.

He sat there and still felt her stare, her scrutiny, at his short fingers, at his jutted wrist-bones, and at the crisscrossing veins at the back of his hand. Her glare had reminded him of the people in the bus he had traveled in this afternoon from the border town of Sirari, twenty kilometers away. When he entered the Leyland, the passengers’ eyes seemed to bore through him. He bowed his head, walked to the back, sat quietly next to a window, and looked out all through the forty-minute journey to Gwikonge. He was not aware when they passed Kiomakebe and Ikerege. Once in a while the bus struck a pothole in the earth road and skidded, and the passengers moaned, but it was almost as if Rioba felt and heard nothing of these.

He wished that the bus would never reach Gwikonge; he wished that the journey would go on forever.

When the conductor indicated that Gwikonge was near, Rioba closed his eyes and pretended to doze. The conductor asked if anyone would alight at Gwikonge; the passengers looked round and at their neighbors, and those in the aisle turned their heads behind to see whether anyone was coming so that they could give way. Nobody said that he would dismount so the fare collector signaled the driver to continue on. Someone seated next to Rioba deliberately touched Rioba’s shoulder, but Rioba feigned more sleep. The other person tapped at him and Rioba brushed his face. He squinted as one waking from a dream and saw trees dance outside and race past. The bus glided on and he went back to his artificial siesta.

The other passenger shook him this time. Rioba knew him. “Are you not coming down at Gwikonge?” he asked Rioba.

Rioba rubbed his eyelids and faked a yawn and stretched his arms. “Gwikonge?” he said. He extended his hands and opened his mouth again. His heart pumped fast. Was there a way he could be driven and taken far away from Gwikonge? He felt that the bus should move faster. He reclined in the chair and closed his eyes.
“Conductor!” Rioba’s neighbor now shouted. He leaned forward and touched the arm of the person seated in front of him. Soon word reached the fare collector. The Leyland had gone for about four minutes past Gwikonge.

“Is there anyone for Tarang’anya?” the conductor asked. He was thinking about the next station.

“Conductor, halt!” a passenger said.

“There is no bus stop here,” the conductor said.

“Stop this bus,” someone said.

The fare collector said nothing.

“There is a sick person here!” Rioba’s neighbor said.

Rioba was not ill—to be called diseased was more that he could take. Instead of waiting to be labeled more conditions and names, he rose. As the conductor asked the driver to stop the bus, Rioba leisurely looked below his seat to get a carton box he had placed there. The driver grumbled something about people who drank too much liquor at the border town of Sirari and Rioba took his time to get his luggage. He was careful to make sure that the utensils—especially the spoons—inside the box did not clink to attract anyone’s attention. He was ashamed to carry such things home. All eyes seemed poked at him. He held his carton above the heads as he pushed his way through people in the aisle. The travelers cursed. “He must have dipped his whole body in the alcohol,” someone said. “This bus is not a mattress for fellows to sleep in,” said a middle-aged man. “He is still dreaming about the sassy females of Sirari,” said a hefty woman and everyone laughed. Rioba seemed undisturbed by their comments; at the door he told the conductor that he had one bundle and a spring bed on the carrier. At least Lena had spared these. He stepped out and walked round the bus to point at his luggage to the conductor, who had gotten on top of the Leyland. Rioba was sure that the passengers stared at his trousers and crumpled nylon. He intently looked up. When the spring bed was lowered and the luggage in a small manila sack given to him, he stood at the same position for a long time holding onto the bale that contained old shoes, two kimbo tins and other little things. He
was disgusted; were these all he was taking home after working in the city for twenty years?

He thought of throwing the bundle and the box to the nearby bush and leaving the bed there by the road and walking back to Gwikonge. It would be better to arrive home empty-handed and say that his items had been lost during the night as he traveled from Nairobi to Sirari. People lost their property that way from time to time and any informed person would believe Rioba’s story. He had let the bus go far past Gwikonge market, where he would have kept his things with Tato, the shop-owner with whom he left his goods whenever he came from a journey. Now, how would he transport this scrap, this misery, back to Gwikonge? He broke a tree branch and brushed his polyester to clear it of dust. He rubbed his hair and dipped his hand into the hip pocket of his trousers in search of a handkerchief, a piece of paper, anything, but found nothing. He wiped his face and glanced at his fragments on the ground—they looked worse than the stripes of rags he saw beggars carrying in Nairobi. What did street vagrants ferry home on retirement? What did they take to their slum dwellings after their day in the city alleys? Rioba stared around. He had to do something about his pieces; he did not want people who passed by to wonder what was in the bundles. He sat, looked ahead, and quickly rose. He stretched his hands, as if breathing in and out ready to begin a one hundred-meter sprint, but immediately he let the arms back down. The sack appeared loose—he unfastened the robe around the bag’s neck, and then re-tied it slowly. When he completed this, he felt the string; it was not secure enough. He undid it, and bound it again. His hands trembled. He felt the nervousness of a boy about to leave home to face the circumciser’s knife. Damn it! Damn the parcels!

He cocked the manila envelope, glanced left then right, and hurled it with its items into the bush. He took two long steps from the other luggage. Abandon this garbage, he thought. Walk ahead, keep going like a lunatic and disappear into the abode of the ghosts from where no one came back. His eyes darted from place to place; he saw no one. He strode, seized the carton box and flung it into the undergrowth. Anyone wise enough would help himself with the bed. He whistled lowly and returned in the direction the bus
had come, back to Gwikonge, to his home. He stooped forward, bent himself like a bow and walked home with hands in his pockets, as if he were from visiting a neighbor.

It now seemed almost bright in this room in his father’s house. Rioba faced the low door. Then, he moved his eyes slowly toward his left and spotted a slipper, a leg, a figure. Then he saw a cloth’s threads. His father wore a gray sweater that dangled down and almost touched the floor. In the sack under the shrubs there was an old pullover that he had brought for his father. The old man sat in an armchair, his left hand with long fingernails on his lap, and a goatee almost reached his stomach. His father never kept a big beard—was he really the one? He could not see the old man’s eyes. Was his father dozing? Was he sleeping? Was he peeping at him—sizing him up? His right hairy arm hung from the seat’s hand as if he were about to pick up a club that was on the floor by his side. Rioba looked at the entrance, and wondered how fast he could go through it in case there was danger, in case a weapon were aimed at him. As a young man, his father had been mischievous and provocative, but even now, in old age, one could not be sure that his earlier character would not be ignited.

Rioba remembered that his father had carried the bludgeon everywhere; it was even next to him as he played the harp at ceremonies in people’s houses. It was said of the old man that when his fingers seemed unable to pull the harp strings, he used the stick to strum the twines, and some people said that he did this to express disappointment that no one had challenged him to use the stick to protect himself. But now Rioba had been told that his father was sick, so he probably no longer played his favorite instrument. Had he stopped jerking the cords and mourning the loss of Kerera, of the converging horns?

Rioba needed to call his father’s name so that he would be sure that the forested chin was his father’s, and so that the old man would know that he was inside. But hadn’t his father told him to enter? Why wouldn’t he announce that he was there in the chair instead of playing this childish game of having Rioba stand by a pole?

Rioba peered up. He could very easily touch the beams of this house. He looked from one end of the roof to the other. Many iron sheets had rusted, even some that were far away from above the fireplace. Since he had not seen this building when he was at
home four years ago, he assumed that it was constructed three and a half years ago, but still that was not enough time for the roof's cover to corrode even if it felt the heat and smoke of the fire every day. Three years was a rather short duration for new sheets to be coated; the ones on this structure must have been second-hand ones, like the frock that the figure in the seat wore, Rioba thought.

If Rioba had not lost his job, he would likely have built a house of new iron sheets for his father, probably even a permanent one. Things had gone well for him until there was word that the government of Kenya would soon retrench some workers in response to demands by big international bodies in America and Britain. The organizations said that the Kenyan authorities had hired too many employees, most of whom did nothing and just collected salaries at the end of each month. Soon after the rumors, people began losing their civil service jobs.

Rioba was not worried about the talk of lay offs because he was in a shoe-manufacturing company that had no connection to the government. Furthermore he did not see any idle person in his department in the sole-making section. He was himself hardworking and although he had been late to duty once in a while, he had never had any misconduct at his workplace. So at thirty-nine, he was sure that he would smile up to fifty-five, the retirement time.

It came as a surprise when employees in his firm were asked to fill forms and say whether they were willing to leave their jobs before the required age. The managers promised that those who did not wish to be retrenched would stay; those who opted to resign would be given good money—a golden handshake—with which to begin some investment. Rioba soon learned that the consent forms had been distributed only to junior employees and wondered how much the business hoped to save by sending away low-level workers who in essence earned very little. Rioba did not fill the papers; he still needed his job. Because very few people filled the documents to ask for voluntary departure, the numbers required were not met; other employees had to be put aside by force, and Rioba was one of these given a three-month notice of retrenchment.
He blamed his father for not educating him to a stage that would have equipped him to evade the loss of his job. With a secondary school Form One standard, there was nothing else that Rioba could be recruited to do other than arrange materials to be made into soles of shoes. He could not get an office job and could therefore not escape the axe. If only his father had given him a proper education, Rioba reasoned now—at least paid fees for him to complete his secondary education—he would still be working and he would not be here leaning against a post and not sure whether he saw a long-bearded shape in an armchair and a bludgeon on the floor close by. His father had met the expenses for only one year of Rioba’s secondary level, amidst complaints at the beginning of every term that Rioba was impoverishing him because each session he sold some livestock to pay Rioba’s fees. Rioba’s father grumbled openly to anyone who would listen. Sometimes he introduced Rioba as “my son whose tuition cost is the same as the price of a helicopter.” Rioba noticed that when a new term was about to begin his father became harsher and itchy like a healing wound accidentally pricked by a thorn. In these times he used abusive language toward Rioba’s mother at the littlest excuse.

The city fortuneteller had arrived four years after Rioba left school. Rioba was happy that he would work and refund the “amount of the airplane’s value” and get a replacement for Kerera, and he hoped that his mother would not have to bear further slurs on behalf of the son. But Rioba did not give the ox back, and his mother received more insults from his father.

Early in her marriage, Rioba’s mother had suffered physical violence from his father at the slightest mistake. His father even punished her for the children’s misdeeds. She had passed away six years ago, and even though his father had long stopped beating her by then, Rioba was sure that in one way or another the injuries she got as a result of the canes and fists had led to her death. She complained of body aches up to the last days of her life and although she did not say directly that the pains were from his father’s battering of her, Rioba felt that his father was responsible.

Rioba now advanced from the pole. He rubbed his face. He held his knee, and bent forward in the direction of his father. He took a short step toward the old man.
stopped, cupped his ear forwards, and listened. He straightened up and sighed. He rested for a moment and then he bent, crouched, looked ahead, and listened.

A child cried outside somewhere between this house and Boke’s. It was less than two minutes walk between the two buildings if one went through the cattle enclosure.

Rioba looked at his father, who appeared not to be seeing him. Rioba stood upright as much as it was possible in this room. There was now a seat close by him. While he kept an eye on the old man, he folded his shirtsleeves, stretched his hand, gripped the chair, and pulled it toward him. He unfolded it and placed it beside the post. His father seemed to move; in fact, the jungle of a beard appeared to strut, but a housefly still perched at its end and the old man did not wave the insect away. Rioba concluded that he was asleep; he would wait for him to wake up.

He hoped that his father was not playing the waking-sleeping games that he performed to Rioba and his siblings when they were young. His father would be resting in the bedroom when his mother told one of the children to tell the old man that supper was ready. None of the children liked this errand. The appointed “victim” went inside and told the old man to come and eat, then left the place assuming that the father had heard. Often the old man failed to turn up, and Rioba’s mother had to call him. His father insisted that any child sent to inform him had also to touch his feet and shake them slightly to fully awaken him. Rioba and his siblings thought that the old man feigned sleep when asked to come to table. Rioba wished that his father, now at sixty-five, was old enough to know that Rioba was no longer a boy, that Rioba was forty years old. If his father wanted someone to treat like a baby, he could try one of Rioba’s children. Rioba hoped that his father was not involved in the pastime of wanting to be tapped, but if he wanted Rioba to stroke him, shake him, he would wait forever! Rioba sat.

Outside, the child cried again.

That was likely Rioba’s youngest offspring, who was born three years ago. Earlier this afternoon, when Rioba arrived and the boy’s elder sister told him that Rioba was his father, the boy had glanced at Rioba and hid behind his sister. Rioba concluded that that was Boke’s fault—she was bringing up the son poorly; she was badly raising the children;
she had not told the boy of his father. It was clear that Boke had not shown Rioba’s photographs to his son. Rioba had not sent pictures for at least two years, but his wife should have shown the boy earlier images of his father so that he would know Rioba. Rioba had attempted to see whom the lad resembled but the boy could not allow his father to look at him, so he had decided that he would later have a good view of the youngster.

Rioba had not immediately stood up from where he sat below the granary’s eave, when his wife invited him to the house. She had walked away haughtily, with shoulders slightly raised. He wanted to let her disappear and then he would sneak into the building and sit before she saw his oversized and patched-up polyester trousers, the only presentable pair that Lena had left behind. So he sat there at the barn and slowly lifted his eyes and peeped at his wife as she flaunted away. This was not the woman he knew; this was not the Boke he had married; this was not the wife he had left behind. Boke, who four years ago was like a piece of rod, with legs full of scales, was now round and smooth and her lotion pervaded the air long after she had gone. For whom did she prepare herself? That smell and others like it had consumed all of his golden handshake earnings in Nairobi.

The sum was not much, but he would have used some of it to buy a bullock, an aged one. He had planned to come home immediately after getting the benefits, but a friend of his had introduced Lena to him, and although she had been good to him, she had somehow cunningly made sure that all the money was spent on her. Then she brought a truck and packed all his belongings and vanished. With the handshake amount he would have bought some outfits for his children and Boke so that his wife did not have to show off the ones that she got from the men that she powdered herself for. He wondered that she traded in second-hand clothes and he could not understand what that had to do with this odor of perfumes that dominated the surroundings even when she was not there.

He did not know how long he stayed next to the granary. His daughter came to inform him that tea was ready; Rioba told her that he would follow her soon, but he must have sat there for another five minutes. When he joined the others—his wife, daughter,
and son—in the sitting room of Boke’s straight-walled mud house, they were already having their drinks. Again, Boke had not trained the children well—how could they start taking tea before he arrived at table?

“Are there no cows in this homestead?” he asked his wife as she poured strong tea into his cup.

“We have them,” Boke replied without looking at her husband.

“Why then this water?” He pointed at the kettle.

“None of the cows is lactating,” Boke said.

She should use the money to purchase milk instead of buying beauty products, Rioba thought. Was strong tea the way to welcome a husband who had been away for four years? At least Lena knew how to take care of him—she always had a cup of warm milk and buttered bread ready whenever Rioba came home.

“Where are the other children?” Rioba asked.

“In the field herding,” Boke said.

The children that Rioba asked about were the two eldest sons—Gesase and Ginono.

“Nyaikuba, stop playing and drink the tea,” Boke said to her youngest child. “Did you greet your father?” Boke asked. The boy smiled shyly, shook his head, and then nodded.

So they had named him “Nyaikuba,” Rioba thought. They had not consulted him and that must have been the work of his father. Even if custom allowed a person to give a name to his grandchild, Rioba should have been informed. Nyaikuba peered at Rioba, then looked back at his mother and Rioba wondered what the boy meant by these expressions in his eyes. He considered Nyaikuba’s face and saw that the boy looked like the old man. There were slight similarities in appearance between Rioba and his father, but Rioba thought that this child should not have resembled the old man more than he resembled Rioba. He examined his son again and saw the old man’s narrow face in the boy. Nyaikuba cast his eyes restlessly from place to place and Rioba thought that the lad was searching for something that this man, his father, had brought for him from where he
worked. In the bundles in the bush, there was nothing for this boy. Boke told Nyaikuba to stop gazing at vacant spaces and take his tea, but Rioba was sure that his wife’s “vacant spaces” was a reference to his coming home empty-handed. Suddenly, the boy jumped from his seat, announced that he had finished his drink, and rushed to the bedroom. What did he want?

An anthill had grown on the wall in front of Rioba. His wife was definitely not taking care of this building, which he had at least been able to construct during his time in employment. Some soil fell on the table and he looked at the rafters.

“Termites are eating into the timber,” Rioba’s wife said.

As he lowered his eyes from the beams, he saw a pressure lamp in the corner, next to the pot of drinking water. Boke had even bought a pressure lamp! She by now likely knew how to light the lamp and she seemed determined to no longer be the village girl he had married fifteen years ago. He glimpsed at her face, which was as clear as a veneered table’s top. She must have applied creams that now made her look fifteen years younger, Rioba thought, like a twenty-year old. Boke looked back at him as if she were beckoning him to a wrestling match. Did she want ointments from him? He hoped no one would enquire whether he had kept any luggage at Tato’s shop in Gwikonge market. He was consoled that they would not ask him since it was he who usually told them to collect any load left there. They would have to wait for him to tell them; they would wait forever. Did the boy know that fathers brought things for their children?

Someone shuffled his feet from the bedroom behind Rioba; that must be Nyaikuba, Rioba thought and continued sipping at the hot tea. Even though it was a cool late afternoon, he perspired. Rioba did not turn around, but Boke looked at Nyaikuba and her face suddenly aged. She rose in a stroke, reached for the boy and gave him a thunderous slap. She said nothing, just slapped him. Rioba was sure that Nyaikuba saw stars right in front of his face. For a moment there was grave silence. Then, the child cried and ran to Rioba, and from the bedroom Boke told him to stop mooing. Rioba ignored the boy; Nyaikuba howled and his mother warned him again. Rioba had not seen the boy shamble, but from the way the earth floor was scratched it seemed that he had put on his
mother’s shoes. Maybe her best pumps—the ones she had received from her favorite
darling. Had Lena considered Rioba special? Could a cherished lover take all of the
other’s property the way Lena had done to him?

Rioba now thought that he had stayed a bit too long in Nairobi after the
retrenchment. Otherwise he could not have drunk strong tea—mere leaves in water—that
burned his lips, and he could have bought the ox so that his father would not sit as he now
posed, as unmoving as a dog waiting for a bone to be thrown its way. And Rioba would
not be here in this manner; instead, he would march over to the old man and announce
that he had money to replace the bullock. Rioba would get his wallet, open it, count some
notes—something like ten thousand shillings—and hand them to his father and tell the
old man that that was for Kerera. He would put back the remaining amount into his purse
making sure that his father saw that he had more left. He would then walk back, sit, and
face his father and they would converse man-to-man since he would have settled the debt.

He now glanced at his father in the chair. Soon it would get dark in this hole of a
house; he had to do something. The old man’s bushy arm seemed to move, the claws
danced; it was as if he wanted to get the club from the ground. The hand looked bigger
than Rioba knew it to be. That was the hand that had hit his mother and made her
whimper and cry like a five-year old child. She had begged for mercy and called her
husband her Lord and invoked the name of his first-born, Rioba. By uttering the name of
the first-born, Rioba’s mother showed great remorse for whatever offences she had
committed, but his father whipped her more.

One night in the kitchen, his father descended on his mother with blows, kicks,
and sticks, and outside Rioba’s siblings sobbed and looked up to him as the eldest to save
their mother. Rioba trembled; his chest pained; he feared his father. His father could very
well turn on him and beat him, but it was better for him, a twelve year old, to moan rather
than his mother. Still shaking, he walked out, stood at the hut’s door, and shouted at his
father to stop the lashing. His father was shocked and grabbed a burning piece of
firewood and threw it at Rioba, but he was not near. His father cursed, gnashed his teeth,
and went in search of Rioba, who fled into the darkness. For a week Rioba did not meet
his father and finally, he gave up looking for the boy. When they met his father talked to
him as if Rioba were now a man; his father spoke to him man-to-man. He never hit
Rioba’s mother again.

Rioba now wanted to have a man-to-man chat with the old man. He rose from his
seat and walked straight toward his father. He would touch him and shake him. As he
reached closer, the goatee had the appearance of a chicken’s feathers at being unraveled
by the wind. His father’s eyelashes fluttered, he opened the eyes, and his hand still
seemed to move toward the bludgeon.

“You thought I was dead,” his father suddenly said and rubbed his nose. From his
bush of a beard, he peered at Rioba and with his claws he scratched the chin as if it were
infested with lice. Slowly, he lifted his pullover, which nearly touched the ground, and he
attempted to dip his fingers into the hip pocket, but he had difficulty getting there. He
rose and remained in a bent position. He almost fell back in the chair but he steadied
himself. “...still strong,” he said. Rioba extended his hand to greet him, but the old man
did not offer his. Instead, with seeming concentration, he searched in the pocket as he
looked beyond his son.

Rioba’s arm drooped.

“Where is this thing?” his father asked himself.

“What are you looking for?” Rioba said.

His father did not answer. Even with the forest beard, his face was still lean. He
walked with a slight limp and emptied all pouches of his trousers and placed the contents
on the round little table. There were some pieces of newspapers. And the smell of
tobacco. He still did not get what he sought. The old man just passed near and around his
son as if Rioba were not in the room; to his father, Rioba seemed to be part of what he
saw in this place every day.

Rioba slumped to his seat. He did not want to be trapped, tethered, and made to
moo, so with his eyes he followed his father’s movements.

Rioba did not think that his father was looking for a handkerchief until the old
man stood at the door and called out at Rioba’s daughter to find him one. His whiskers,
and sweater, which went well below the knees, seemed to cover the entire door. But he
did not have to bend like Rioba to get through the entrance. The old man strutted back.
His left foot was swollen—was this the disease that the messenger had talked about? He
went to his chair, and mumbling some words, he sat. He coughed to clear his throat and in
a way indicate that he was the man in charge in this his house.

Soon, Rioba’s daughter ran in with what her grandfather had asked for.

“Bring a candle in here,” her grandfather said. “No, the lamp.” He leaned back to
make himself more comfortable and placed his arms on the hands of the seat.

It was still bright and the window above his father brought in enough sunlight.

Why did he want a lantern? Was his sight becoming bad?

“We are well here,” his father began as if he were continuing a previous
conversation. “I am still alive,” he said with the finality of a court verdict.

Rioba inclined forward.

“Just thieves now and again,” his father said. “But we are used to that; we handle
them.”

“Yes,” Rioba said. His father was back to his pranks, Rioba thought.

With his fingernails the old man noisely scratched his foot. He stood up and
moved to the hearthstones. Why did he want to start the fire at this time? His father got
some wood nearby, and started setting them in the fireplace.

Rioba rose. “Let me help you,” he told the old man.

The other continued arranging the planks. Rioba got some sticks.

“Leave that alone,” his father said. “It’s not even cold yet.” He abandoned
whatever he had and went to his armchair.

Rioba broke some twigs, put them in the fireplace and sat back.

“How is your foot?” Rioba asked after some silence.

“What foot?” his father said.

Rioba wondered what to say next. Although his father’s foot was so swollen that
it was difficult to tell where the toes began, did he know what exactly he had enquired
about? Should he say that the messenger had told him that that was where the problem lay? Why had he not asked Boke about what ailed the old man?

Rioba leaned back, took a deep breath, folded his arms across the chest, and crossed his legs. He hoped that his father would see that the son was sympathetic. He needed to utter something more to his father, at least to show that he was sorry for not coming to see him earlier, and to indicate that he was now back home forever. Was his father aware that Rioba had been retrenched? Did he know of the Nairobi women who had “robbed” him of his earnings?

“The medical people say that it’s the sugar disease,” his father abruptly said as if recovering from a stupor.

Rioba looked at the old man, hoping that he would say something more. Should he touch the other’s foot to create camaraderie? He would at least have made an attempt to be friendly to his father. Rioba made as if to stand, but some force held him down—he felt as if a sack of stones were placed on his shoulders. His father could very easily place the paw on his neck, throw the long cloak over him and suffocate him. Or his father would leash him and prepare him for slaughter. Was his father thinking about Kerera? He always meditated about the ox and every time Rioba came home, his father asked him about the bullock, or he mentioned the animal when he was sure that Rioba was within earshot.

Rioba’s daughter hurriedly entered with the pressure lamp; it was the one that Rioba saw in his wife’s house as the family took tea earlier this afternoon.

“Walk carefully,” her grandfather said. “Some of you do not know the price of an item like this.”

She suddenly moved slowly. Pretentiously slowly, Rioba thought. She placed the lamp on the table in front of Rioba who looked at it, squinted, and lowered his eyes. The girl had placed the light too close to him and the rays blinded him. He felt naked and bare. After a while, he stared ahead at the shadows cast on the wall.

“Did you get my messages?” his father asked. “I have been asking for you for so long.”
Rioba thought that he should inform his father that he had received only one communication, to which he had now responded, that he was here and in all these hours his father had not told him why he had called him, but instead had indulged in childish tricks. Rioba thought that the old man should end his games of babies and say why he had sent for him.

“They sacked me,” Rioba said. The blinding lamp again. Rioba looked at the ground for a moment, got a stick nearby and broke it and it made a rather loud snap that he vaguely heard. Was “sacked” what he should have said? Was it better to be fired than be retrenched? Being sacked would help explain why he had came home with nothing, and why there was no Kerera, and why there would never be an ox.

Rioba perspired.

“What are you saying?” his father raised his sharp poet’s voice. “I was told that they gave people huge sums of money.”

“It was not a large amount,” Rioba said. “There was no money.”

“Bugi’s son has purchased a piece of land at the market place, he has purchased a flourmill, he has purchased goats for his mother.” As he mentioned the last item the old man seemed to twist his mouth contemptuously, and he waved his left hand dismissively.

“He was in a different firm,” Rioba said.

Bugi’s son, Mahende, who had worked in Nairobi, must have told the old man everything. What else had his father heard? Was his father also aware of what had befallen his son in the city? Did he know that Rioba’s retirement sum had been spent on some chameleon women? Now the entire village knew of all that he had done in the capital, Rioba thought. Sweat rolled down from his armpits. He undid the top button of his shirt. His heart hammered. His father gave him a sideways glance and the lamp helped the old man to examine him, Rioba thought. He was likely looking at Rioba’s figure and despising him. His father peered more pointedly, more intently as one would focus at the eye of a needle as he aimed the thread through it. He was probably glaring at Rioba’s face; the veins stood out and ran across it like sisal fibers. Rioba felt humiliated and as if
he had forgotten the blinding beams, he stared into the light, which seemed to poke at his
eyes.

“Yes, a different company indeed!” his father said and spat on the earth floor.

Rioba took one long step from his seat. He grabbed the bludgeon that lay beside
his father and it felt weightless in his hand. He swung it and hit the lamp. After all, wasn’t
he the sun itself? He thought he heard pieces of glass fall and roll in various directions.
He whirled the weapon a second time, but missed whatever was left of the item on the
table. He cursed, swore. He did not remember when the stick fell from his hold. “Say it is
the ox you want!” he shouted. He turned round, seized his father’s sweater, pulled him
forward, and plunged him down. The old man appeared to have not yet recovered from
the effect of the clanking things in the room.

Rioba clicked the tongue and searched for the club. He swore, clenched his teeth,
and looked for something else, anything. “You treat me like a dog. Say it is your Kerera
you want. Kerera! Kerera!” He stamped his feet; he moved around. Unfamiliar with the
terrain of this place, he struck something; he was momentarily trapped, and he tumbled
forward on his stomach, very close to where the wick illumined some flame. He turned to
rise; he hit his shoulder against the table. The old man was already by his side; he had
probably moved swifter than Rioba had done earlier. His father struggled to hold the front
of Rioba’s neck and press him down. The old man held a club, the same one that Rioba
had used. His father’s eyes spoke of murder.

Rioba did not seem to realize when a crying child arrived and stood beside
Rioba’s father, and the old man did not look aware either. Nyaikuba screamed, tramped
on the floor, and pleaded with his grandfather to place the weapon down. Someone
cought the boy’s hand and tried to pull him away, but he resisted. Nyaikuba looked at
Rioba, whom some hours ago he had been told was his father. He looked at his
grandfather. It seemed that the boy wished to say something, but he did not talk.

“I can grind your brain,” his father spat the words at Rioba. “Am I the one who
took your job?” he thundered.
Rioba struggled on the ground, and kicked his feet up and down. His father wanted to effectively secure him at the neck and strike him with the bludgeon, but it seemed impossible for the old man to do both.

Rioba’s father looked at Nyaikuba whose cheeks were wet with tears. He scowled at his son on the floor, “You feces of a beast.” He relaxed his hold on Rioba, clucked his tongue, took his grandson’s hand, and moved away.

There were more people in the room. Rioba could not see them from where he lay, but he felt their presence. They crowded the tiny place and consumed all the good air. The wick of the lamp he had struck was almost going off, but the house was bright again, probably from lanterns that the other people had brought with them. So the prophecy of the lamp had come to this—him crouched next to the legs of a table? Defeated, Rioba had little to hide now—he was more exposed than ever before. Next round he would take time to learn the layout of a place before he waged war; it was difficult to win in someone else’s territory.
Voices at the Junction

Mbusiro One
I left the footpath and reached the edge of my green vegetable farm where the grass was low-patches of growth. The hem of my dress and my legs were wet and some water had gone into my gumboots and feet. I unwrapped my shawl from across the shoulders and used part of it to wipe myself, and I fastened my headscarf. The sukuma wiki leaves were sprawled on the ground all over, and stalks hung limply in rows all the way to the end of the plot. “What a waste, Mbusiro,” I loudly addressed myself.

I turned and saw my daughter-in-law, Wankio, come by the way I had followed; she was now near the old homestead where we had moved from about two years ago. We had destroyed all the houses there, but we had not completed clearing the place as one could see bits of sticks and poles here and there and mounds of blocks of soil of what was once the partitions of the mud buildings. One house’s wall still stood halfway dismantled and the posts jutted out. The tall grass only reached her knees and she did not seem bothered by the dew and the wet clay path that had concerned me a while ago as I came. Instead, she moved as if the ground had been beaten by noon heat and was dry. She held three sacks slung on her shoulder.

“You should walk slowly,” I said. “That place is slippery.”

She did not look at me; instead, she focused her attention above my head, beyond me. Her left eye never saw, but it was not easy to tell that unless one went close and examined the differences between the eyes. The cornea of her left eye had spots of gray, but it was when she turned and tried to position herself in order to make the right eye also do the work of the other one that one may have noticed that the eye was blind. She now
still ignored my warning, became even more courageous in her walk, strode on, and was soon at the garden’s edge. Then something seemed to entangle her dress—a stick nearby must have held the hem—she slipped, but she quickly led her right hand in front and spread her fingers on the ground to avoid falling. Nevertheless, her knee caught some mud and the end of her cloth was smudged. To her side, I rushed.

“What happened?” I asked and offered her my hand.

“I’m all right,” she said. She took no notice of me, rose on her own, and rubbed at the soil stain. She contorted her face as if to recall something, as if to say something, but she pursed her thin lips, then pulled the upper one forward and briefly shut her nose. In her forehead, tiny wrinkles appeared.

There was something heavy in Wankio’s mind. I suspected that she had overheard the conversation with my sister and her careless talk about Wankio’s childlessness just before the rain began.

“Let’s collect the good leaves before the clouds break again,” I said.

Our Tarang’anya village rain was known to give a warning of rumbles and strong winds that blew from the Maeta hill that faced our homestead a long way across the river, but the fall that had just ended this afternoon had surged into our compound without any signal, hit the ground for about thirty minutes, and disappeared in the same manner it had come. In the final ten minutes I heard hail pound my iron roof, and I looked through the window and saw stones land on the backs of cattle standing in the kraal. At that moment I remembered my sukuma wiki that were nearing harvest, and I asked God Almighty to spare them.

I now moved away from Wankio and picked my way through the vegetable columns; I tried to walk on tiptoe, but still stepped on some leaves. Water dripped from the few blades still clinging to the stalks, and some drops still went into my gumboots and my feet, and as I walked the liquid made the sound as that of someone noisily gulping water down the throat.

One by one I shook each leaf and held it in my left hand. I walked back and placed my collection on the sack that lay at the end of the shamba.
Wankio placed her hands on her hips and looked into the distance. She was probably wondering at this destruction and the loss that would follow, for even though this crop was mine by name she played an important role in tending it. When she came home from Tarang'anya primary school where she taught, she helped me with whatever needed to be done here. I now left her alone to gaze and I began gathering the crop from the side close to the river and moving up.

Finally, she removed the gray shawl tied around her neck, rubbed her face, placed the clothe on a nearby branch, and started working. If she had listened to the conversation with my sister, I hoped that in the name of our Kind One Above she knew my position. Seven years was a long time for Wankio to be married and be without a baby. If only she could get a child, then her life would be complete and her long neck and the dimples in her cheeks could blossom at the touch of her infant’s hand. Even I, Mbusiro, would be fulfilled when my grandchild peered into my small eyes, and tried to extend his little fingers to reach my wrinkles, but instead my rough hands would caress his tiny face.

Although at times my tongue had slipped and talked about my loneliness and said one or two unpleasant things to Wankio, I knew that the Lord was the giver of whatever we all had and that He would offer Wankio something at the proper time. Merciful God gave and He took. Hard, I prayed; every request of mine began with a plea to Him on behalf of Wankio and her husband. As I entered the church each Sunday I looked at the long wooden benches and the people and imagined that I saw Wankio’s offspring and the offspring of her offspring from this generation to the next generation and the one after. When the choir recounted the stories of barren men and women of long ago who were blessed in their old ages, I intoned a big amen and said that the will of the Savior would be done one day for Wankio.

The cloudy sky now held the approaching gloom at the same level; it was not getting darker, and I hoped that it would be that way until we set all the good crop aside.

“Wankio, get your shawl,” I said. “You will catch a flu.” I thought that she needed to cover her head since she rarely let the hair grow long and she must have been feeling cold now.
As if I had not spoken to her, she went on working. I bent down, and separated two leaves of *sukuma wiki* and a white worm recoiled and moved across the blade. I threw the crop away—besides the hail holes, we had to deal with other things too.

We had now collected a large amount, but still had a vast portion of the land to cover. I would take the *sukuma wiki* that had not been badly damaged to our little market next to Tarang'anya chief’s Camp and I would sell it cheaply. I would also talk to the food store people at the secondary school to see if they could take some of the good vegetables, otherwise I would suffer great loss. I usually took my produce to Kehancha town about one hour’s walk from here, but the market day was six days away. Furthermore, the people who came to the town market “pretended” to be too clever and could not take *sukuma wiki* that had dents in them. I now picked some leaves as I walked closer to where Wankio worked. Just when I stood beside her, she straightened herself, pulled the collar of her dress, and looked at it, and scratched the back of her neck near the hairline.

“Has something gone into your hair?” I asked.

She still rubbed at the same place.

“Let me see,” I said. I saw a tiny ant crawling from her head to the shoulder and I told her to stay still.

“Look at it. It’s here.” I held it to her eyes. “This one gives a very bad sting,” I said.

She passed her hand on the hair as if to make sure that I had not deceived her, and then she walked to her shawl and flung it over her shoulders and let it hung loosely on her chest.

A vehicle hooted on the earth road near the chief’s Camp, ten minutes walk from where we were. I could not see the vehicle, but I knew that it was a *matatu*, a public service one, in a hurry from Kehancha and wanting to make another trip back before total darkness set in; we here were also competing against the gloom from the clouds.

I walked to the vegetables we had collected and weakly shook my head at the pile of waste. Wankio had decided to put the *sukuma wiki* into a sack and I let her—I held the
bag for her to easily arrange the leaves in. She tilted each blade to clear it of any water left; she examined it once again, and with her fingers she brushed aside any insect that crawled on a vegetable. I got impatient with her overzealous concern—wasn’t she aware of the skies and the amount of crop that we had already lost?

She unwrapped her shawl, folded it, and placed it on her head. She bent and I put the filled sack on her head. She started moving away, but the bag did not seem well balanced, so she stopped and tried to lift the load, but the *sukuma wiki* was heavy. She held the sack again and attempted to adjust it, and she almost fell.

“You’ll break yourself,” I said. “You are not careful enough.”

“You don’t like me,” she said.

“I did not mean that,” I said. She must have been thinking about the conversation with my sister, but I did not want to go that direction now.

I set the bag well; she straightened herself, moved away, and I sighed. “Heavenly God,” I thought to myself, “I hope she gets home safely.” I looked at her until she went beyond the old homestead, reached the junction to the river, and branched toward home. She had some huge thing in her mind—if it was to do with my sister’s words I knew that that we would settle. Or was it her husband, Chacha, who was troubling her?

* * *

Except for some years when my husband abandoned the family and went to live in Mogumu, Tanzania, he was a hardworking man who took care of us. He also walked in the path of the High One in the Pentecostal Church up to the end of his days and left me to care for our six children. When my husband was called from this world by the Lord Redeemer, our eldest child, Chacha, was 22 years. We had three daughters, and then, there were the last two sons—Muniko and Rungu. All the daughters later got married, and were now taking care of their husbands and children.

Chacha grew up well and when he completed school he was employed and he helped me educate his younger brothers. Some of the bride price of my daughters was also used to pay fees for the boys, and even for Chacha himself. There was no need to
trouble ourselves with secondary school education for the girls since we did not have enough money anyway.

When Chacha felt it was time for him to marry and he told me that he had found a bride, I was not sure that Wankio's family was a good Christian one. Wankio happened to be from the village where my sister was married to and so I called my sister and enquired of the ways of Wankio's kin and of Wankio herself. We investigated, and finally we agreed that she was a good young woman. Unlike most of her peers, who got married or eloped at the end of primary school at the ages of fifteen, sixteen, before they were even weaned from their mother's laps, Wankio had persevered, completed secondary education and was soon to graduate from Teacher Training College. Her family was not particularly Christian, since it was only her mother who attended church, and only on important religious occasions such as the celebration of the birth of Christ and the beginning of the New Year. In addition, her mother also went to service when there was a wedding that she had been invited to. On the other hand, Wankio's father was known to sharpen his *panga* in readiness for the farm as Wankio and her sisters prepared to go for worship, and later on in the field as the singing of hymns reached him from the church, he whistled and aimed the machete deep into the bush and lower to the ground.

On the whole, my sister's findings showed that he was not a reckless man, but I wondered what talk I would share with him and his wife since they were not what I called proper Christians. I prayed. Finally, the Almighty King revealed to me that Wankio was meant for Chacha; above all, Wankio herself was upright and God-fearing. Who knows, I thought at the time, I might be used to change the hearts of the unbelievers in her family.

When I later saw Wankio, I was a bit uncomfortable that she was taller than Chacha. I remember wondering why my son had not found a woman of his height, but had instead chosen one who he would have to look up to while they talked. Maybe he should even have gotten one as short as himself, but that would have meant that their children would be stump-high. That Chacha was dark and Wankio light did not bother me.
Except for the lack of a child, Chacha and his wife lived happily; he continued with his work at the council, and she was employed as a teacher. Then, he lost his job in what he told me was as a result of demands the Kenya government was facing from the Europeans. The radio also said something about this and called it retrenchment, but I did not understand these matters well and left everything in the hands of the Great One.

I was disturbed when Chacha told me that he was applying for the position of chief. In fact, I was scared; did he not recall how only three years ago an assistant chief in a neighboring Sub-Location had been found by the roadside, slaughtered and his body hewed into pieces? I did not see the body but those who saw it confessed that they had never seen anything like that, where fellow human beings had literally slit the neck of another person, then, cut the body as if it were firewood. How did they withstand the last cries of their victim as he moaned and asked for mercy? The thought was unbearable that my son would become chief, and then, I as mother would one day have to face the pain of him dying in such a way. For several days, I was at a loss as to what I, a mother, should tell her son who had six months previously been sacked—for “retrenchment” and “sacked” were the same thing according to me—from his job, and had now found an opening even when I felt that this chance was not the right one. The chief’s work was an evil one, I tried to persuade Chacha, but he told me that he would lead with the teachings and guidance of the Holy Scripture. He said that the Location needed a Christian leader who would light the torch for everyone to follow. I sought the advice of the Giver and His prophets; I prayed; I pleaded with the Good One Above to give Chacha another opportunity and show him that the place of chief was closed to him. I talked to pastor Samuel, who assured me that he would communicate with the Graceful One.

Chacha went ahead and took the interview to become chief. Now and then, I asked him whether he had heard anything from the government, and when there was no reply for two months, I thought that the vacancy had been given to someone else, and I remember praying one day in church and thanking the Lord for making sure that His will had been done. In my expectations, I must have forgotten how the government works; for one evening, nine months after the interview, Chacha came home with a big envelope that
contained his appointment documents. Smiling from one end of his mouth to the other, he placed the paper in my hands. I said nothing, and he was disappointed that a mother could fail to utter a word at a son's accomplishment. When I recovered from my daze, I asked him whether he should take the job, and he was surprised with my question, and told me flatly—in fact he hissed at me—that he would take the offer even if he had seen all along that I did not like the idea. He declared that that was his life, and everything should be left between him and his Savior. I was not attentive to what he said; I only remembered to wish him well, and reminded him that he should lead by the example of the Lord and His Word, and not get infected with these bad things that chiefs and their assistants did all over the place.

About that time there was talk that the opposition political parties would take over the government at the end of the year. But this was the same thing I heard five years before, and in 1992. All the opposition leaders wanted to be president; they just confused me. And the parties were just countless—there was one called DP, another was known as FORD, another SABA SABA, and numerous others. The Kenyan opposition spoke too much about bloodshed, quarreled with and abused the government, and I didn’t know what would become of this country with these people behaving the way they did. The radio said that an opposition leadership would bring only war; Luos would fight against us Kurias, and Masais against Kurias, and blood would flow all over the place. I hated to see blood everywhere. I did not want any more conflicts; I had witnessed terrible fights in the past. Peace, we needed. If the present KANU administration would give us peace, it was better it remained. After all, we had lived with KANU for many years, and calm, we had experienced.

But who knew, anyway? I, Mbusiro, was rather old to think about politics. What I did not like was the government youth-wingers who came around and took my cocks, and called this theft a contribution for some *harambee*. If the coming leadership would shorten the long hands of our rulers—like the assistant chief who at first refused to sign Muniko's I.D. application forms—some good would come out of the political change. I thought that some of these administrators had no manners at all; for, how could the
assistant chief expect Muniko to give a donation and yet Muniko was just a schoolboy? Whenever I wanted to talk to the assistant chief, he told me that he was busy. Finally when I found him at Kehancha town one market day, we walked to the veranda of a shop nearby, and he delivered a long speech to me about how he had too much work, how people were starving in this area, and how headquarters made demands on him. I did not listen to half of the oration, as I wanted him to finish with me so I could go back to selling my produce. I thought he should resign if he could not carry the load of responsibility from his bosses.

He leaned on a pole, pulled a harambee card from his pocket and asked me to pledge something, and before I could say anything he aimed his pen at the paper and was ready to write. He looked at me, and I gazed back.

“How much?” he asked.


“Mama,” he said, “it is just for a small harambee.”

How could he address me respectfully then seek to steal from me? I wanted to ask him what he meant by “small harambee,” but I remembered that I needed a signature from him so I told him to write twenty shillings.

“Twenty shillings only?” he asked. He peered at me as if he were looking at a figure emerging at a distance and trying to discern what it was. “Twenty only?”

“That is all I have.” I placed Muniko’s I.D. forms in his hand. He grumbled, looked from side to side, grabbed the money, and went into the shop. Soon after he returned with the signed papers.

If the opposition people would let old women have their coins, then, they would be good leaders. But bloodshed, I did not want.

* * *

I sat upright in the folding chair in my round mud-walled kitchen and looked through the only door of this hut into the inner cattle kraal. In front of this house, close by the edge of the inner kraal, was my maize granary. Unlike many families, I built our stores in the enclosure of the kraal to safeguard the food from night thieves who would
have to jump over the kraal poles and twigs to enter the pen if they wanted to invade our granaries. The boundary of the outer kraal went round until at some point it met a house. On the whole, we had five buildings. To the right of the kraal’s gate was Chacha’s straight mud-walled iron-roofed house, although as a married man the house did not really belong to him. Among our people, the Kuria, married men owned homesteads, while the houses belonged to the wives. But because I was still alive, this compound could not be called Chacha’s and was therefore known by his late father’s name.

My sister, Sinda, sat in a three-legged low stool to my right, next to the door. She now undid her blue headscarf, laid it on her lap, folded it so that it made three ends and she tied it back on her head. A load of beads hung from her neck, and her ear lobes fell down on her chest—she had undergone the traditional ceremony of ear-piercing and stretching. She extended her long legs and rubbed some dust from them.

We had just completed talking about my plan to visit one of my daughters, and with the long shadows cast outside from the maize shed’s roof, I thought it was getting late, time for her to leave so that I could carry on with my own matters of the afternoon.

“But there is something that I would like to tell you,” she said as she scratched the ground and the dung-smeared floor peeled off. She broke the stick and sat straight in the chair. “But we can discuss that another time,” she said.

“No,” I said, “we can talk about it now. There is still time.”

“I really do not know whether I should tell you this.” She was quiet for a moment as she briefly twisted her right ear.

“What?”

“I mean … Knowing very well that I was responsible. That I was the one who brought her here.” It was my turn to be silent to allow her to say more, but she did not speak.

While growing up, we children in the family had nicknamed Sinda the mute one, but that ended when at the age of about seventeen she faced my father and told him that she had found a man to marry her and she would leave whether the elder sister was married or not. My father was astounded—his head of forest hair seemed to have
suddenly been burned to a flat land baldhead. Before he could respond, Sinda thundered: "If others have chosen to be celibates, that is their decision. I'll not wait to have twisted skin while here at my father's homestead, and listen to my bones crack as I walk." Most surprising of all, she waited for an answer there and then.

"Daughter," my father said, "please go. We shall talk later." As far as I could remember, there was no conversation that day. My father must have discussed with my mother because in the baraza (we the children called such meeting a baraza because it was similar to the baraza that the chief held at his Camp every Monday to issue government policy and settle disputes among members of his Location) the following day, he spoke about "we."

"Since the world is changing, and Sinda has found a husband, we shall allow her to go," Father said at the quiet sitting that evening. There was to be no wedding at the moment—that would be against custom since one had not yet been done for the elder sister—but other obligations had to be fulfilled.

The world was indeed becoming different, especially for my father. It was not unknown to have a daughter married at seventeen; in fact, some fathers gave off their girls earlier than that. But my father insisted that his daughters would not get married before they got to twenty; on the whole, he said that twenty-two was the best age. He often told us of his sister, married while a teenager, who lost her life at childbirth, and my father believed that she passed away because she was too young to successfully carry a pregnancy. I thought my father relented in Sinda's case because she would likely have eloped—better have her leave in a more honorable way, my father must have reasoned. Lately she had taken to "drinking air" all over the place and walking as if she were not stepping on the ground. Sinda did a courageous thing since in those days a girl did not find a husband; rather, it was a husband who found her. Indeed changing was the world.

"Wankio may never give birth," Sinda now said. She looked over her shoulder, peered outside, in case anyone else may have heard her. She and Wankio were best of friends. Wankio was most likely in her house, and I doubted that our voices would reach there.
Meanwhile, it seemed that the room suddenly became airless. I took a short broom of twigs from the floor and waved across my face as if I were dispersing houseflies from pieces of beef at the abattoir. I frowned and felt the wrinkles deepen in my forehead. I sighed. "What did you say?" I asked.

"Mbusiro, you'll forgive me," she replied. Her cheeks seemed to have unusually sunk and the spaces between her jaws and chin deepened. Then, abruptly, she was the thundering daring daughter: "Wankio will never bear a child!"

I was silent. My sister was behaving like Magita the madman of Tarang'anya who the other day had thrown big insults at me when I did not give him my basket. "Sinda, how do you know?" I said.

"I've observed her," she said and revealed canines like those of a wild animal. Her three lower front teeth were missing. She was Magita himself. She slowly closed her mouth.

"No," I said. "You have not looked at her."

Outside, the sunlight was eclipsed for a moment and a cool wind blew into the kitchen.

"Okay, tell me this." She folded her arms across the chest. "Is she pregnant?" She was again the daughter dismissing others as celibates and rugged skins, and Magita wrestling a banana from my hands.

"Control your voice, Sinda," I almost spoke in a whisper.

She leaned forward. "Remember, she was not untouched at the time of marriage."

"Ah, Sinda, we set that aside long time ago."

"We cannot forget it." She lowered her tone. "That is why she cannot bear children."

I placed a hand on my knee. "Sinda, you are the one who brought Wankio into this home."

The world outside darkened; it was becoming colder. Was it going to rain?

"Yes." She held my hand and I had a feeling of a hound chewing ribs. "And that is why I want to help Chacha make a family before it is too late."
She licked her layered lips as if waiting for another bone to be given to her. She must have felt important that she could divine the happenings in my household. We were silent, but I knew she would not be quiet for long.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ll not allow you to take Wankio away,” I said. “You get too much into my affairs.

“I’m your elder sister.”

“Your seniority is not wanted in my home,” I said.

She rose.

“I’ve warned you.” She stepped outside. “The rain is gathering,” she said and hurried through the gate of the outer kraal.

I went out. Dark clouds hung in the sky and thunder roared at a distance. Sinda would be rained on, I thought, but I was not sure if I cared. Too bad that she had chosen to be like Magita, the lunatic.

* * *

I stepped out safely from a matatu at Taran’ganya chief’s Camp junction. I looked down the road in the direction of the river Nyangoto and then toward Kehancha town where I had come from, and when I was sure that no vehicle was coming I crossed the way. Just as I reached the other side, someone emerged from beside a tree and approached me. That was Magita’s manner of appearing—like a crow out to snatch a chick. He was the madman, the “owner” of Tarang’anya.

At about thirty years old, he was the tall height of a sisal pole, and had a long nose that almost reached his lips. His dark-charcoal hair was long and had strands of white and was neatly kept—at least he remembered to comb every day. In my right hand I held a basket full of items that I had bought at Kehancha, and as the owner of Tarang’anya came closer, I moved the basket to the other hand so that the right one could be free to greet him. It was known that those who did not greet him with a handshake awakened the legion of demons in his head. He looked at my luggage and I knew that he wanted something to eat, so I got a banana, turned it, examined it, and when I was satisfied that it was a good one I handed it to him. He refused to take it with a wave of his hand that said
that such a little thing was for a child, and that he was not a baby. He stretched his hand toward my things. The right arm of his black coat was torn at the elbow and the threads dangled into my items. I held the basket away and reminded him that he should treat me as his mother-in-law, but he was undeterred—he grabbed the basket as if I had taken it on credit from him and refused to pay, and he now wanted to keep the item until I met the cost. He actually said that that was his property, and pulled from one end and I from the other side. I knew that if I let go, he could take all the bananas and even the basket. I looked round to see if anyone was coming because I did not want to be seen struggling with a madman.

Finally, I got it from him. How I managed, I do not know. I should have moved away, but I stood there and told him to think twice next time before pushing his mother-in-law all over the place, and I advised him to get a wife like other men. That must have released the bad spirits in his head and he rattled on that he did not need a woman at all. He sent out a shrill laughter that seemed to have come not through his mouth, but through his wide nostrils. He kept quiet and seemed to be regretting what he had said, then: “Why should I have a woman when some people with wives do not know what to do with them?” he asked.

Magita was generally a harmless lunatic, but once in a while his harmlessness stopped—one time he had taken his brother’s child and thrown him over a sisal hedge. This was after Magita’s mother had visited the Ikondo village herbalist who had Magita tied and fed with the juices of barks and roots through the nose. His mother told me that Magita had growled like a goat at the slaughterhouse, but that she did not mind this since the beasts were being exorcised. She wondered why the spirits remained lodged in her son’s head and I advised her that the demons needed a powerful voice (not the mutterings of Ikondo) to command them to enter a herd of swine that would drive them to the river.

“Tell your daughter-in-law to come,” Magita now said. “Tell her to come see Magita if you want a grandchild.” He paused. “In fact, you’ll get a boy.” And he pointed at those parts. Well … I can’t mention the word.
I saw one or two people coming up the road from the Nyangoto bridge. Magita’s talk was going far beyond the need of a banana. I threw the fruit at him and hurried away. He ignored it, flapped the hands of his coat and stood in my way. At that point I imagined a baby hurled over a fence and what would happen to an elderly woman like me.

I moved out of his way and walked faster. He shouted that my son had been bewitched, his manhood crushed, that he would never make any woman heavy, and that the solution lay in contacting Magita, and he rambled all that rubbish which could be expected from a lunatic. Kind God forgive him. He said that I should release my son from the pot of pastor Samuel so that he could seek other pots; that I would have no grandchild to light the evening candle for me, and no one with whom to read the Bible and hold prayer at the night fire to chase away the cold; that was not the king in the Holy Book polygamous; that was not Jesus with two wives (two wives as if he were best man at Jesus’ weddings, what sacrilege!), and all that litter from an insane who was assured that he would fill his stomach with a banana. He shouted his filth until I was far, far away. I branched from the road and took the path leading to my compound and arrived at home panting.

Magita was not known before then to speak dirty language to elderly women. What had become of him? That he could talk such words about the Bible and Jesus was also surprising. He usually came to church early and sat at the front benches as the room was being prepared for service. He bowed and quickly intoned some phrases, and made sure that he left when the session was about to begin.

For several days after the Magita incident I heard his voice in my ears. What was a madman telling me? That the king had many wives? But why was the king polygamous? If the king had many wives, he must have strayed from the ways of the High Lord. And what king did Magita talk about? Had Magita read the Great Book? I did not think he had gone beyond Class Four. What did Magita know about kings and wives and the Holy Word beyond sitting at the house of the Almighty Above and reciting incantations to heathen figures? Blasphemy! He ought to be barred from stepping on the holy grounds of God’s building.
I had strange thoughts and I decided to share them with pastor Samuel. The pastor assured me that Magita was not God’s messenger, and that Magita was not even a false prophet, and he was nothing close to a disciple. Pastor Samuel also confirmed to me that Jesus Christ did not have two wives. “All right,” I said, and tried to move on with my daily life.

**Wankio One**

One Saturday morning, I sat in a three-legged stool and peeled sweet potatoes under the gum tree some distance from my house. During the lunchtime rest, our cattle sometimes sat here and they had eroded some of the grass. The roots of the tree stuck out and spread close to my feet. I had washed the potatoes and laid them on a goatskin; I put the ready ones in a basin nearby. I rubbed my hands on my shawl tied around my waist, and tightened the scarf on my head. I leaned forward and pulled some potatoes nearer. Some clouds covered the sun briefly; then, they moved on. It would probably rain at night.

Since there was no one else at home today, I decided that I would boil these potatoes and take them with *obosara* drink. My mother-in-law had gone to a funeral, and Chacha was in Migori town, thirty kilometers from here, on some issues to do with his job. With the approaching elections he had a lot to do and he did not have even a minute to sit down. Chacha’s younger brothers, Muniko and Rungu, had gone to assist a friend construct the roof of his hut. So I was alone and I could even decide to go without lunch.

“Mosaiga,” a voice greeted me.

“You almost scared me!” I said. Gati had most likely walked on her toes, and now stood beside me. Her broad feet had traces of water.

“You should know the way I arrive,” she said. Her hand gripped onto a *jembe* slung on her shoulder and her big biceps bulged as those of a boxing champion. She was likely from her farm across the river. Gati and I grew up together in Nyamotambe village, about five kilometers from here, attended the same primary school, and proceeded to different secondary schools. But in Form Two she left, went home in the middle of the term, packed her bags, and followed the man who had made her pregnant. We remained
friends, and when I got married here, I therefore moved closer to where she lived and our relationship was strengthened. In fact, her matrimonial home beyond the river faced mine on this other side and we were in different villages.

“I know your steps,” I responded to her comment, “but when you come tiptoeing like a thief in the night…”

“Wankio, please, don’t preach now.” She smiled. She often said that if I had been a pastor I would never have converted anyone since I was always too eager to rush to the Bible. But I reminded her every time that I was quick only when I talked to her.

“Mosaiga, take my seat.” I offered and rose. Having been circumcised in the same year, we called each other “Mosaiga,” although it was not common for women to refer to each other as such; in fact, we used this name more as the nickname of the two of us. I entered the house to get another stool.

“I won’t stay long,” she shouted.

“Even one minute?” I asked as I returned.

She put the hoe on the ground, pulled the chair and sat. I moved the transistor radio, which I was listening to, a bit away from her and placed it on a pile of dry leaves close to the tree trunk.

“You really should just take your seat and … I’ll leave soon.”

“No, you’ll take my lunch,” I said.

“Eh, Mosaiga, who will cook for my young ones?” Whenever she mentioned children I saw some guilt in her face, as if her eyes were reprimanding her for uttering a taboo word. “No,” she said, “I mean there are people at home waiting for my meal.” Again she lowered her head. I had observed that of late it was difficult for her to talk to me because she probably thought I saw everything in terms of my being childless.

“So where is everybody?” she asked. That still did not seem to mollify her. “Oh God, I am tired.” She stretched her arms and yawned. Her lips were dry. “I have been weeding the cassava since six.”

“You should invite me to come help you.”
“I'll not,” she said. “That *shamba* is like your own.” She smiled. “Just walk in any time and assist.”

There was silence. I decided to answer her question. “The old lady has gone to a burial,” I said. I reduced the volume of the radio. “As for the men, you know that they cannot be confined here at this time.”

“But it is only eleven.”

“Move your chair away from the sun,” I said. A wave of wind blew some dust to her face. She placed a hand on her lips and sneezed.

“I'm okay,” she said. “Give me a knife. I'll peel with you.”

“But you said that you won’t stay.” I stood up and as I entered the house she shouted that I should remember to get water so she could wash her hands.

“Also get me something to drink,” she said.

I returned with a knife, and water in a hand basin; I went back and from the building I heard her cough. That dirt must have gone into her throat, I thought. As I came back I caught Gati’s tear-filled eyes staring at me. She rubbed her face and looked at me from foot to chest, and then she quickly turned away. She waved her head. Wasn’t I the same tall Wankio, with small ears, and one not-good-eye, that she had seen all these years?

“Why did you shake your head?” I asked.

“I just recalled the madman, Magita.”

“What has he done?”

“These days he seems to do more terrible things,” she said. “His insanity is going out of control.”

“Yes,” I said.

“One of these days he’ll do something that this village will remember forever.”

I gave her *obosara* in a big mug. “I hope he does not kill a human being,” I said.

“Mosaiga, you know how to take care of me. *Obosara* is the best for this thirst.”

She gulped the drink.
She started peeling a potato from among those she had sorted to her side; she had chosen huge ones only. "Is murder the only thing that can never be forgotten?" Gati asked in response to my statement about Magita. She pushed back two large potatoes toward me and took a lean one.

"Just work on the ones you want," I said. I was a bit amused at this game of exchanging the roots. The weeding had fatigued her and this was showing, although she may equally have been playing some divination trick of the heathen.

"Have the big ones so that you can grow fatter," she said. "Magita will strangle somebody," she said.

"God will watch over him."

"He'll do worse than what he did the other day." Although she had witnessed only the last moments of Magita snatching things from my mother-in-law's basket, Gati narrated the event as if she had been there from the beginning. I believed that so much had been added to the story about Jesus having been married.

"I was talking to my aunt the other day...," Gati said, changing the topic.

"Umm." I concentrated on my work.

"And she said that medicine can be found," she said.

"To heal Magita?"

"But his mother has traveled the entire world."

"Yes," I said.

Suddenly, she went quiet. She hummed a sad song.

"Has anything bad happened?" I asked.

"No."

"Is everybody okay at home?" I asked. Silence. "Is he molesting you again?" I peered at her face for any bruises. Her husband often beat her, at times very badly. He minced her like meat, my mother-in-law usually said. "How is your minced-meat friend?" my mother-in-law could ask, and giggle like a playful teenager. She laughed as if she had invented some words into the language. Then, suddenly, she would change her tone and say that it was the devil in the house that brought such lashings. Gati's husband claimed
that she was disobedient and always arrogantly answered back even when she had not been provoked. Many people objected to this, and saw the man as the one with the restless hand that always sought an opportunity to relax itself by beating someone who would not fight back. With Gati’s muscles, she could easily wrestle her husband to the ground, but instead at one point she had ran away to her parental home, and he paid with a heifer in order to get her back.

“He has not touched me,” she now replied.

“That is good.”

“These days I know the remedy,” she said. “He’s also aware that if he lays a hand on me he will be fined.” As an afterthought she said, “Nobody hits a woman whose sons have become big boys.”

The radio said that it was quarter to twelve. “It’s noon. I now have to leave,” Gati said as if correcting the announcer. She placed the knife on the goatskin, rose, and tied her shawl tighter around the waist. She stretched her arms, and took a deep breath in and out. “I am tired,” she said and sighed.

We moved away from the gum tree down the compound. “Have you tried other means?” she abruptly asked. She talked as if she was not addressing me, or I was not the subject that she spoke about. We were quiet. We walked side by side; she, bowed down; I, gazed ahead.

Suddenly, she turned. “Wankio, I really want you to have a baby.”

I, too, wanted a child. I wanted more then she wanted and more than anybody else wanted. I had felt the agony of seven years of waiting. I had experienced the pain. “I know,” I said.

“Think of attempting all ways. You should even see herbalists. If hospitals have failed. God does not reject children. Wherever they come from.” She was breathless; it was as if a load had been lifted from her. She touched my shoulder. “I feel for you,” she said. We stopped there in the path leading to the river.

I nodded.

“We’re not growing younger,” she said.
I was sure that there were many others who thought like Gati, that at 33 I was getting old. People thought me already aged even before I got married because to be married at the time I was, was to be married well after the expected age. During my holidays while at Teacher Training College, I saw what the women of my village, Nyamotambe, meant with their eyes they met me at the market center, or at the river, or at the flourmill.

During one circumcision ceremony, as we escorted the girl-initiates on the earth road from the initiation grounds back home, some woman called Nyakebati, created a chorus in which she said that “while putting many books into their heads, their faces have rusted like dry sugarcane peels, and they think they have become men.” At the beginning it seemed an innocent refrain, but it soon gained momentum and everyone in the crowd of about 80 joined. The group danced, cheered, and added all sorts of obscenities to the song. All through, the words “dry sugarcane peels” were retained. I tried to convince myself that the chorus was not about me, so I joined and shouted it louder and louder, and looked around to make sure that I was not the only one who had put many books into her head. I felt redeemed that there were other people who had also attended college like myself. I was salvaged better by what happened next.

It had rained the previous night, and now there was a drizzle that made the road slippery. I did not notice when Nyakebati fell; I just saw her on the ground as she struggled to mumble the words of her now popular piece. Then, she went dumb. Some women gathered around her to find out why the song had been swallowed midway, and when they realized that she was not hurt they dispersed and took up the lines that had arisen out of the Nyakebati accident. In this new chorus someone led us in chanting about “one whose legs had been lifted and smeared with mud.”

Teasing was part of a circumcision occasion, but it was also common that some people took this chance to clear up real and imaginary bad feelings toward others. When I arrived home that day I secretly took a mirror and looked at my face to be sure that it was not dry sugarcane peels. Later I asked myself: Was Nyakebati settling some dispute with me, or with some member of my family? I even asked my mother if she had any grudge.
with Nyakebati, to which my mother replied that as far as she could remember, there was none. “That is just circumcision ceremony mischief and fun,” my mother said and dismissed my persistent questions.

I was aware that naughtiness and jest at times turned out to much more than that. Take for instance Wegesa’s story that was now part of the everyday speech of the women of Nyamotambe village. Wegesa was said to be unfaithful to her husband, and many people claimed to know her lovers. It struck some people as an insult to her husband when she created a circumcision chorus that challenged men who thought that they possessed their wives, “own them, own everything.” The last line of her refrain posed: “Who do they think they are?” Her husband’s sister was at the gathering where this response was chanted and the women thumped their chests. The sister felt that her brother and the entire family had been dipped into cattle dung. She felt that she owed more loyalty to her brother and not the jumping womenfolk, and she therefore went and provokingly told her brother, so that “my family can be put back in its place of honor,” she said. The “put back in its place of honor” that followed was something that became famous in the community of Nyamotambe and farther. Words were hurled, many insults exchanged, clubs thrown, and children disowned. When calm returned, Wegesa had been divorced—the aftermath of what began as cheer. In a subsequent ceremony, a wise mind recalled Wegesa’s story and composed a song cautioning the women to beware of what occurred to Wegesa who had the courage to confront the spirits in their dwelling place as they discussed the society’s fate. Greater wits took this as a challenge and created even more malicious refrains.

The Nyakebati “dry sugarcane peels” refrain never left my mind. Such a chorus—especially coming from a woman like Nyakebati—was not without a sinister angle. Was she foretelling what would happen to me in years to come? Did her shrill voice bear any meaning for the future? Was there anything more to the mixture of muffled words, a drizzle, a slippery road, and lifted legs?

“Yes, we’re not young,” I now said to Gati.

“The two of you should see a herbalist,” Gati repeated what she had said earlier.
Gati now looked very confident; her hesitancy of moments before seemed to have
gone. I felt a pang of bitterness cut through my stomach. Was my childlessness an excuse
for her to preach to me the words of the devil? Chacha and I had consulted many doctors,
and we would still see more. We would not go to Satan’s diviners.

“That is wrong,” I answered Gati.

Chacha often wondered what I discussed with “that woman who does not come to
church.” I told my husband that the Lord advised us who have seen the light to present the
message to all and in that way we would bring many into the kingdom. I had spoken to
Gati about the word of God, but she did not seem ready. We usually talked for long times,
we even read the Bible together, but I doubted that she listened keenly to the verses. She
said that she did not have to go to church since she already lived an upright life.

“Haven’t you told me now and again that God told Adam and Eve to give birth
and fill the earth?” Gati said.

She was fond of giving my statements back to me, and most of the time she did so
I just smiled. Sometimes I even laughed, and showed her how she had misrepresented the
teachings of the Bible. Today I neither smiled nor laughed, and did not wish to reeducate
her.

“God helps those who help themselves,” she continued. “Wankio, days never wait
for us.”

I did not hear when she said goodbye. I just saw her disappear across the sisal
hedge down towards the river. I stood at the place she had left me. As my friend she
should have been aware that the persistent talk of children, and children, and children
weighed upon me. I wondered why I had allowed her to come this near, why I had guided
her to pry into my life. I looked down the way she had gone and I thought of shouting at
the narrow path and at her, and barking at the river for allowing her to cross. Why hadn’t
it filled up, broken its banks and flooded to keep her away from here? I wanted to set
aside my Christian teachings and call her a sniffing fox, and hurl all types of horrible
names at her.
I wanted children; I should have had at least three of them by now. Life without offspring was a deprived life, full of loneliness. What would become of me in old age, when my body was tired, and I needed a grandchild to get me some drinking water? With the passing of each year I took longer to walk from Kehancha to Tarang’anya, and when I arrived my legs ached. Then I had to look for vegetables, light the fire, and get clothes from the washing line. My first-born would now be six years old. Every time I went to Nyamotambe village to visit my mother, she talked to me as if she wanted me to tell her that there was someone developing in my womb. My sisters pitied me. They smiled, cuddled their babies while I looked, and I forced a grin too. When they began talking about children I excused myself, pretended to go for a short call, and spent thirty minutes out there. When I came back, they still went on about how so and so’s boy was growing fast, and how he would resemble so and so.

I wanted children. But I did not have to walk around like a homeless heathen and enter people’s homes at lunchtime and look through the door crevices to see if there were any food leftovers. How could Gati reduce herself to quoting the Bible that God assisted those who helped themselves, a statement known by even those who thought that Jesus was one of their fetish clan magicians? She seemed to have joined those, like Aunt Sinda, who were against me. Did my mother-in-law also belong to this group?

* * *

When Gati had left, I completed my work, prepared lunch, and took a rest. I must have slept deeply for about two hours until heavy winds that blew outside woke me up. The skies rattled with thunder from Maeta hill, and as that was the sign that there would be rain, I started collecting items into the houses. I went through the kraal and got a sack from my mother-in-law’s kitchen and began filling it with the cassava that had been drying on several hides close to her maize granary.

The winds whistled and the sky rumbled more. Cows mooed and goats bleated. In our neighbor’s compound a mother shouted at her child to get out of the way. Dogs yapped, and snarled. Footsteps of cattle approached our homestead. There was more mooing as our livestock crossed the sisal hedge and rushed into the yard. I shouted at my
cousin, who was with the animals, to watch over the cows so that they did not feed their young ones. I abandoned the cassava and ran to untie the calves and lock them in their pen. I quickly returned to the food. From beyond the river, from Maeta, the storm raced toward our home.

I did not notice when Muniko, my brother-in-law, arrived with another sack and started stuffing it with cassava. In a moment, he dragged the full bag into the kitchen. As we filled the last one, the rain reached the kraal gate and in a second drops fell on my feet, in some sort of caressing way. But then the water became sharper, and just as we stepped at the doorstep of my mother-in-law’s kitchen to take in the final sack, the skies opened and our compound received the downpour. It came in thuds then followed a gush as one breaking through a bridge. Muniko slightly stooped and with head almost touching the top of the door, whooped to mock the rainfall. All the snarling and mooing of animals, the whistling of the wind, and Muniko’s excitement were silenced as the water completely covered our compound and proceeded to the next plot. This was the fruit of the clouds that had gathered as I peeled sweet potatoes this morning. Good rain announced itself in advance, it was not like the one that had come abruptly and destroyed my mother-in-law’s sukuma.

“It has splashed on me,” Muniko said as a flash of lightning passed in front of his face. He jumped inside. His left leg had a slight limp from an injury he had a few years ago while felling a tree.

Thunder rumbled across the sky and the hut’s roof seemed to tremble, but that did not bother me. A strange delight ran through me.

“Hahahaha,” Muniko laughed and shut the door.

“Muniko, don’t yell like that,” I said. “You’re just covering up your fear of little things.” I broke some firewood.

“I may be scared, but I was quick enough to save you before you were drowned in the rain.”

“Thank you. Today I would have had a cold.”

He took a stool and sat by the hearthstones.
“The fire is not ready yet,” I said.

“Make it ready. Quick.”

“Eh, I’ve always said that your wife will suffer. You command too much.”

Whenever I told him this he quickly told me that by the time he married, he would have learned to request. But today he kept quiet. He was Chacha’s immediate younger brother although there was an age difference of 13 years between them. There were three sisters between Chacha and Muniko. Muniko was the tallest in the family; he had to bend in order to enter every house in the homestead. Because he walked with a stoop, his friends nicknamed him “the crooked one” and he seemed to have liked it, a name that he proudly called himself.

“I’m wet.” He touched his long hair. I looked around for something to give him to wipe his head. I could only see my shawl that I had left on a seat as I came in to get the empty sacks.

“Use this,” I said. He hesitated. “Don’t be shy. It’s the only one we have now.”

When he still did not take the cloth, I swiftly brushed water from his head. He grabbed the material from me, passed it over his hair, as a sharp knife would peel a potato, and threw it in a nearby chair.

I laughed. “Muniko, I’m not your mother-in-law.” He pretended not to have heard, moved closer, and began stoking the hearth place.

“Stop. You’ll put off my fire.”

He obeyed and folded his hands across his chest. “Okay, I surrender,” he said as if as an afterthought.

“You didn’t thank me for the shawl.” I smiled.

He was quiet. “Thank you,” he said.

“Your wife will have problems if she’ll not be the type to ask for thanks.”

“She’ll see it here.” He pointed at his eyes that were more round than oval. He almost had no eyebrows, which I had initially thought when I was new into this home that he consistently shaved, but I later realized that he was not the kind to go to such pains.
“Let’s play draught,” he said after I had lit the fire and we had warmed ourselves for some time. I had also put on the lantern and the room was bright. Outside, it still rained with increasing intensity; we could now start thinking of the next planting.

“Wait first.” I rose. “You’ll choose between draught and strong tea,” I said.

“You’re scared that I’ll beat you at the game.” He laughed.

“It’s either food or sport.” I sorted among the sufurias for one to prepare the drink.

“You’re afraid,” he said. “You can only defeat Chacha.”

I ignored him and I was sure that he was happy I had thought of, and settled on, food. His mother called him “ugali”; she said that Muniko while young had been very fond of flour meal, a habit that to me seemed to have been carried far beyond childhood. His mother said that as a child, Muniko’s each day’s first announcement that competed with the crowing of cocks and the flapping of hens’ wings and shook the morning stillness seeking supremacy over everything else, was the cry for ugali. Since in that early morning there was no warm ugali, his mother gave him cold leftovers of the previous night. She always made sure that all remains were not fed to the dogs for she predicted that when “ugali” woke up and found no food, he would likely cause the earth to shake. The habit of eating leftovers was one that Muniko had pursued up to the time I was married into this home, for I had witnessed him consume the flour meal after ox-plowing at nine in the morning. His mother condemned him, but she gave up when her son still clung to the practice. She said that Muniko was a hard worker, and he therefore deserved to eat well—hot, warm, cold, and leftovers.

On his part, Muniko nicknamed his mother “ugali squared,” for he said that before she offered him the stony flour meal, she ate part of it and claimed that she was only tasting it, but Muniko could not believe that the hillock of ugali in his mother’s hand was just for “tasting.” During one school holiday Muniko, who was in secondary school at the time, came home with a new idea. He called his mother “scorched earth squared”—the “scorched earth” was apparently learned in some class lesson the previous term. Finally, he settled on “scorched earth” and was hilarious with this invention of which he promptly informed his younger brother, Rungu. The two became excited with the name
and tossed it as if it were a piece of roast maize being generously passed around
customers at the evening fireside. I was sure that my mother-in-law knew of her
nickname, but she never said anything about it. She continued to call Muniko “ugali.”

Chacha One
For the interview I dressed in a second-hand brown suit. Initially I had wanted to get on
my bicycle and head for Kehancha town ten kilometers from home, but decided against
that because I did not want to enter the place while stinking of sweat. So I got into a
matatu to Kehancha. When I alighted, there was some dirt on my trousers since rarely did
one travel in public service vehicles and leave without a mark. I arrived thirty minutes
early and thought I was in time to get a sitting space, but I had to stand. Earlier comers
had already taken the only bench there that was placed against a low brick wall of the
veranda. I looked at those present, interrogated each in my mind, and did the same for
everyone arriving. I felt a little uneasy when I realized that I might have overdressed for
this occasion, and wondered if I might be considered over-qualified for the vacancy.

I had been to about five job interviews before; the last one I attended was several
years ago. To bring myself to the present situation, I had yesterday asked my wife to ask
me some questions. At first she was not ready to be the interviewer, claiming that she
herself had never been to any interview. Later she agreed to treat the whole thing as a
class lesson and test me. She asked me why I wanted to be chief, and whether I would use
the law of the Bible or the law of man to rule the Location. I dismissed the second
question as irrelevant because I did not foresee a pastor on the interviewing panel.

On the day of the interview proper, I was not the first to enter the room. Whenever
someone came out, some of my colleagues followed him to get an idea of what they
should expect, but I ignored their panic. Finally, my turn arrived. At the corner to the left
of the door was a pile of sacks that probably contained chickens waste. I soon realized
that this building belonged to the ministry of Agriculture, and that insecticides and seeds
were kept here. The place seemed to have been haphazardly swept this morning for use in
the present function. It was a small room, and the panel of about eight people was
crammed around a table at the center. The chairman was a retired District Commissioner (D.C.) whose beard badly needed a trim. His tie, which he adjusted throughout the session, was expansive and rather long—so long that it almost touched the floor. When I entered, all the eyes were directed at me for some time, and then the Chair tapped his baton on the table and indicated that I could sit. I do not recall all the questions that they asked me, but I remember that someone wanted to know the acreage of the land I owned, another how much livestock I had, and another the number of cattle I thought should be paid to a bride’s parents. One even asked me to recite the loyalty pledge, something that as pupils we memorized in primary school over twenty-five years ago. I could not immediately find the relevance of some questions to the matter at hand, but I stoically answered them because I did not want to be unemployed forever.

After I left the room, I realized that the Nyatechi councilor, Mageta, who I had been told was canvassing for one of his clan members to become chief had raised most of the unimportant issues. His argument was that his kin always produced leaders, and that my clan was so small that a person from such a miniature group would never get enough support to enable him to rule. People stopped me by the roadside and whispered that I needed to be careful with Mageta, that “he is the type of person who can poison you, he can even send thugs to your house to slaughter you.” I nodded and replied that God would protect me, but one old man told me that if I thought I would use the doctrine of pastor Samuel to lead the Location I should not take up the chief’s job. He was the same person who said that Mageta went around the area saying that the citizens should not be led by a baby for Mageta argued that since I had no children I was not an adult at all. “He even called you a castrated bull,” the old man told me. He said that Mageta was inciting the public to reject that ox from Samuel’s herd. I knew that the decision of who should become chief did not rest on Mageta alone, although many people believed that he had a lot of influence in the offices at the district headquarters in Kehancha, and people said that he sent his children to take goats to the D.C in the evenings. Mageta could not be trusted, the old man ruled and advised me to consult those who would step where he had
passed and erase his footprints. Mageta was not of my Location, but his talk of castrated bulls and Samuel’s herd scared me a bit.

Castrated bulls or not, and without getting anyone to rub footmarks, I was appointed chief. Twenty minutes after I was installed as chief, a man came to my office door with a land boundary dispute. Before he even sat, he elaborately explained how every night his stepbrother moved the sisal border between the plots of the two of them. “Chief, he is eating into my land. And he smokes bhang. Yesterday night he nearly killed me after smoking those leaves of his.” I had not even dusted all the corners of my desk, and here was someone expecting me to solve his problem about land, bhang, and leaves. I was scheduled to meet with assistant chiefs in my location that morning so I told the man to come the following day, upon which he replied that his stepbrother would most likely strangle him that night.

The story of a boundary and leaves was just the perfect beginning into my life in this job. People arrived at our home as early as seven, even earlier, with issues to be dealt with. One Sunday as Wankio and I had breakfast, a woman by the name Nyansita, came and said that her two sons had quarreled that morning over a widow their brother had left behind. I think that she was initially a little ashamed—she being my mother’s age—to tell me that the two had fought over the control of the widow’s bed, but I insisted and she said that the woman loved the younger son and yet the clan had given her to the elder one. The older sibling attacked his brother with a panga, and cut his hand, but the way the woman trembled as she narrated the incident made me doubt that that was all the injury.

Neighbors had taken the hurt person to hospital, she said.
“I would like you to reconcile them,” Nyansita told me.
“But one of them is in the hospital,” I said.
“You can talk to them when the other one has recovered.”
“We’ll first arrest the elder one and implement the law,” I said.
“No,” she said.
“He has committed a crime.”
“No, but it is just his brother,” the woman insisted.
“Then, go and tell this matter to the assistant chief.” She was irritating me.

“He cannot help me. He has been unable to solve this problem.”

I told Wankio that I would be a little late for church and left with Nyansita. I passed by the chief’s Camp and asked two Administration Policemen (A.P.) to accompany us; the woman did not seem to like their presence, but she said nothing. We arrived at her home and easily arrested the elder son and took him with us to the Camp.

I did not go to the service that day, and when I came home in the evening my mother reminded me that it was God who had given me the job and I needed to set Sundays aside for Him. In our house, Wankio lay in bed and she said that she was tired and unwell. I left her to rest, took some material on Public Administration that I had been given at the D.C’s office, and went to the sitting room to read.

“I would like us to discuss something,” Wankio told me later that night. We were seated in our bed. The light, from the lantern on a table in front of us, cast our shadows on the mud wall. Behind the table was a cupboard on top of which were two suitcase boxes with our clothes.

“What is it?” I said. “Are you all right?” I touched her left arm and then face to feel her temperature. She had been fine in the morning, but with so many mosquitoes buzzing around, malaria attacked at anytime. In this season, almost every household in my Location had an affected person. I did not detect anything wrong with Wankio’s body.

She sighed. “I feel lonely,” she said. She placed her chin in her hand.

I touched her arm. I looked at her, but her head was bowed. “I am sorry,” I said after some silence. “Everything will be in order after I have settled into the job.” As a chief I spent less and less time with her, did not accompany her to church as I used to, and I was not always present to take meals with the rest of the family. At most times there were people in our home who wanted to consult me about some matter; before I even washed my face in the morning someone with a problem knocked at the door. Wankio wondered whether these people did not know where my office was.

“Nothing is going to be fine,” Wankio now said. I did not talk. She waited. “You have been saying this all the time,” she said.
On the day I got the appointment letter in the post office at Kehancha, I felt as excited as a child who had acquired something he had long wanted to have. It was a market day at Kehancha; I crossed the road and entered the market area and looked for someone to give the news. I met my uncle Masui, but I did not commit a lot of time to him since he was the kind of person who always lined up his troubles before the two of you had even completed exchanging greetings. His problems ranged around beer, money, and “something for my stomach.” I saw no one worth telling and since it was approaching evening I got into a maiatu and headed home. The vehicle started off with loud honking that was a sign of confidence, but soon it was croaking its way up the road. It gasped and the women passengers must have held their breath and worried that they would not be in time in their houses to prepare the sukuma they had bought so as to have their children eat before they retired to bed. I knew, and I supposed many in the groaning machine also knew, that the driver referred to his Datsun as “a short distance runner” because it only operated between Kehancha and Tarang’anya, and only on market days in town. Soon the short distance runner froze to a complete stop, the driver and his conductor jumped down, opened the bonnet and fidgeted with some wires. I became impatient and walked home.

About one hundred meters from home, I almost ran; instead, I walked faster. I arrived in our compound beaming and saw Wankio getting clothes from the washing line next to the gum tree in front of our house. I strode and stood at her left. I smiled. She greeted me. I pulled an envelope from my coat pocket and gave her and I smiled again. She turned her head briefly and glanced at the paper as one could look—in passing—at a piece of meat at the butchery that she was not interested in buying.

“What is it?” she asked. She continued getting the clothes and placing them in her left arm.

My hand was still stretched toward her. “Just see,” I said.

She looked again—simply another glance. She took the envelope, looked at the address, and then placed the paper near her armpit and pressed her arm on it. She realized that it could not be held there for long, and she moved as if to put it on the ground.

“Please, Chacha, take it. I’ll read it later.”
“I want you to read it now. Do you know what it’s about?” I smiled. I wondered what I must have appeared like to her.

“I know,” she replied. After a moment’s silence she said, “They have employed you.” She spoke as if she had been in long battle against “they” and now she had lost. She placed the envelope on the grass.

“Open it,” I said.

She nodded. Wankio sometimes behaved as if she wanted me to court her all over again. With her help, I had done that in the past, but today she did not seem willing to assist me. I had first met her at a Pentecostal convention at Migori about nine years ago. Her cousin introduced her to me; then the three of us had lunch together, and for the next six months I did not see her. When I next met her at Kehancha, I discovered that I was beginning to love her. We dated for one year, then, married.

“Read it, then,” I said. A wind blew across her, and she tightened her face which seemed chalk-like and appeared to have made tiny cracks like those that form when clay dries after it has been beaten by the sun. She sneezed and her eyes became wet.

It was only later that evening that Wankio congratulated me and hoped “that the job will be good for the family.”

Pastor Samuel had told me that the chief’s position might take me away from my family, but I doubted this very much. When I thought that that would turn out to be the case, I dismissed the thought, arguing that people were always changing and we would deal with the situation when it emerged. The pastor cited fallen kings in the Old Testament, and I quoted Paul, who said that leaders were chosen by God. When I got the job, the pastor came home to pray for God’s blessings for my family, and His guidance in my new responsibility. He spoke about unity and in his “brief” sermon referred again to the same stories of David, Solomon, and Ahab. I did not listen to half of his service; he never left a compound without a “brief” message that sometimes lasted for three hours. We sang “I am a soldier in the army of the Lord” and my mother closed the session with a prayer whose length almost rivaled that of pastor Samuel’s preaching.

“Wankio, it’s only three months into the job,” I now said.
“That’s a long duration. The maize planted three months ago is halfway to harvest time.”

“And it takes eight months before reaping.” There was still plenty to learn in this new work, and I thought my wife was not being patient.

“I’m lonely,” she said.

At this point I did not know what to say. I still held her hand and slowly caressed the arm up and down. Her head was still bowed.

“I want someone with me when you go away.”

I now got a clear idea of where she was going.

“Chacha.” She was silent for a moment. “This is a miserable world. This is unfair.”

“Please,” that was all I could say.

“We need to do more.”

“We shall try,” I said. “But we have tried. What haven’t we done?”

“We have to see a doctor.”

In some ways, Wankio was like my mother. When my mother and my father disagreed, in most cases my mother was the one who spoke and won the talking war. She could raise her voice and my father only murmured. She could then tell him to repeat what he had said, and my father could go dumb. In many instances, they had quarreled over money missing from somewhere near the pillow and my mother accused him of taking her savings and using it on beer or snuff. He feebly protested and asked her to go and check properly where she had placed the money. “Or how do you know if it’s not the children who took it?” he defended himself.

One day, as my father took tobacco snuff, my mother asked him of the whereabouts of some notes she had placed below the pillow. Either my father did not answer, or did not reply well enough from where he sat in the kitchen on a log next to the hearthstones; my mother grabbed the snuff in a dry banana leaf in his hand and threw everything into the fire. He had just returned from felling sisal poles to repair the roof of the hut. I was at the door when my father’s snuff turned into smoke, which drifted out
through a small window slightly above where he sat. The window was never closed; at
night we placed a threadbare sack there that did little to seal the space. He stared at the
hearth for a moment, and I hoped that he would do something to counter what my mother
had done, but when he turned and looked at a panga on the floor, I became afraid. He
lowered his face almost to knee level, and seemed to be listening for some voice from the
ground.

I was not happy to see a defenseless man disturbed while he took his tobacco in
peace and I still felt that he should do something to reclaim his honor. My mother
must have realized that I was angry and to ease the tension she sent me to get a filter for the tea
that she had prepared. I just stood at the door; she came over, and twisted and pulled my
ear until I felt as if it were being uprooted from the rest of my body. I went away
grumbling that people should find better places to keep their coins. My father clicked his
tongue, cursed, walked out, packed some clothes into a small bag, and left home.

After about eight months, someone told my mother that my father had been seen
in a village in Mogumu, Tanzania. He had relatives there, but the person who gave this
story said that he was not living among these kin, but was staying with a woman whom he
had married. My mother dispatched communication to him to come back home. He sent
word back that he would never come back.

Then one afternoon, he returned home. Meremo, my six-year old sister, who was
not yet weaned when he left, denied that that was her father, and said that her father was
already in heaven. The conversation in the family now revolved around sin and
redemption, and the fact that my father soon also spoke the same language convinced me
that he had not been a bad man after all. We in the family never again heard of pillows,
nor saw the mixture of tobacco, wood, and fire curl through a window, although once in a
while my mother raised her voice over something else. My father clutched the Bible up to
the time he passed away nine years later.

"But we have seen many doctors," I now said to Wankio.

"You," she said then hesitated, and raised her head briefly. "You should see a
doctor. It's all for our family."
My body went numb. Was this the tongue of pillows and smoke charging at me? I uncoiled myself from her, as a python that had just been struck with an arrow would disentangle itself from a dead goat. The snake would then attempt to move way into the green bush around but because of its size and the more weapons aimed from the goat’s owner and other people, by the time the huge serpent made its way to a hideout, it would likely have been severely wounded. Would five arrows kill the reptile? Would five poisonous arrows finally incapacitate the python?

I stared at our shadows on the wall and everything seemed to suddenly unfold, as does a skin being peeled from a slaughtered goat. I imagined myself on the ground and elephants trampled on me. Cries of bulls passed through the air as their testes crushed, and I saw Wankio in league with the enemy. Some weeks ago, Wankio had told me how Magita had confronted my mother; the way she narrated it, with her left eye seeming to blink at particular instances, sent fear through me.

“I should see another doctor so that you can leave me,” I now charged.

“Those are your words,” she said.

“You want to know so that you can elope with that Swahili man of yours! Do you want to be his second wife?” Several times, I had noticed her with this staff mate of hers. I had first seen them together a year ago as they walked down the road after school. I asked Wankio whether it was proper for her to stroll with a man who was not her relative; she said that I should not feel insecure, and I wondered what she thought I felt threatened about. As a matter of fact, my mother had herself cautioned Wankio that it was not decent for a married Christian woman to be seen with a man whose place of birth and religion were unknown. In many instances the two were also together when they took their pupils for games competitions—Aunt Sinda’s grandchildren had met Wankio with “a Somali” during one sports day in the grandchildren’s school. The Swahili probably resembled the Somalis that the children had seen at the border town of Sirari or at Migori. When the Swahili man got married, I thought that Wankio could become sensible and leave him alone, but they had continued escorting each other. The man lived at Kehancha.

Sometimes I looked at myself, and saw that I was too full of flesh to have my wife be
“snatched” from me by some fellow who resembled the bones of a mouse for he was rather emaciated. When I told Wankio this, she defended him saying that he was like all Swahilis. I wondered who between the two of us had traveled more and seen more Swahilis.

“Chacha, this has nothing to do with that teacher,” Wankio said. “We were seeing doctors before he came here.”

She was right—we had seen countless doctors, and spent a lot of pain and money. Were it not for the settling of bills and bills, we could be rich people by now; I could be a wealthy man. One doctor told us confidently that he knew the antidote that would restore Wankio’s fertility—Wankio was the one with a problem—and he put her on a nine-month medication program during which time we slept in different beds. And this was the only physician who ever said that he had diagnosed something; all the others said that there was nothing wrong. Some advised us about what times to meet so as to succeed in making a baby. The doctors found no trouble on my part—but how could there be while I knew very well that none of my forefathers was impotent? Look at the multitude of fruits growing from the descendants of my ancestors and take, for instance, my paternal grandfather who had five wives and fifty children. Was not this the line that I came from?

“How many doctors shall we have to see over this?” I now said. Medical expenses had depleted me. I had come to the conclusion that some of the physicians just wanted to get free money from me and I would rather put it to better use.

“I thought we agreed that we have to see them as long as we have a problem.” She turned her head and looked at me.

“I have no problem,” I said.

She sighed. “What has gone into your head?” She clasped her hands together.

I turned briefly in order to face her more directly. “I’ll get hold of you and that Swahili before you reach Migori,” I said and nodded my head up and down.

In my considered opinion, I thought the man must have been a criminal. Why had he come all the way from his home in the coast province to teach in a primary school in Kuria district in Nyanza province on this other end of the country? Primary school
teachers got posted in their home districts, and if they went farther than that, they taught in the neighboring districts. Why had the Swahili skipped numerous districts and come to Kuria? The issue was simple: He had a past to hide, and now as chief, the best thing I could do was to hand him over to the authorities. The person was probably a foreigner—he could very well be from Zanzibar, or mainland Tanzania, or even Somalia, for it was not actually easy to tell whether he was a Swahili or a Somali. If he were some sort of chameleon constantly changing his appearance and thought that he also had the brains of the trickster, he would soon find himself mistaken. When the long arm of the law netted him, he would answer to his true identity. I became agitated as I figured out this plan; after all, I was chief.

"Leave the Chief’s Act out of this," Wankio said. "The Swahili has nothing to do with us." Of late Wankio had formed a habit of advising me to apply my powers with restraint and telling me that the Chief’s Act was no longer as brutal as it used to be during the one party rule in this country ten years ago. In these times of multiparty democracy even chiefs had to be transparent and accountable, she admonished me, and at such a moment she seemed to be teaching Civics to her Class Five pupils. I knew that a chief had been taken to court for misusing the very authority meant to protect him.

"The Swahili is in this!" I said. I lightly slapped my lap.

"Don’t shout," she said. She held my hand down.

"Everybody knows that he is your second husband." I stood up.

She pulled me back to the bed and my shadow briefly danced on the wall and touched the iron roof.

"Oh God, what has become of you?" she asked. "Do you know what you’re talking about?" She let my hand go and bowed for a moment. "It’s very clear in my mind," she said and stood; in fact, she seemed to leap from the bed.

"I’m the one who knows what I’m talking about," I said.

She tightened her mouth and projected her lower lip and grimaced her face as if to say, "Do you also count yourself as a man?" I gripped her wrist. The shadow of my head
became larger and I saw strands of hair tie a banana by the roadside; I saw Magita’s tongue overhanging from his mouth and spitting venom.

“You are hurting me,” she said.

“Whom is that face for?” She breathed fast. I grasped her more, and she screamed. I released her hand; she left the bedroom, and I heard her open the door leading out of the house.

“Real men don’t behave like this,” she said.

I rushed for her. She jumped out and latched the door.

I had heard of stories of husbands being locked out by their wives, most likely when the men returned home late from drinking, or when a wife suspected that her husband was sleeping with other women. For me it was the other way round—I was meshed in, caged. I stood there in the sitting room in that darkness and hated myself. I disliked myself for all the seven years I had been in marriage. Wankio was determined to reveal to me that I was not a full man, and anyone saying that would face the maximum length of the law. I was Chief, and the chief was law. When I went around the Location people bowed as they greeted me, old men removed their hats from their heads and called me “old man” as if I were their age mate, and whenever I passed somewhere everyone stood up. But my wife enclosed me and shackled me.

At times I wondered why it was that we had been denied a child. Seven years was a long time to be married without anything to show for it. When our people said that a couple who only ate and enlarged themselves abused marriage, I knew what they talked about. If I were the alcohol type, I could have met the wrath of drinkers in bars and changaa clubs. That was where they insulted men and incited them to marry other women and forget about wives whose only work was to fatten themselves.

Some time ago in Kehancha, the poet Magabe Magabe asked Sasi Wangwi of Nyamotambe to bring his wife to Magabe Magabe so that he would make her hatch. Sasi Wangwi’s ten-year marriage was childless. My cousin, who was present at the bar, told me that Sasi’s distended stomach seemed to have suddenly shrunk, and he rushed out. As people urged Magabe to escape, Sasi returned with a Masai sword, and plunged it into the
other’s belly. Barmaids screamed and scampered in various directions like rats upon
which a light had been flashed at night as they ate maize flour in the kitchen. Two or
three people quietly cluttered behind the counter, and others ran out. Magabe’s howl
found some men in the middle of gulping beer from their glasses—for them it was too
late to stand and restrain Sasi. Some customers recklessly placed their liquor bottles on
the tables and moved toward Sasi, but before they could reach him, he turned wilder, and
lunged the weapon a second time—this round close to the heart. The poet moaned again
and again, and my cousin said that what he heard was not human cry but the moan of a
bull at the abattoir. Sasi threw the dagger down, and at this point it seemed needless to
touch him. He walked out muttering that, “I’ve killed the goat. We shall see whether he’ll
plant his seeds.” He turned himself in at the police station about three kilometers from the
bar. During trial he told the magistrate that he would rather live in jail forever than be
continually reminded that he was infertile.

My cousin seemed to be challenging me; telling me not to wait to become like
Sasi Wangwi. At 40 my cousin had three wives and numerous children, and the other day
he told me that he had seen some beautiful girl whom he would woo to have as a fourth
wife. I always consoled myself that he was different from me. He seemed to have nothing
else to do with the plenty of bride price he got from his sisters’ marriages; he was
fortunate to be the only son in a family of countless daughters.

I now locked the door and went back to the bedroom. I lay across the bed with me
legs hanging to the ground and gazed at the rafters and shades in the roof.

Wankio was provoking me. For seven years, I had waited for her to give me a
baby. Seven hopeless years of waiting. Now, I was tired. She was a good wife—loving,
hard working, and all that. But what was all that without a child? If I died, who would
name me? With no children of my own, how would my name be remembered and carried
forward to the end of time? A chief had to have an heir. I knew well that the chief’s
position was not inherited these days, but then when a chief counseled children and young
people in his Location, he had to speak with authority, he had to speak with the
confidence that he had children and that he was talking from first-hand experience. That
was how the youth would consider him different from them; otherwise, they would regard
him as a boy.

What sort of manhood was proven by merely having a wife? After all, everyone
was capable of having a wife. It was a man’s children who made him a man. Wankio was
playing with burning wood. I would marry another wife. I would take the Church
marriage certificate, throw it through the window, and bring home another woman. If
Wankio so wished she would leave. What would the Church do to me? Excommunicate
me? This was nothing. I would have already married. Would the Church stop me from
marrying? What did they do to the youth leader, Kerongo Kerario? What did they do
when he brought a second wife and lived with her? What did they do when one day, after
it was evident that he had another wife, he went to church and proclaimed that one man,
one wife, was a suffocating practice? Did he not rise calmly as if to give a testimony
denouncing his recent wayward ways, but instead delivered a condemnation of a
congregation that practiced fornication by the evening and night, and intoned amens in
church by the morning and afternoon? Did he not dare anyone without sin to cast the first
stone? Did anyone stand to throw the rock? And did he not march out of that building to
freedom?

And what would my mother do? I would wait and see. My mother’s Church
would be offended, and Samuel would even dedicate a service to dispel demons from me,
and our home. All that was nothing; I had my life to steer.

In fact, Aunt Sinda had already told me to inform her when I was ready for a
second wife, but I would not involve her. I was chief and would get a woman by myself.
After all, I got Wankio on my own.

Although I had wasted seven years, I was still young. Was my grandfather not
sixty-two when he got his fifth wife?

**Muniko One**
The world outside was quiet on this Friday night. Holding her chin, my mother, sat next
to the hearthstones in her kitchen and tended the fire that was heating the drinking water
in a big *sufuria*. Some distance away on Mother’s left, Wankio leaned forward from her round three-legged chair and washed chicken portions in a plastic basin, and put the pieces in a pot near her. I sat in a stool, folded my arms across my chest, and wondered when the meal would be ready. Suddenly, our dog barked in the outer kraal and moved closer to the edge of the enclosure next to the kitchen. And then, he quickly went mum. He had likely sniffed the scent of a familiar person, and soon Chacha called to his wife to open the door. Since the kitchen had no outer door, he had to be let in through their house down left.

“Let Muniko open for him,” my mother said.

But Wankio was already washing her hands. “I’ll do it,” she said. “I’ve finished with the chicken. Watch over for the dog.” She wiped her hands on her shawl that hung from her shoulders, took a flashlight, went by mother’s maize granary in the cattle pen and disappeared down to her house.

Not long after, Wankio came back followed by Chacha. He wore the chief’s khaki uniform and held a baton in his right hand. He greeted each of us, and stood at the door for a moment and spied into the room as if he had never been in here before. His body nearly blocked the whole width of the door, but then since he was short, I could see above him to the world outside. The front of his official brown beret shone with the emblem of Kenya’s coat of arms. He seemed to be coming from a meeting, probably with the District Officer (D.O) or the District Commissioner (D.C). The administrators were likely having a tough time preparing for the elections that were now some two and a half months away. He stepped in, placed a folder at the edge in a table close by and unfolded a chair and sat next to the door, on my right. He held a zipped pocket bag.

“Put those things in a safe place,” my mother said in reference to the folder on the table. Wankio moved to get it.

“Leave them alone,” Chacha said. “I’ll take care of them. That’s government property.” Wankio held back her hand and recoiled. Mother narrowed her eyes, contorted her face, removed the drinking water from the fire, and placed the chicken pot.

“When will that supper be ready?” Chacha asked.
“Soon,” Wankio replied.

“Are you hungry?” Mother said. “You can take some porridge for now.”

“No,” he said. “This time is for a heavy meal.”

Mother extended her hand, tilted the porridge pot and peeped inside. It had nothing; I had cleared the last drops of the liquid an hour ago, but I was beginning to feel hungry again. “You’ll have to wait for the supper,” she said to Chacha.

There followed silence.

The lantern went low; I took a spotlight and I left for Mother’s house to get paraffin. I walked leisurely through the outer kraal and turned left to Mother’s joint. I was glad to be out of the kitchen for some time and I hoped that when I returned the situation would have improved, and people started chatting. Chacha had changed since becoming chief, and because I was not sure whether he knew what had happened between his wife and me, it was better I be far away from him. There was no kerosene in Mother’s place and I moved aimlessly from one room to another. I returned and reported that the jerry can was empty.

“You should have told me what you were going to look for,” Mother said. “I could have told you that there is no paraffin.”

“I'll get some from our house.” Wankio said, rose, and glanced at her husband as she left. Perhaps she expected him to say something, maybe even object to her going, but Chacha did not even glimpse in her direction; he stared ahead at the fireplace. The lantern was now almost off.

Chacha had recently told my mother that he had helped her children enough and it was now time for the offspring to take care of themselves, as grown men should. In his statement, he put himself out of the group of Mother’s children and since it was only Rungu and I who were here in the home, he must have been referring to us. She had asked Chacha to chip in with Rungu’s fees on a technical course that Rungu was taking, but Chacha wondered why she could never let him enjoy even only a single month’s salary undisturbed by the problems of her sons. This was his first quid as chief, and he insisted
that he would give no cent to anybody. Mother beseeched him to help, but he talked louder, and ended up shouting so that we others in the homestead heard him.

"Chacha," my mother had said, "they too will assist you when you are in need."

"All these years no one has ever helped me!" he said. "When will they give me a hand? When?"

"We all require one another," Mother said. "It's just that you are the eldest."

"Eldest what?" His voice rang in the mid morning and overpowered the chirping of insects and chuckling of hens. "Oldest to big men who are over twenty years old?" He paused. "They're not my babies!"

Mother kept quiet as he talked on and on. "Think about what I have requested," Mother said after some time. He did give some money for Rungu's fees.

I had realized before this incident that I would no longer depend on Chacha's earnings. When I did not do well in my exam and planned to xerox Form Four and take another plunge at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, I thought I could get money from him, but the very month that I wanted to go back to class he lost his employment at the Kehancha County Council. He had paid my fees all through secondary school, and now without a job he said that he could not afford anymore. I thought that he could give me a small portion from the huge sum of cash he received as retrenchment benefits, but he remained unyielding and said he would use all the dough to invest for himself and his family. I wondered quietly which family he was talking about since he had no young ones and his wife worked and earned a salary of her own. In fact, his wife's income was enough to feed both of them.

My mother then went to see our councilor and the chief to seek assistance for my first term expenses. The two leaders could not understand how she who had all the years educated her children without help should now seek donations. The councilor said that someone whose daughter-in-law scooped bucks at the end of every month should not ask for help, and that Chacha should pay my fee; and the chief told Mother that she should not beg since she had an iron-roofed house, while most of the other members of the Location slept in grass-thatched structures. My mother wondered what buildings had to
do with boarding and tuition, and decided that she would not continue pleading if that was what it had come to.

But only two days after the vow, she was out again. This time she went to Pastor Samuel, who called a swift *harambee* the following Sunday after service and managed to get three hundred shillings and the congregation said "amen" and uttered praises to the Big Guy above. All us family members were at church, but Chacha, who sat across the aisle on my left, seemed a little unsettled. After the meeting, the elderly chaps shook my hand and wished me well in my studies. I responded enthusiastically and thanked them for the generous contribution, but of course, I knew that three hundred shillings would not take me back to anybody's classroom. I did not know whether these guys were mocking me, or they were not aware that I would need at least eight thousand shillings for the first term alone. While I shook those hands, I figured out the next move. Back home, when my mother gave me the *harambee* coins and said that I keep them well as we looked for more, I felt like laughing, but instead I told her that I had decided I would not go back to school that year.

"What will they say when they hear that you did not go?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"They will say many things," she said. She held the money at me. "You know our people."

"Give it back to them," I said.

"Muniko, you're not thankful."

"Mother, don't talk as if you've never paid fees."

"It's not Christian to return whatever has been given in good faith."

"Okay, keep it," I said.

She probably stayed with the money, but if that was done on my advice I did not know. I did not bother to find out what exactly became of the donation, but Wankio told me that my mother used it and promised she would get some and give to the pastor who would put it in the service of God. I doubt that she ever gave it back, because some weeks after the pastor preached of the Pharisees and the coins, and some people turned uneasily
in their seats and surveyed Mother and Wankio. Later, my mother confessed to us that she had repented and that there was nothing to worry about, and when the pastor conducted a service on honesty and forgiveness, she said that the theme was in recognition of her courage. However, on this day, nobody looked at her and her daughter-in-law.

Because of all these events, I made up my mind to be a farmer for the time being, cleared a portion of land next to the river and planted maize. I usually woke up at five or earlier and worked until the weather got hot.

Wankio now returned with paraffin in a small tin, poured into the lantern and the room got bright again. I wished it had been dark longer; I felt more comfortable that way. We all continued our hush-hush, and I wanted to leave the room because the silence was becoming too much for me to bear.

Chacha placed his beret on top of the folder. He pulled some papers and the hat fell to the ground. He quickly set the documents back and picked the item and carefully put it on his head.

“How is your work?” Mother asked.

“It’s fine,” Chacha said and kept on searching for something among the pages.

“Where did I leave it?” he talked to himself.

“God will assist you,” Mother said.

Chacha unzipped the bag and dipped his hand inside—besides the numerous papers there was the chief’s rubber stamp. He did not need to be in the office to sign and stamp documents; he did that right by the roadside.

“I hear people say that KANU will be defeated in the next elections,” my mother said this more as a question than as a statement. Chacha did not reply.

“What are you looking for?” Wankio asked him.

“You won’t know what I want.”

“It might be in our house,” she volunteered.

Chacha said nothing. This exchange between Wankio and her husband made me uneasy, and I wished she could stop the conversation. What if Chacha had discovered that we had behaved improperly?
I wondered what came over me that fateful moment. There were moments that I admired Wankio—admired her in a brother-in-law-sister-in-law kind of way, you see. Sort of like she was good, she sometimes used to wash my clothes, things like that. Some years ago when a tree fell on my foot and almost chopped my fingers off and I was admitted in Migori, she came to visit me nearly every day. I saw that my brother had a tip-top wife and at times I imagined myself marrying a babe like her. Sometimes we even joked—just those jests between brother-in-law and sister-in-law, you know. She even wanted to know whether I had a dame. At first I told her that that was not Christian, but she said it was okay as long as we handled our relationship in God’s name. She told me that she and Chacha were pals before they got married and they conducted their affair in the Lord. She was one of the first people I told when Wegesa became my chick. Wegesa and I were young things really—what did youngsters know at eighteen anyway? We attended the same choir, and winked and smiled at each other as the conductor guided us through the hymns and during the break I tickled her and we giggled. I informed Wankio of the progress of my relationship with Wegesa, and Wankio cautioned me that as Christians we had to walk in the ways of the Bible. Then four years ago, Wegesa passed away in a road accident while she traveled home to begin her holidays. I had had no other girlfriend since. I would clinch one when I started thinking about marriage.

And now this. Muniko, how did you get yourself in this slippery situation? Wankio had brought porridge for me in my shamba as I weeded for the maize and she asked for my jembe so she could help me as I took the meal. I left the hoe for her and moved to pick my shirt—I had removed it so I could feel fresh and work faster. As she passed near, her clothes must have brushed my body. Here my memory became a bit misty; things were a bit tied up. We likely touched at that moment as she went by; she did not move. I felt warmer; my heart raced. Something whizzed into my mind and blocked it and in a flash, we held each other shoulder to shoulder and slipped down. I didn’t know what happened around. The rustling of the young maize leaves may have stopped and the remaining dew on the weeds may have slipped away.
When I sat up, I saw shapes of chimpanzees stride by in the imaginary coming darkness. These turned to many-eyed ogres—the figures my mother had told me occupied this earth before Christianity brought light to the world. Some of the monsters had their young ones on their backs and looked at me for a moment, and went on to drink water at the river. Others did not even glance at me; the earth shook as they approached; they somersaulted past me, and dived into the water.

God, what had I put myself into? Wankio was beside me; she just sat there, and said nothing. I wondered whether I ought to say something and I think that I uttered some words, but up to this minute I do not know what they were. But I remember that she said nothing. What was she thinking about? She did not take long before she rose, but to me it seemed as if she had sat there forever.

I waited to be stopped somewhere—in the middle of the path, in the act of swallowing food, in my sleep—and asked what happened as the maize leaves trembled. Even with the limp in my left foot I would take a sprint; I would marshal my running tactics and jump over the sisal hedges. I used to be athletic and at one time I ran in the 400m hurdles at the Provincial level; I was ready to be champion again. I would tear my way faster than Ezra Sambu, the police constable whom it was said had left many experienced athletes’ mouths gaping as he bolted to the finishing line. My heart now pounded as it used to while I awaited the beginning shot for a race. I was ready to get back to glory; I was set for a dash.

“The government cannot be defeated in anything it wants to do,” Chacha now said in response to what Mother had earlier asked.

“I just want peace,” my mother said. “God is against fights.”

“Don’t worry about these people who make a lot of noise around.” He lifted his head from the documents. “Didn’t we win in the past two multi-party elections?” he posed and waited for a reply. He looked back at his papers when Mother said nothing.

I did not recall exactly what happened in the first multi-party election in 1992—I was a bit too young at the time. But in the one that followed five years later, I participated in the activities since I had obtained an I.D. and registered as a voter. I was not at the
forefront of the campaigns as such, but I did attend some rallies. Chacha said then that he wished the opposition success since he hoped that a different government would stop plans to retrench workers; it was as if he had foreseen he would be put aside. He also said that there was a lot of corruption in the administration; for instance, one had to bribe to get a recommendation for promotion and Chacha had stayed in the same job level for twelve years. He had wished that God would descend and right the wrongs in the country. The opposition lost.

This year, the opposition seemed more upbeat and some parties had formed an alliance to field a single presidential candidate. I did not know what would happen to the chief’s authority were the opposition to win in the forthcoming elections at the end of the year. The opposition said that they would do away with the positions of chief, D.O., D.C., and Provincial Commissioner (P.C.) and replace them with a system of elected councils that would get their power from the people. Some days after Chacha had taken the chief’s interview, I asked him what he thought about elected councils and he told me that no government would do without chiefs. How would they reach the people at the grassroots? he asked. I thought Chacha said this because he feared what would happen in case he became chief and the government then scrapped the office; it would be like being retrenched twice. He told me he doubted that the opposition would win anyway—he did not figure out how they would succeed after failing in the past two times.

Chacha now looked up and his emblem glistened. “Muniko,” he said.

“Yes.” I almost made for the door.

“You should attend the chief’s baraza every Monday,” he said.

I was silent. Under other situations I would have said something, but these were not those circumstances.

“Yes,” Mother murmured. She seemed to have been dozing. “Muniko, you should go to the baraza now that your brother is chief. But since you’re still young, you can attend twice a month.”
“No,” Chacha said. He scratched his temple. “The *baraza* is for every man over eighteen.” He went back to his documents. “That’s the law,” he said without lifting his head.

He looked really busy. I had thought that his work was less demanding since the administration had brought in the entire community to help deal with cattle rustling in this area. In the days before, herds were stolen in the neighborhood nearly every day, and chiefs were always on the road tracking the animals. Now through the people’s involvement, the suspects were reported to the community’s police, *Zungu Zungu*, who brought them to the mass gathering, *iritongo*, and asked them to defend themselves. When the evidence against them was sharp, the thieves were sentenced to death, which was carried out by the *Zungu Zungu*. This force executed by stoning, beating, and cutting. That was a bad way to kill.

From what Chacha was doing now, it seemed that the duties of chief had not gotten any lighter.

My mother removed the lid from the pot in the fire and stirred the cooking chicken. With a ladle, she scooped one piece into a plate. I salivated. Hunger chewed my stomach walls. I folded my arms on my chest and gazed at the roof.

**Mbusiro Two**

I had spent the whole morning weeding for my onions and I felt tired. I was now seated in a low stool at the veranda of my house watching over the sorghum I had spread to dry on a straw mat. I did not see any chickens walk around to scatter my food so I dozed off. Earlier I had almost fallen from the chair and wanted to get a folding one to lie back in and even sleep if I wished, but I had work here and I knew that any absence would invite the cock which always led the congregation. A crow flew low above the ground, flapped its wings and missed the target—the chicks—and fled away across the sisal edge up in the direction of the secondary school. The hens chuckled and secured their young ones to safety. I threw a stone at the bird and shouted. Back to my stool, I went.
I did not notice when Sinda arrived; I just opened my eyes, then blinked and saw someone on my left. She sat as if she had been there for hours; I supposed that the situation was a good chance for her to ambush me; she always sneaked into my compound, my house, my family, even when I was wide awake.

I opened my small eyes, rubbed my face and with the end of my shawl I wiped the spittle that had run down my chin. I disliked this habit of saliva streaming from my mouth whenever I slept, but on the whole there was nothing that I could do at this age of mine.

“Why didn’t you shake me?” I asked Sinda.

“I wanted you to sleep enough,” she said, and briefly touched her long ear lobe. We exchanged greetings and I stood up and took a stick from the ground to chase away some chickens from the sorghum. They had probably observed my dozing routine and concluded that they were not only safe to eat, but to even defecate on the grains.

“How is your family?” I asked my sister as I walked back.

“We’re waking up well,” she replied, and passed the tongue through the gap in her teeth as if to remove something that had stuck there.

A cock slowly moved toward the mat; I beat down the cane. “Shiau!” I said. The invader jumped back to the cypress shade and immediately pretended to scratch the earth carefully as a worshipper’s finger searches for a verse in the Holy Scripture.

“How is Sagati?” I asked.

“He is all right, although his wife told me this morning that he complains of a pain in the stomach and feels something cutting through the intestines.”

“He’ll know what to drink next time,” I said.

“Children of these days never learn a thing. He’ll probably realize when his colon get roasted.”

“God Almighty forbid.”

Sagati, Sinda’s last-born, was known to wake people up with his howls of drunkenness and he had been nicknamed the soloist of his village, Nyamotambe. He usually rose early to march all over the place in search of the *changaa* brew, returned home before eight, and demanded that his wife “slit something’s gullet” for him to
“grind” which meant she should slaughter a chicken for him to consume. Sometimes when he came back, he was unable to utter the slit phrase, so he simply gestured to his wife by passing his hand across his throat. How he was even able to lift his arm, only the Merciful One could tell. Then, he staggered to bed, and in seconds the whole compound trembled with vibrations of his snoring. When the chicken was ready Sagati insisted that all of it, except the legs and head, be served to him in a big bowl and he devoured it with a hillock of cassava-millet ugali. His two children came into the hut, but he quickly asked them to leave and told them to answer their mother’s call from the kitchen; the boys did not move; they probably knew it was a lie since they had been sent by their mother “to get some bites of chicken from your father.” Sagati gave a piece to each of them: “A crumb that could not even feed an ant”—those were Sinda’s words—and he told the young ones to return later for more. With the children temporarily out of the way, he settled into the meal, breathing heavily as if he were being taken over by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sinda said that Sagati inherited his greed from his father’s lineage since our family was not known to have gluttons.

Of course, no woman would have sufficient chicken for such a changaa-possessed husband, and sometimes Sagati’s wife fried eggs or gave him sukuma wiki. He stared at the eggs and grumbled about “worthless human beings who did not even rear a chick” as he invited the children to wash their hands and eat with him. On the other hand, the sight of sukuma wiki probably gave him stomach upset—and according to Sinda’s testimony Sagati peered at the leaves, passed a finger through the vegetables as if something more precious lay hidden inside and finding no manna, took one or two bites, and left his sons eating and retreated to bed. When he had eaten either meat or eggs he and his wife went to plow the field as other people returned home from the farm. The couple worked till noon or one; Sinda said that Sagati toiled like a tractor, and some people attributed this to the fuel he put in his stomach at dawn, but recently this petrol almost killed him and it was suspected he drank bad brew. That was what people said, but I knew that all changaa was dangerous liquor; the work of Satan, it was.

“Tell him to stop taking that poison,” I now said.
I kept watch on the sorghum. I beat my stick on the ground, and the chickens scattered away.

“I’ve spoken enough,” Sinda said, shook her head, and jingled the beads round her neck. “I’m too old to keep talking to an adult with a wife and children. I hope that this pain in the belly will teach him something.”

“He better heed the warning,” I said and was quiet for a moment. “This is the time that he should come to the Kind Lord.”

My sister pulled her mouth, opened her lips briefly, and made a face as if to say “good luck with your Father.” She did not believe in the One Above and none of her family members had knocked and entered the house of the Great Giver. From stories in the Good Book and the way I saw the world around me, I learned that one needed some event in order to accept God the Redeemer. Sagati’s encounter was such an experience, and I thought the Holy Word called it a vision—something had been revealed to Sagati and it was time for him to acknowledge the way our apostle, Paul, did on his way to Damascus. I was excited by this connection, but did not want to tell Sinda as yet; I would wait for the Lord Himself to demonstrate it to her for God the Torch worked in mysterious ways: Who knew, probably He would use Sagati to bring salvation to my sister’s homestead.

Sinda and I talked about other issues, and then she asked me whether Wankio was ill.

“What makes you think that she is sick?” I asked.

“I don’t know, exactly.” She leaned back in her chair.

I knitted my brow. “You should have found out from her,” I said. I walked over to the sorghum, straightened the mat and deliberately moved slowly toward the corner of my building. I looked to my left toward Wankio’s house; the hens were now at the gum tree—they had likely realized that they would not win against me. I went up toward the sisal hedge of our land and looked around as if I were searching for something. I slowly walked back, considering each short step that I took.
"As I entered the homestead I saw her move down to the latrine with her shawl over her head," Sinda said when I was near her. She went silent; she wanted me to continue with the conversation, but I kept quiet too. "Then as I reached the big mango tree," she continued, "I realized that she had been lying there. I waited for her to come back so I could greet her. She took rather long to return." Sinda must have thought of going to find out what Wankio was doing in that toilet, I thought. "With her back bent, she emerged and walked up slowly," my sister said. "Her face was sleepy. She told me that there was nothing wrong with her except she was tired and not feeling herself. I examined her." You're very intruding, I thought. You're like a cat with ears upright waiting for the chance when nobody is noticing so that you can dip your whiskers into the milk. What business do you have to appraise my daughter-in-law? "Have you looked at Wankio of late?" she asked.

"No," I said and now sat back. "What do you mean?" I asked rather innocently. I knew where her words were leading to, but I wanted her to think that she was clever—wasn't an elder sister supposed to be more vetting? Sinda always wished to remind me that she was the big sister. Sometimes I agreed with her while she was present, then when she left I did things in my own way.

"Mbusiro." She moved her chair closer. "You mean you have not closely looked at her?" She craned her neck and the beads hang forward.

My sister now behaved like the gossiper she was, very much like Motongori of Tarang’anya and I wondered what would happen if Sinda lived in our village and teamed up with the women of Tarang’anya. Here, meetings sat at the first cockcrow and did not disperse until the sun set and night insects started noises that challenged the night walkers. When I passed at the chief’s Camp kiosks where a market sometimes convened, the women bowed their heads, some stretched their necks, and assembled, and talked, and whispered. The market congregants first greeted me; some did so very endearingly; then, when I left they began their service about me, and I knew that their sermons were about how my daughter-in-law had not yet gotten a baby.
The pastor of this congregation had to be Motongori, the one with protruding lips; she who had only one son and a stupid one at that—a son who could not tell the difference between the footprints of a cow and those of a hen. It was known all over the place that for this ignorance, the teachers had sent him away from primary school. And remember, when he first went to school he was already an adult—school was not for bearded men.

“No, I have not observed her,” I now said in reply to what Sinda had earlier asked. “Then look at her.” She made an all-knowing serious face, and nodded her head slowly up and down. “Watch her carefully.” She nodded again. This habit with her head was one that she must have gotten from our father, and having made him give in to her wishes of marriage, she probably thought she was intelligent when she did exactly what he used to do.

“Wankio is just unwell.” I shrugged, and hoped that that could end the topic. At this point Sinda must have thought me stupid. “Are you sure about this?” she asked. “What?” I was not concentrating on the conversation. I threw a stone at a hen that emerged from the direction of the gum tree.

The fact that I had never had a grandchild by a son did not mean I was ignorant about these matters of how a baby’s journey began. I myself had carried six pregnancies from the start to the end; Sinda possibly imagined that I had forgotten my own experiences. She therefore thought I was senile on the matter of conception and she was alert; she assumed that such remembrance was the preserve of elder sisters. But, of course, at my age I did not need an older person to come giggling and tilting her head like a greedy goat waiting to invade the owner’s sorghum farm, showing me that she had discovered the pregnancy of my daughter-in-law. Or did she think that since I had been patient for seven years, then I did not remember the details of how it all started? On the contrary, this long wait may have made my instincts sharper. I knew that Sinda just wanted to hear me say “yes,” and she would begin the rumor of “no”; she would run all over the place trumpeting: “How can it be, after seven years?” She would even consult
diviners to confirm that it was all a lie. Or she would pretend that she was happy for us, and yet I knew how of late she beat the early morning dew and knocked at people’s homesteads in search of wives for Chacha.

I had noticed that something was happening inside Wankio’s body when one morning she was still at home during school time. I examined her face, her dimples, and the way she walked, and I asked her how she felt. How long had she been this way? She responded. Did I hear right? I thought. Very attentively, I listened. I did not know whether she understood where I was leading to, but you could never tell with the young women of these days—they have read these things in those books. I should have shouted: “My daughter-in-law is heavy! Hallelujah!” but I kept my suspicions to myself—in the armpit—as my mother used to say. You did not mention such matters until you were sure. I told her to follow me to my house and there we sat and I asked her some more questions—she is my daughter-in-law, after all. Had she told her husband? And then I concluded as matter of fact—I did not want to be very conspicuous—that she should see a doctor immediately, and we agreed that she would do so the following day, a Saturday. I suspected something, but you see, after waiting for seven years, you have to sit back and be sure that your instincts have been properly awakened. She did not go to the hospital the next day, since she said that she felt better, but I called her again to our baraza and gave her more words on this issue. Was this the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah? I thought. In my mind the child was already named: If a girl she would be Elizabeth, if a boy he would be Zechariah.

In the days that followed I observed that Wankio was not happy and I attributed this to the changes taking place in her body. Even before this she had not been herself ever since she quarreled with her husband and locked herself outside. On that day I was in the middle of a dream in which I saw many spiders climb the wall of my mother’s kitchen. The animals walked slowly up to the cobweb they had made; then some of them got caught in their own construction. They wanted help, and their colleagues jumped down to get water to disentangle the netted ones. Suddenly, the spiders became many people talking in loud voices; then, they were opening the gate to our kraal, and my father
cursed and wanted to confront them, but my mother held him back. "Let me kill these insects," my father said. He clicked his tongue and beat his index finger against the middle one. "Leave them alone," my mother urged and gripped his hand. "If it's cattle they want," my mother said, "let them take. We shall rear others." He invoked the name of his mother and vowed to defend his property; the thieves said certain things that I did not hear and then, at a distance I heard the footsteps of cattle going away.

I awoke. My sheet was soaked with sweat. The dogs barked and then went silent. I took a spotlight, and slowly opened the door, and looked to the kraal, and I flashed into the center of the cattle pen and all was fine. I went out, passed by the granary, and saw that the lantern was still on in Wankio's sitting room.

"Wankio, are you all right?" I asked. These days Chacha sometimes came home late.

There was no response. Again, I called.

"Yes?" Chacha said.

"Oh, so you're home?" I said.

"Yes."

"I was just wondering why the light is on."

"We're fine," he said.

Some days later I discovered that they had quarreled and Wankio ran out. They said nothing to me, but at my age I noted this and asked Wankio, who casually told me about the incident. Still I was not very sure of the extent of their misunderstanding; in all their married life I had not known anything between them that led to the fastening of doors from the outside at midnight.

I reminded Chacha that he was not chief to his wife; that he was not chief in this homestead and that his crown and baton lost meaning the moment he entered this compound, but he did not seem to understand me. He was chief of his Location, but he could not be chief in my residence; and even if he and Wankio lived in their own place he still would not be chief there; the significance of his emblem would end at the gate to his home. But heed my advice, he did not.
Probably because people sought him here, he thought that he was chief everywhere, every time; he even imagined he was chief on Sundays. He no longer attended our prayer meetings in the kitchen in the evenings. Didn’t the word of the Sacred Book say that a ruler should lead by the example of the Almighty King? I opposed this chief’s position from the beginning—this thing would bring nothing good to my son.

“Monitor Wankio closely,” Sinda now told me. “Observe her keenly.” She was very good at instructing people, at instructing me. I wondered why she did not lecture her daughters to stay in their matrimonial homes and take care of their husbands instead of eternally taking hordes of children to camp in her house for her to feed. Each daughter always found a reason to be at her mother’s place. Some said that their husbands battered them; others claimed that their spouses had illicit relationships, and one—the last-born daughter—said that her husband sent her away when he caught her putting a love potion into his porridge. She intended to hold to her position of last wife and the mixture was probably meant to deter the man from marrying another woman. She denied the herbs story and gave her own tale. I knew that the Great Lord said that we should not judge, but that on—that daughter of Sinda—was too restless to stay in a marriage. Why couldn’t my sister go and tame her children before she came here to tutor me to observe my daughter-in-law? Let her first guide her daughters. Amen. The word of the High Savior had something to say about this, but there was no need to waste the Word on Sinda.

Sinda wanted to guide me to say that Wankio was pregnant, and then my words would put her mouth into work with rumors, but bad luck for her. Finally, she went without any addition into her basket of gossip, and I wished you had seen her ruffled face as she left—you would think that someone had died in my homestead.

**Muniko Two**

I stood at the door of my house and peeped into the cattle kraal and up toward my mother’s kitchen. I unzipped my long gray jacket, folded its arms and spied out again. I took one big step into the outer kraal, glimpsed around, turned right, rushed past Mother’s
granary and quickly but carefully undid the latch to her house and entered. I went straight to the bedroom, and to the middle partition of her old cupboard at a corner. There, from among bits of paper, thread, a broken mirror, I took a photo album. My mother claimed that here it was well hidden and she alone would release it and be around to make sure that no one took anything from it. It had lost its cover, had some leaves torn and others off, and a number of pictures were missing, and I always wondered how well she had protected it. She said that had it not been for her keen eye the album would either be in a worse shape or it would have no photographs at all. She called it the family album, although it had non-family pictures too. This treasure, as Mother nicknamed it, had a good number of the snaps that I wanted to look at. There were other collections here and there, but they hardly contained any photos, most of them having been plucked by my sisters and their children.

My ears were up for anyone who might sneak into the room, and I likely looked like some rabbit being pursued by hunters. I grabbed an old newspaper leaf from the floor, hurriedly wrapped the album and slipped it into the inside pocket of the jacket and zipped up. I had bought this coat at the Tanzanian side of Sirari border town some years ago, when second-hand clothes were the in-thing. I had harvested my own maize, sold it, and purchased the item. This was probably the first thing that I bought out of my own sweat and I was proud of it. The cloth was patched up in several places, but I was not ready to give it a rest.

I passed my hand on the jacket, on top of the album. I listened in case anyone was coming, then, stealthily walked out of the room, entered my joint, took a pangä and immediately strode through the out door of the house. I whistled as if I were heading on a good jolly afternoon stroll.

"Where are you going in this heat?" My mother’s voice startled me. She looked out from the entrance of the kraal.

"To the river." I said. "For a bath." I went past her, my eyes fixed ahead.

"In this heat?"
“Yes.” Of course, it was best when the sun was warming the water. I hastened on and hoped that the album was well concealed.

“A coat in this sunlight?” she asked behind me.

“Yes,” I shouted back over my shoulder. I disappeared out of our compound, went past the old homestead, branched down, entered our neighbor’s land, and took the path to the stream.

Had I remembered to shut the cupboard? I wondered and turned my head for a moment. No one was following me; I made a detour, dashed across the sisal boundary and entered our plot, and walked near the edge of my mother’s cassava farm. I bent and meandered through the shamba. I unzipped the jacket; I was feeling warm. I stood upright and beyond the river cattle grazed by the Maeta hillside. A smell of fire reached me—our neighbor down was burning grass and twigs from a cleared place in preparation for plowing. I bowed again and made my way between the columns of cassava plants. I squatted and looked across the stalks to the other end and realized that I could be easily spotted. I ducked from the shamba and entered a small bush of grass and overhanging tree branches. This could be a safe corner, except that oftentimes I saw Wankio gather firewood here. She was the last person I wanted to meet; I had made some private vow to avoid her at all costs—I did not want any suspicions pointed at me. If I kept a distance from her, then no one would imagine a link between what seemed to be happening inside her, and me. And I also thought that this would make Wankio try to forget what transpired next to the maize shoots.

“Muniko, what happened as the leaves swung?” a voice would ask.

“Wankio should tell you,” was my reply.

“It’s you I now ask,” the voice insisted.

“And when will you talk to her?” I said.

“Leave that to me,” the speaker said. I was delighted with how I was steering this trial. Was I in a court of law? What charge had been placed against me? Who had filled the charge? Was it Chacha? Wankio?
The magistrate that I imagined wore a long coat. He tapped at the desk and scratched his smooth chin. "What did you do as the green stalks danced?" my interrogator continued.

"Danced, did you say?" I shook my head and almost shut my eyes in an effort to remember when the trees quivered.

"One day you'll recall." The fellow disappeared. Why did he leave before offering me a chance to defend myself? Whose voice was that? Was it God's, in the cubicle of judgment?

Something now bit my toe. I removed my slipper, jumped and saw a line of safari ants making their way from the grass to a boulder. I slapped the bottom of my trousers, folded them and checked my feet. I had to hurry away from these animals. At a distance I heard the splitting of timber and the humming of a song. Thick smoke rose from our neighbor's plot and spread up in rivulets toward the river and to where I stood. It was hot and I was sweating. I took a disused path along the land boundary, and went back to my thoughts.

In responding to another referee, I saw a delighted Muniko. I imagined myself eloping with Wankio. I told this voice that Wankio and I had conspired to slip into this matter so that we would tie the knot. The guy quickly disappeared perhaps he did not want to listen to any more of this angle of presentation.

Then, a voice of doubt in me took over. Why would you have Wankio while she had a husband? I was asked. Was there anything wrong with marrying one's brother's wife? I struck back. And what did the Scriptures say about this? I continued. What about if the husband died? There had to be something about this in the Bible; indeed, Pastor Samuel always said wherever he was that one did not need to read other books regarding how life should be lived; that the Bible itself contained every lesson. That was why it was known as the living word, he said. I would shoot a question about death and wives and husbands at our next youth meeting. But then everyone would probably wonder why I was interested in death, wives, and husbands. Was I a husband? Did I have a wife? Did I
want to die? I would not put forward such a query. I wished the Bible were a novel that I could read from the first page to the last, get entertained, and get informed.

These thoughts about death were not good at all. My brother was still alive. But what if he passed away? One never knew when one expired. Furthermore, with his present job, matters were tough; circumstances would always be risky—he could even get waylaid as he came home at night. One evening, not so many years ago, someone had chopped off an assistant chief’s head, slit his stomach and spilled his intestines by the roadside.

I now thought I heard the movements of someone coming toward me. I pulled a short stick entangled in the grass, listened, and waited. I held my breath. A vehicle passed on the road and blew dust to our land and this mingled with the smoke from our neighbor and settled heavily on the leaves in front of me. Then, all was quiet. I walked away. I removed the jacket and slung it over my shoulder.

The messenger in my mind wanted answers about the issue of death. Was I planning to kill my brother so as to take his wife? Inherit her? I wished to consult the holy verses about the matter of inheritance, I told the chap, but he insisted that there was need to clear this matter quick quick. But wasn’t God a patient God? But was this really the apostle of God?

I knew of a cousin of mine on my father’s side who had inherited his brother’s wife according to Kuria tradition. The brother died and left behind a young, charming, pretty woman and the family decided that the deceased’s brother should take over to beget children for his sibling so that the late brother’s lineage continued, and also to make sure that the woman did not loiter and bring a bad name to the family. She was actually a dame since at the time of her husband’s death the couple had had only one child. One offspring was not enough, so the brother inherited her and they got more children and the deceased’s team multiplied.

The inheritor and his brother’s wife became so close that they even imagined they were actually husband and wife. They seemed to have forgotten about the late brother, although all the children they got used the deceased’s name. The inheritor’s father
thought that the conduct of his son and the "wife" had sprung beyond the expected, and one evening he called the young man and told him that it was high time he married. You see, in essence, he was still a bachelor.

The inherited wife could not hear of this and she went into tantrums. "Marry what?" she asked the inherited husband. "Are we not having a good married life? Why do you want to bring in another woman to disrupt our harmony?" She could not listen to him. She would not accept a co-wife, she also told her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law was shocked. "But your inherited husband has only been loaned to you," she told the woman. "Loaned to me, not so," replied the other. "I do not borrow anything," she told the elder woman. They latched the kitchen door and spoke into the deep night. The daughter-in-law threatened to leave if her husband brought someone else. She called him "husband," not "brother-in-law" as custom required. The two women in the round mud hut argued. She would not share her man, the younger woman vowed. Her mother-in-law could not believe this talk about her man. An inherited-loaned-husband had now become her man! Big talk this was, the elder woman shook her head.

The next day a meeting was convened. In attendance: Mother-in-law, father-in-law, the inherited wife, and, of course, the inherited-loaned man. Venue: The man's house. The two older people needed a final answer to this matter. What did the inherited-loaned man want? The woman sharply eyed her man. The room was quiet and tense. It was ten in the morning, a rather bad time for a sensitive get-together like this one, because a visitor might come in and interrupt the council. All eyes were on the loaned husband. He cleared his throat, and everyone's ears seemed to curve forward.

"I'll get my own wife," he said and took a deep breath. There was silence. Deep silence. His mother heaved a sigh of relief. The father said nothing; he only seemed to be in rhythm with his wife's movements.

The inherited wife's lips trembled; then, she calmed herself. She placed her hands on the table and immediately withdrew them. "What did you say?" she asked. She tightened her fist and her hand shook.
The loaned husband stared through the window to the kraal; he seemed saddened by what he had spoken.

“You heard him,” the mother-in-law said in apparent defense of her son, lest the young man reject his words and say that he intended to have his tree dead as his brother’s sprouted.

“So you’ve been flattering me?” the inherited wife told her man. She stood up. “Eh? You’ve lied all these years that you love me?”

“This had nothing to do with love,” her mother-in-law said, and tried very much to keep in control. At a similar gathering years ago, they likely had informed the “wife” that this thing had to do with bearing children for the deceased, not love, but the inherited wife seemed to argue that the resolutions of that session had been overtaken by events.

Realizing that no one was on her side, the inherited wife stormed out. “I’ll make sure that no other wife comes into this home,” she shouted from outside.

“She is joking,” her father-in-law now spoke. “She’ll be all right after some time,” he ruled calmly and dispersed the group.

Down in her house the inherited woman quarreled, cursed, and turned the entire place upside down. She scattered spoons to the floor, threw plates from the cupboard, and went to the bedroom and brought her box of clothes, opened it, and overturned it in the sitting room. God, what was she looking for? She kept saying, “It’s either me or her. Not both of us. I’ll leave. No, I can’t leave. She won’t come here!”

Her father-in-law told everyone to stay away from her until her spirits rested. And the spirits did hush up. And the man did get his own wife.

I now arrived at the jacaranda tree. Its leaves were beginning to sprout again after the brief rains. I broke twigs from a nearby tree and spread them on the ground—this place would be a good haven for me for now. I hurled a stone at a weaverbird perched on a branch above me, looked around the surrounding bushes, removed my treasure from the pocket, and spread the jacket on the twigs and lay down. I was confident of this hideout; I had successfully used it in the past when I wanted time with my own thoughts.
I opened the album. There were a number of black and white snaps that somehow
told something about the album’s age. There were also one or two photographs of my
maternal grandmother who had kicked the bucket some twenty years ago. She was huge
and short; Chacha had likely inherited some of her genes.

I came face to face with Wankio’s picture taken when she was newly married. I
quickly moved on. What chances did I have with Wankio anyway? What about fleeing
with her, to some distant land where you would live your own life with your child the
way you wished? a voice urged me. I wondered how this fellow knew that Wankio
carried a baby. I was sure about one thing: I had committed fornication. Wankio and I had
sinned and I did everything to avoid my partner in transgression, but she did not dodge
me at all. What did she think about? Why was she carrying herself as if nothing had
happened between us? She did things more or less as usual: Called me to hew firewood
for her, asked me as she had always done without any hint of guilt in her tone. What did
she plan to do about the sin? I wished I could ask her, or have someone do it on my
behalf. What did she want to do about the adultery? Did she also hear messengers urging
her to escape with her sweetheart? Wait a minute. A mirthless smile passed through my
lips: Sweetheart?

Had she told her husband? If asked I would say that she lured, hooked me into it.
Or what about if I said that she was dreaming, imagining things? I shook my head at this
thought. I had watched Chacha for any hints that he knew something and I found none.

I now moved a little to get away from the encroaching heat for although it was
now after four, it was still hot. I turned to Chacha’s photo when he was about 27. I
opened through the pictures and found one of mine taken a year ago—this was not exactly
the same age as 27, but it could do for now. The years weren’t a big difference—I was
interested in the similarities of the appearances of the two human beings. Chacha was
definitely shorter, but that would not be an issue in the forthcoming infant. Or would it
be? I spied the two photographs better than I had examined site shots in my Geography
map work exams. Our faces did not resemble at all; his must have been more like
Father’s. I looked for Father’s picture—yes, Chacha was very much like Father, although
Father was not that short. Chacha’s face seemed to be drawn outwards and mine curved inwards. Both our noses were rather pointed, and slightly upward facing. And our ears were small and turned forwards. I could not immediately get any trait that was distinctly mine, except the height. So where did I stand? Whom would the coming baby resemble? If the child shot up like a flag post that would very well be attributed to Wankio who could not be regarded as short.

Sometimes when I worried so much about what the offspring would look like, a voice told me to be ready to carry my product and “wife” to safety. The conspirator urged me to summon the sprinting prowess that I used when I dashed the 200m race to the finishing line, and turned back and cheered my opponents whom I had left way, way behind. Are you not Muniko Mohagachi whose name once rang across sports fields in the District and beyond with chants of “Muniko! Muniko! Muniko!”? The speaker told me to be a man and protect my offspring. I was a bit at sea here—I wondered whether manhood meant sneaking into one’s brother’s bed.

I would wait and see how matters rolled out, and then I would tackle the situations accordingly.

I rose from the ground, straightened my trouser and jacket, put the album back and eased my way through the undergrowth. The smoke from our neighbor’s plot had subsided but the smell still lingered in the air.

* * *

Two days after I lay at the jacaranda tree, we held a prayer session in my mother’s kitchen and Chacha attended for the first time since becoming chief. Rungu was also present from college so he joined us and we were full family. My mother seemed excited that Chacha was there; she was getting worried that the demands of the world were pushing her son away from her and the message of the Word. I thought that in this thrill Mother would herself have selected the scripture of the day, but she asked Wankio to choose it and Wankio picked one from the Gospel according to Matthew about honoring one’s father and mother and about a man being defiled by what leaves the mouth, not by
what goes in. Wankio read slowly, pronouncing each word distinctly. I had never heard her do it like this; she usually hustled through the verses.

When she finished, Mother preached about God's mysterious ways, about children, fathers, and mothers, and how wonderful the Lord was in His blessings to the families of the globe. This topic was not new to Mother; she always talked of manna to the universe. But today she appeared to be possessed by some spirit and forgot the small audience and spoke as if she were delivering a testimony in church. I looked at her with interest and listened to her sermon. When she completed, she offered a long prayer about tranquility on earth. She beseeched God to give the country peaceful elections and a God-fearing ruler. She was confident that the Almighty would grant our nation a long-serving leader like the one who was about to leave office. She said that if it were her wish, the current person would continue to lead, and I almost laughed at this suggestion. Gracious Savior, do not forsake your people in their hour of need, she pleaded. She asked for calm in the neighboring countries. And again she prayed for peace in the world.

Chacha looked at his watch; he was possibly bored or tired. The election campaigns had not officially begun, but the political parties were on informal tours here and there. Some time ago, Chacha told one of his assistant chiefs, who came home to see him about night meetings, that he should watch out for illegal groups organized by the opposition who lied to the youth. Such gatherings boasted that an opposition government would cause the country to flow with "milk and honey," and in the process incited the people with politics of hatred against the ruling party.

Not long after, Chacha warned me against being seen with the opposition. When the long arm of the law catches up with you, he said, it will not know that you are the chief's brother. He lectured to me as if I were his boy. I decided that I would wait until the campaigns began officially, and then I would bob up at every rally. I did not know what he would tell me when that time came.
Chacha Two

Assistant chief Koboko and I bent and walked down the narrow footpath. Since I was short, I easily moved below the overhanging twigs while Koboko, who was in front of me, was tall and he had to twist the branches in order to pass. He had removed his cap; I still had my beret on and held my baton in my hand. It had rained here about an hour ago and drips of water from the leaves dropped on us; where we had come from, there had been a downpour soon after the end of the *iritongo* gathering. We now came out of the canopy of trees, walked upright and soon got to a wide path lined with sisal trees on both sides. On our left was an expansive grazing field. At some distance a cow mooed, and a herds-boy whistled and another played the flute. I took my watch from the hip pocket: It was 5:15pm. We now approached a river. Suddenly, Koboko stopped and gazed ahead.

“What’s it?” I asked.

He still peered as if he had noticed an enemy during battle and as leader of the command he had to halt his troops so as to issue further instructions. Or it was as if he felt something tugging at the fishing hook he had thrown deep into the waters.

“Oobe!” I heard a female’s voice. “Let me pick my clothes!”

“There is a woman there,” Koboko said and made a quick retreat. He rubbed the big pimples in his face and he seemed to smile—I could tell that he had relished staring at the naked person. “These women should put some signal to show that they are bathing,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

We walked back.

“Otherwise they’ll make us notice things not meant for our eyes.” He shook his head. “One may even end up seeing the bareness of his own daughter.”

“Pass,” the woman shouted.

At the riverside, there were some clothes spread out to dry on stones, but there was nobody around.

“Where is she?” I asked.
“Where are you?” Koboko shouted. There was no response. We crossed the river and took the path toward the Kehancha road. Rays of the setting sun shone on the bushes on either side of the way.

“Chief, I hear that the opposition has united and will field one candidate for presidency,” Koboko said.

“Who told you?” I asked.

“No.” He hesitated. “Not exactly that. I heard it on the B.B.C.”

“You listen to the B.B.C?”

“My son told me,” he said. “You know how these young people are. They’re always turning the knob and getting to many stations.” The longest serving assistant chief, Koboko was about fifty years old.

“Why do you allow him to listen to the B.B.C?”

“He takes the radio when I’m away.”

“Keep the radio,” I said. “As a matter of fact, have your wife hide it when you’re not at home.”

Before I became chief I used to listen to the B.B.C once in a while. The station mostly talked about politics, which I did not like then. Now as chief I was right in the middle of politics and should have tuned in, but I was certain that those Europeans had nothing good to say about our ruling party, and were only bent on sowing seeds of discord.

At a meeting we had held in my office yesterday at 9:00am, I thought I had understood Koboko to be on our side. I had called the meeting of the five assistant chiefs of Sub-Locations within my jurisdiction to pass to them instructions that I had received from above on how matters should be conducted in this season of political bickering and unwarranted groupings.

“Mister Chief, I think what we need to do is to come down hard on these people,” Koboko had said at the meeting.

“How exactly, do we come down on them?” I asked. I slightly moved my feet on the pot-holed cement floor.
“That’s not difficult,” he said as he shook his head and waved his left hand as if to imply that even a novice could see what needed to be done to put the opposition elements under lock and key. Koboko was one of the people who had applied for promotion to chief and the fact that I was appointed did not impress him and he took every opportunity to remind everyone that he was the most experienced chief in the Location. At such moments he referred to himself as “chief” not “assistant.”

“It’s very easy,” Koboko had continued. “My grandfather was a chief for the colonialist. If he contained people during those times, how can I, how can we, be defeated in this day and age when there is plenty of law on our side?”

“But the law has changed, Mister Assistant,” said Mwikwabe, assistant chief of Tarang’anya Sub-Location. Mwikwabe was probably one or two years younger than me. We had attended the same Isibania secondary school. When he joined Form one, I was in Form Three, and I helped him get into the dormitory where I was deputy captain. He was bright, but he must have been enlisted into the bhang-smoking clique of boys who had grown up in the indecent life at the border town of Sirari five kilometers from our school. As years went by, Mwikwabe inhaled more and more smoke from those leaves and by the beginning of first term of his Form Four he smelled of the drug wherever he went. One day a teacher confronted him about the intoxicant and Mwikwabe hurled a rock at him; the teacher bent in time and the stone flew past him and dug a hole into a brick wall. Mwikwabe cursed at the miss, looked around for another weapon, and finding none, he walked away swearing, and saying words to the effect that school was meant for uncircumcised boys. He went straight to his dormitory, packed his belongings, and left the compound. He later completed his Form Four in a harambee school and barely passed his “O” Level exam. No wonder, the only thing he would become was assistant chief.

“Experience shows me that the law is still the same,” Koboko replied to Mwikwabe’s statement. “I’ve been in this sport for exactly fifteen years now. It’s the same ballgame.” In his heyday, Koboko played in the District primary schools’ football team. He went on to tell us how his grandfather had ruled a much larger Location and how as colonial chief the old man had quelled riots against the white man.
"That was a long time ago," I said.

"Mister Chief," Koboko said, "we talk from the past and echo those who have gone before us." He yawned and reclined to his seat as if he had just completed a soccer match. He passed his thumb and index fingers on his lips. I was aware, as many people were, that his wife, Baru, often refused to allow him into the house whenever he came home late. She told him to go back and sleep where he had come from. Some people said that Koboko "gave warmth" to a widow in the neighboring village and it was alleged that when his wife sanctioned him out, he went back to this woman and provided her with maximum warmth. At the first cockcrow he left for his home, stayed near his house and when his wife left for the shamba, he sneaked in to dress. Some people stated that he lay next to the granary and crawled into the building at six when Baru left for the farm. Since one could not get any sleep beside a sorghum barn, when Koboko entered the house he rushed to bed to have some rest and many times woke up late. There were no chances of having breakfast at home and he often took tea at a hotel in Tarang’anya market—it was not actually a hotel as such, and most times it was closed.

Baru took every opportunity to remind Koboko how he had married her. Years ago, Koboko had gone to her home on several occasions seeking to propose to her, but at all instances she refused to meet with him. She said that she would not be wife to a person whose face was full of ridges—the big pimples on his face. Koboko realized that he had to change tactics, so one day he counted some cattle from what had been received from his sister’s bride price, called a friend of his and together with Koboko’s younger brother told them to drive the animals into Baru’s home. The sun was just setting as the emissaries arrived at the girl’s place with the mooing cattle. In the herd were two lactating cows and the messengers had made sure that the calves did not get close to their mothers’ udders during the journey.

Baru’s home was not far from Koboko’s and in about thirty minutes the envoys approached the compound as do the bridegroom’s best man-to-be and a companion when they take bride price to the bride’s home. The cows mooed louder, as their udders must have needed immediate relief. The situation probably worked to Koboko’s advantage that
the first person the emissaries met was Baru’s mother. The “best man” told her that they had come to seek her daughter in marriage, and had brought something and that she should wash her hands, get a pail and respond to the cows cries. She was momentarily stunned. Then, she ululated and ran to get the milk mug. That was a good indication and the two directed the animals into the pen.

Later that evening when Baru learned that the cattle had been sent by the man with ridges, she plunged into cattle-dung, dirtied herself, wept and vowed that she would never be married to Koboko. Stock that had been accepted into the kraal could not be returned, Baru’s parents ruled. Baru swore that she would do something that had never been done in her village and her parents feared that she would commit suicide. They monitored her movements and quickly made wedding arrangements. On the day of the ceremony, she sobbed all the way to Koboko’s home. The women who escorted her may have been aware of the circumstances leading to the marriage but they said that her tears were for the beginning homesickness of leaving her parental home. They teased Baru and assured her that she would soon taste something sweet to make her forget her place of birth. “I did not love him,” she lamented. “I hate him!”

Baru always told Koboko that were it not for his scheming he would still be a bachelor. Most probably I needed to borrow some of his mechanisms in my dealing with Wankio. At least he was better than me since somehow he had had his way. In a way, he now had two wives.

“Yes, assistant Mwikwabe,” I said at the meeting.

“Mister Chief, assistant Koboko has been in this job for a long time. He was even there when we had only one party. But now the circumstances are different.”

“But we know that, Mister Mwikwabe,” I said. I felt that they were all consuming a lot of time with this petty talk about things having changed and things remaining the same.

I was definite that the thing some people in this country called the wind of change would not go anywhere. This year was not the first time the misguided opposition had talked of the wind of change. Ten years ago, they lined-up the same slogans and we, the
ruling party, emerged unruffled and even stronger. What did this talk about change, democracy, transparency, and accountability mean to the men and women in the village? All these terms were empty, null, and void. These high-sounding catchwords were coined by people who lived in comfort and bliss in Nairobi, and who did not know anything about rural life where people struggled to eke a living. A decade ago, the city dwellers had come into our Locations and insulted his Excellency and all his representatives, but nothing had resulted from the slander.

For instance, the opposition said that *harambee* was all rubbish. But tell me: How would these opposition individuals help the common *mwanaanchi* if they did away with the African spirit of giving, receiving, and sharing embodied in *harambee* as espoused by Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the founding father of our nation? Abolishing *harambee* would be an affront on the independence leaders who mooted the idea, and such an affront would be disrespect on the very foundation of the Kenyan state.

As his Excellency’s spokesman at the Locational level, I would not allow the situation to degenerate to chaos. Since this multi-party thing came around, some people had the audacity to open their shops and sell wares while a few meters away the D.O. read his Excellency’s speech on national holidays. This was the kind of freedom that had poisoned the minds of the youth.

When I was young if one happened to pass at the chief’s Camp, or D.O.’s office at 6pm when the flag was being lowered, and one heard the whistle for the event, one had to stand as still as a rock and wait for the exercise to end. Today’s youth did not stop in honor of the flag. Instead, they laughed and howled and somersaulted nearby, quite unaware that the emblem of our liberation and national identity was being lowered.

In my boyhood I witnessed people, even some old men, whipped by Administration Policemen (A.P.) for not being still and at attention as the flag was raised or brought down. Ignorance of the law was no defense. One evening an elderly man ran down the road towards the river Nyangoto bridge when he heard the whistle at 6pm at Tarang’anya chief’s Camp; he may have thought that someone or something was after him. When the exercise was over, one of the A.Ps got into a bicycle and went after the
fleeing culprit. Trembling at the sight of the officer, the offender pleaded that he had no knowledge what the signal had been about. The officer burst into a lengthy laugh.

"Where do you live, old man?" the A.P. asked.
"Down in ... on the other side, officer. Forgive me."
"In Tanzania?" the A.P. roared again. "You're a Tanzanian?"
"Ofisa, I'm not Tanzania."
"What are you saying? That you're not Tanzania?"
"Yes, not Tanzania."
The officer laughed.
"Show me your I.D.," the A.P. said.
"I forgot it at home. Forgive me Ofisa. I bring it tomorrow."
"You're Tanzania," the officer said.
The A.P. led the man away and locked him in the cell. One thing that the young people of these days did not understand was that you would not compete with the government—the administration had a long arm that soon caught up with the wrongdoer.
The A.P. ruled that ignorance of the law was no defense and fined the culprit for disloyalty to the flag, the symbol of national unity, and for moving about without an identification.

"Chief, has the opposition united?" Koboko now asked after we had walked some distance in silence. It was now a bit steep on this sandy path. On our left was a large plantation of bananas and on our right smoke curled up through the thatch of some huts of a large homestead. Koboko was a little ahead of me.

I laughed. "You tire me," I said. "How can they unite? Haven't they talked about that in the past? What came of it?" I hoped that he did not detect the slight fear in my voice.

He shook his head.

"Nothing," I said. Sometimes I wondered what would happen if God abandoned us and gave leadership to our opponents. They would never rule this country the way KANU had done for 40 years in peace and harmony. The opposition people were too
greedy and selfish, and God being against greed and selfishness would not hand over the administration to them.

We got to the Kehancha-Tarang’anya road, turned right and headed toward Tarang’anya. At least this place was plainland and we walked with little effort. It had not rained here today and the earth road was dusty despite the rain two days ago. We moved in silence.

I had to do something about Wankio, I thought. She seemed to be carrying some treacherous being in her womb. The rat in her was not mine. Not mine. I could not wait for the belly to grow and distend upfront and she keep shoving it around and spitting in my compound. I believed that she had exposed her bareness to some hyena and the wild animal in this had to be the Swahili. I was already making plans to have the Swahili transferred, and then I would dismiss Wankio from my home, and begin life with another woman. I was still young and would not allow another man’s seedling to run around in my yard and step on my toes as if I were the father. I would not wait for the rodent to come into this world and emerge the total replica of the Swahili with the soft curled hair. If it came to that I would commit homicide. I would mix the tobacco pesticide, orthene, with food and have the rat eat when it wagged its tail toward me. Or I would grip its neck in my arms and ask it to utter its last words.

I would ask Wankio to leave my home and follow the Swahili. No, I would not do it that way. I would first have the Swahili transferred to some distant land, and then I would send Wankio back to her parents to give birth to her illegitimate item. The whole world would know that Wankio had allowed the Swahili into her body. In fact, the entire world seemed to be talking to me as I went about the business of administering the Location. The moment I stepped out of our compound, I imagined that I saw fingers stretched out, mocking me, and asking me what sort of chief I was. I saw them in the green-black snake I had noticed long ago, licking its lips and waiting for me as I went upstream in search of an appropriate spot to launch my hook. I retreated, and never went to fish again. What did Wankio think of me? Why had she allowed another man into my property?
“Multi-party politics is here,” I said at the meeting, “but this does not mean we let his Excellency be insulted. It is our responsibility to see to it that what happened the other day regarding his Excellency’s effigy does not recur. His Excellency may be leaving office at the end of this year, but his portrait must be respected. His picture represents authority, and he was given the mandate by we the Kenyan people when we elected him.” I relaxed and leaned back in my chair. I was pleased with the substantial statement I had just made.

The opposition spoke of the incident of the effigy as a victory for them. In fact, the opposition sung everywhere about this purported success. The incident took place in Kehancha when after a political rally some rowdy youths jumped into nearby shops and pulled down his Excellency’s framed portraits and smashed them into pieces on the road and started chanting dirges and going up and down the town with twigs. People assembled in small groups and wondered what would become of the country with the death of his Excellency right in the middle of an election season. They got the impression that his Excellency had actually died.

A number of youths were later apprehended during this disturbance. Some people claimed that Muniko was one of the hooting effigy-smashing urchins, and that he had evaded arrest because he had managed to peel himself from the hand of a pursuing police officer. He left the officer with the back part of his shirt as he tore himself away. He then jumped over hedges, trenches, and halfway constructed buildings, and disappeared. He must have recalled his athletic mania and escaped despite the injury he suffered some years ago. He later told me that he had not been at Kehancha on that day; he had missed the rally because he had forgotten about it.

“Take care of yourself,” I told Muniko.

“I know,” he said.

“These are bad times,” I said. “Do not go to those political dens.”

“But the campaigns have been allowed.”

“I’m telling you: Do not go,” I said. He said nothing and I was certain that his days were numbered.
“What if the opposition wins the election?” Mwikwabe had asked at our meeting.

“They will always lose,” Koboko said, waved his hand, and yawned.

The other three assistant chiefs said nothing; they just looked in front of them at the walls whose paint had peeled off.

“They can’t win,” I said and paused. “Everyone of us knows his job description—you serve the government and maintain security.” I relaxed back in my seat.

“How shall we do that?” Mwikwabe asked.

“How do we do that?” I echoed his question. It seemed obvious to me how that would be done. Nobody talked. Slowly, I leaned forward.

“Have people working for you everywhere,” I said. “Our party’s Youth Wingers are doing a great service. Wherever you see more than two people, have someone walk there and listen to what they are conspiring about. In that way, we shall arrest and contain the situation.” I paused. “Contain the situation.” I looked round the table for any comments, but no one spoke. “Whenever you suspect something, have the offenders held and charged with behaving in a manner likely to cause a breach of the peace.” I nodded; I was satisfied.

“Only that?” Mwikwabe asked.

He was irritating me. “Incitement to violence,” I said. “Invoke the Chief’s Act. Defend your jobs. Remember, if the opposition comes to power all of us here will be sacked.” The way some of the assistants looked at me one would think that they had never heard of the opposition’s proposed system of administration by elected councils of elders or village councils or something of that sort. I did not listen to the B.B.C but I could tell which side of my bread was buttered. I saw that some of the assistants wanted me to elaborate, but none wished to look ignorant by asking me what exactly I meant by “sacked.” They probably did not know the implications of one day being called into the boss’ office and given a letter stating that your job had ended, and at the bottom there would be a sentence about some paltry benefits. I had come face to face with this situation and did not wish to encounter it again.

There was a moment’s silence.
“Mister Chief.”

“Yes, assistant Mwikwabe,” I said.

“What do you say to anybody who says that girls should not be circumcised?”

I looked round the room.

“I’ve no problem with any woman as along as she can get married,” one assistant chief said. The others laughed.

Mwikwabe’s loud laughter revealed two dark upper front teeth, with a man-made gap between them, which was supposed to make the teeth handsome. But the laughter of space and charcoal was like the cry of a mole and if one could regard that as beautiful, then, even a snarling dying dog’s incisors were pretty. Mwikwabe’s tar-teeth were most likely as a result of the bhang that, it was said, he still smoked. He probably wished the opposition would win the election so that he would consume the drug freely.

“Meeting is dismissed,” I said and rose. In any case, circumcised women getting married was not in the agenda; it was not even in the AOB.

Assistant Koboko and I now walked on beside the earth road; we were about fifteen minutes away from Tarang’anya. In the horizon in front of us the sun set and a breeze swept across my face. I fixed my hat properly in my head. Soon I would be home; if someone did not intercept me with some urgent problem, today I would arrive earlier than usual. I now imagined that I saw Wankio’s messengers grab my neck, and slowly, methodically squeeze it, and strangle me, and I bleated like a goat at the first stroke of the butcher’s knife. The mercenaries suffocated me to death; the limping seven-eyed monsters jumped around my bed, and dared me to step down so that they could circumcise me a second time. Wankio had brought hopping, loud-farting hyenas into the house, but I would fight them.

I did not see that I was close to a pothole in the road. I vaguely heard Koboko shout; I jumped, but was too late and a matatu splashed the front of my khaki trousers with muddy water. The conductor and some travelers hanging out of the vehicle laughed. One shouted that that was a sign that my uniform would soon be useless since a new government would take over. I pitied him for he would be disappointed.
Wankio Two
The wind blew. Blew. Blew. I adjusted my shawl over my shoulders. I stopped, looked from side to side and then crossed the tarmac road. I clenched my hands into fists; the morning was cold. My long dress and thick sweater tried to keep me warm, but the chill still went into my bones. I fastened my headscarf, which I had tied down my cheeks and around the neck and left only the space for the eyes, the nose, and the mouth. But still, my face trembled. I rubbed my palms against each other to generate warmth for my body but that only lasted for as long as the hands were together. I tucked my arms across my chest, inside the shawl.

I walked on. Around me, Migori town had woken up and was full of activity. The matatu touts shouted for passengers, and the vehicles honked, honked again: Long sharp honks. The drivers laughed, and joked among themselves. Good for them—they could afford to reveal their teeth. Music blared from the vehicles. These songs were too loud for my eardrums, my heart, and my womb. Some time ago the government had promised to get rid of such noise from matatus and implement other measures to improve transport, but nothing had been done. A new administration would probably succeed. The elections would be held next month and the opposition seemed confident of victory since they had now formed a Coalition and would have one presidential candidate to run against the ruling party’s person. Not all opposition groups had joined the Coalition, but at least the major parties had.

I went past the loading stage for Kisii-bound vehicles and walked on beside the tarmac road. I hoped no one I knew would meet me, and stop me with greetings and inquiries of where I was going, and what I had come to do in Migori. Some people would even offer to walk with you—I was fond of doing this, but today I wanted no escorts and no company. I looked at the ground as I hurried down towards the bridge. As I passed, traders opened their shops; some displayed wares in the verandas of the buildings; others swept the places as they hummed Luo songs that were once famous. One recited lines from a Christian hymn—I needed to hear this as I was heading to confront the Devil. The
Devil would be conquered. Conquered. Outside one shop on my right, a child of about eight years old, stretched his arms, yawned, and cried. From the house his mother warned him that even if he howled, she would still prepare him to go to school this morning. Soon the woman appeared with a stick and the boy cried louder, clutched to her shawl, but she still caned him. The two struggled. The mother almost fell, and the boy rushed into the building. She clicked her tongue and cursed. *When you have them they are a nuisance, they hang on you and almost make you lose your teeth, and when you do not have them you want them dearly* … I pushed my mind away from such thoughts, proceeded, and crossed the bridge of river Migori. Ahead, I saw a woman I was sure was a former college mate. I stopped, turned right, and looked intently back at the water. Footfalls passed behind me and my heart almost reached my mouth. The footsteps ceased. This was the work of Satan. I turned my head slowly to the right in the direction I had come from, and vaguely saw her shoes recede. I took a deep breath.

I hurried on and branched right into an earth road; I was glad to be out of the tarmac. I opened my handbag and got the sketch of the place I was going to. There was a bookshop in my map. I looked around where I now stood, but there was no such building. Had it closed in the course of the past two years? My heart gave sharp spaced beats. I sighed. I gazed here and there like a child who was about to dip her hand into a pot of cooked vegetables. I decided to move on and look for a mosque—that was in the sketch too. At least a mosque would not move.

I had heard a fellow teacher talk about this place two years ago. Did it still operate? Yesterday I had written down the directions as much as I could recollect them from her story; I just hoped that I had gotten everything right. I should have gone to her to confirm the details but I did not want to raise suspicion. I would probably have told her that a cousin of mine wanted to know of the place, but then she would wonder why I, a born-again Christian, would show support in the matter of destroying life. I would have left behind a lot of speculations. Plenty of rumors would spread, and within a short time the entire staff would be talking about me. My childlessness had provided them a good enough garden on which to cultivate gossip, and I did not wish to give them another
shamba. One farm was enough, so I decided to draw directions to the place. I would carry out this issue on my own, finish up with it, and resume my life. I needed to do away with this illegitimate growth in my body. It had to be the maneuvers of Satan. Satan had to be beaten. Beaten.

Chacha behaved as if he did not notice what was occurring in me, and I thought this was because the changes inside me were not because of him. Only once had he asked what was happening to me. He had not asked in exactly those words. He glanced at me, mumbled something about whether I was sick, and kept quiet. Was that the response a man who had been expecting a child for seven years should give his now pregnant wife? Was that the way a man who had waited to be a father for seven years should act? I thought he would say something like, “you’ll be fine.” He never again asked me. He was insistent that the Swahili colleague was my lover. This was not true. I would remove this seedling so that Chacha would not think that it was the Swahili who had planted it. If he thought that it was that man’s baby he would even arrest the Swahili or harm him. God forbid. Since he became chief, Chacha did not behave in a Christian manner. I feared that he would do something bad to the innocent teacher, and yet God knew that there was nothing between the man and me.

Did my mother-in-law know? She had asked me a number of questions and had given some suggestions, but she had not said that she thought I was pregnant. What was a mother-in-law who had longed for seven years for her son’s wife to become heavy expected to do when the wife finally succeeded? Wasn’t she supposed to ululate and sing hosannas and give extra tithes to the Church? I could not remember how my mother received the birth of my eldest brother’s first child, but her case was different since the baby came within the first year of marriage. Since my mother-in-law had not said that I was pregnant, or at least had not said that within my hearing, she would not turn round and ask me where I had taken the pregnancy. If she did, I would make sure I took care of her concerns.

Wankio, you are responsible for this. You should have known that being close to Muniko the way you were would lead to bad ends. But was I not supposed to be friendly
to my husband’s brother? Was I to treat Muniko and other family members as if I alone wanted to possess Chacha? Upon my marriage by mother urged me to remember that Chacha had relatives before he met me, and that I had to be good to his people, and not pull him away from them. What I did was be a good sister-in-law to Muniko. Or did I carry my mother’s advice a bit too far? I was kind and helpful to both Rungu and Muniko.

Every time I attempted to recall that morning at the maize farm, my mind went zigzag and I was unable to coherently put together the chronology of events. When I brushed by him an exciting sensation swept through me. I blinked and I felt happiness seize me. When it was all over, the world near me stood still. What did I think after the sin? I thought that I would reconcile myself to my God and repent, and God would forgive me. But then this. Can this be forgiven? When I realized that I had conceived I shuddered, for a pregnancy shows. This was an illegitimate life that I needed to end and move on in a sinless way.

And the family would remain united; I did not want the family disrupted.

I now realized that I was heading nowhere in the search for The Place. I turned back to the tarmac road. Suddenly, there was a bitter taste in my mouth; I spat. I smelled fried eggs and held my nose. I felt dizzy. I tried to walk faster, but my legs became weak. Soon, I was leaning against a veranda pole, and in a moment I slid and sat on the floor. I released my nose. I sneezed. My heart pounded and my chest shook. I coughed again. I rushed for a handkerchief in my handbag.

I would rest, then, get back to the main road and cross. The Place had to be on the other side. I would look for a bookshop, and even more significantly, a mosque. No mosque would close. Places of worship did not easily shift. The church buildings I saw in this town eight years ago were still there. I had worshipped in one of them—while at Migori Teachers’ College I regularly attended the Pentecostal Church past the post office. Today it was there at the very same spot. Churches always stayed where they used to be. Stayed.

I had forgotten my wristwatch at home and I could not tell what time it was. I must have left it on the bed. If Chacha returned from his job early and found it there he
would wonder: Wankio has never left behind her watch in all our married life, how come today? He would then speculate where I had gone. But, all the same, he would not arrive home before me. He was ever in those meetings of his or out solving a family dispute somewhere. I needed to finish this thing fast—in a flash as my colleague phrased it—and walk home.

What if someone from Tarang’anya passed here and saw me sitting on a veranda floor? I lifted my head slowly and surveyed the area around this crumbling shelter. What if the owner of this place came and demanded to know why I had claimed his ruins, his space, his property? He would allege anything—he would say that I was a thief, or a witch come to put bad things into the ground of his building. He would even claim that I was a prostitute. Did I resemble a harlot? I looked at my dress and rubber shoes. Or he would say that I was a devil-worshipper. I did not know how Satan’s worshippers looked like, but this thought slightly alarmed me as I imagined how I had fully covered myself from head to toe and how some people could take this as a fitting attire of a devil-worshipper. A devil-worshipper, who had to resemble Lucifer, was likely to come baring her teeth, roaring, and releasing fire through the mouth. My imagination was taking me too far, I thought. If anyone wanted to know why I was here I would reply that I was sick. Or what if one of my pupils passed by? Well, today was a Thursday and the students were in school. Anyhow, no one would recognize me.

I must have sat there for about thirty minutes. When I felt better, I rose and walked to the main road. I needed to locate The Place. The teacher had called it “The Place.” If I were unable to get it, I would stop someone and ask to be shown “The Place.” I would ask about it as if it were some well-known hotel where I wanted to have breakfast. I realized that I did not even know what it looked like. All I was sure of was that it was “The Place.” It was the place where what was life now was turned to lifelessness the next minute.

I arrived at the tarmac road and stopped. Coming down from my right, a boy cyclist overtook a vehicle, and landed in a ditch. Curious people ran to look at the boy and that was a good opportunity for me to head forward. I looked right and left, then, I
strode across. I felt energized. I wondered what had happened to me some time ago at the veranda. That must have been the work of Lucifer. "Lucifer would be overthrown," I muttered. "Overthrown." This was a battle between good and evil, I thought. I moved on, and took an earth road. I walked as if I had an appointment at a definite place. The weather became warmer, but I did not want to redo my attire; I would do so when I reached my destination. I now intently looked out for the bookstore. I may have passed it; instead, I began to search for the mosque. The Place was supposed to be soon after the mosque. A boy, playing ball with his colleague, almost hit me, but I bent in time. The two children laughed and one said, "Mama we shall not strike you." How did he know that I was "Mama" in this camouflage? Anyhow, maybe all mamas dressed this way around here.

I took a bend. The way became narrower. I feared that it would come to an end before I got to the clinic. Then, all of a sudden, I saw a long building on my left. My heart missed a beat. The house looked like the hostel I had lived in as a college student. Without pausing to examine my sketch, without checking both sides of the road to make sure no one saw me branch, without a second thought about hell or heaven, my legs just carried me into the compound. As I got closer to the block I thought I smelt medicines, and heard implements clink and I knew that I had arrived. *Wankio walk steadily, hold yourself strong, and get this thing done.* I went round the house to the front. There were many doors. This place did not look like "The Place" at all. *Wankio turn back and run away. Run away. Run.* Suddenly, there was a woman in front of me. She did not even wait for me to ask her what I wanted. "It is the third entrance," she pointed routinely and continued putting clothes on the washing line. These looked like second-hand clothes that she later sold.

I entered through the door she had indicated, and sat in a wooden bench. I thought that everyone in the room turned to look at me. There were about four other people in my seat and in the opposite side, sat three more. While there were some murmurs as I came in, The Place was now silent. Why, upon my entry, did they go as quiet as a pot full of cold water? What was it about me that led to their stillness? Only one person did not go
mute; she continued to pull drawers some distance in front of me. Then this young woman realized that a new client was in the room and she stopped whatever she was doing and moved toward me. She was about nineteen. She welcomed me and told me to follow her. As I walked to her desk I saw the posters on the walls and I doubted that this was The Place. This place had no name. There was no sign at the door. Inside here there were pictures of maize seeds, planting, weeding, and harvesting; there was nothing about what exactly happened in this house.

The receptionist took down my name. She asked other questions. She wanted to know how long I had been pregnant. She smiled and told me that all would be okay. A mere girl, really, I thought. How did she know that everything would be fine? Had she undergone the same experience? How could she work in a place where life was terminated and comfortably say that all would be well if she herself had not crushed a life?

I sat to wait for my turn to see the doctor.

Two girls seated opposite me whispered to each other. Were they talking about me? Were they discussing why an old woman—for they must have thought me as aged—like me would want to abort at a place like this? Or were they wondering why I would even want to stop a pregnancy to begin with? I did not think they could tell how old I was since my cover-up must have been working well. The girls seemed to know each other; possibly one had brought the other. Anyhow, they looked nervous. Like many of us here, they did not know what precisely lay ahead in the operation room. How had they ended up in this building? One had probably gotten a boyfriend at fifteen during a school club outing. She must have seen her young man as the prince himself, and he must have told her how he would marry her after they completed school. He stole money from the parents and provided for his sweetheart and the girl became the class princess who had the latest perfumes and fashions. If she attended a day school, over the weekend the prince took her out for a disco and gave promises of, “darling, life will always be like this.”
She was beautiful. Anyone who was her boyfriend likely walked as if he breathed something else other than the common oxygen. He must have glued her photograph inside the lid of his class locker so that when he opened it he smiled at his conquest and he also beamed at her face before he closed the desk. During the English Composition lesson the prince imagined the long letter he would write to his angel and later as another teacher discussed the physical features of Kenya, the boy only envisioned his gem’s appearance. But matters must have changed when she said that she was pregnant. The prince refused to have anything to do with it. “Do you think I can be a father at this age?” he questioned her and said that he was sure that he was not her only lover. That was that—no proof. The girl had now come to The Place in the hope that things would be settled for her. After all, she had a life ahead, she was young, and would get another boyfriend and conceive at the right time. And you, Wankio: How old are you? When will you get another child? Seven years, seven years, seven years ... Wankio, Wankio, Wankio ...

There were other rooms used by The Place. People entered and left the doctor’s consultation, which was to the right of the receptionist. When someone came out, the girl looked at the person’s chit and directed her to go through a door directly in front of her. This had to be the operating theatre. I sat for about thirty minutes and saw no one leave surgery. I wanted to see how one looked after she had encountered the scalpel. I recalled that one time a nun had come to our college and showed us films on the ills of abortion—how tools inserted into a female’s body held the fetus and returned with tiny parts of the human being. I felt nausea at this thought. I shook my head—I had to get the thoughts of Satan out of my mind. Satan would be defeated. Defeated. Defeated. My pregnancy had not reached the stage of limbs being pulled, cut, and crushed.

I shook my head again in order to focus on the present.

When I was in secondary school a classmate of mine passed away while “trying to clean her womb.” Nobody said that she had attempted to abort. This word was rarely used. She took a number of malaraquin tablets in the hope that they would eliminate the thing that was germinating in her. Unfortunately, she died. We girls heard that such cases
were quite common in this country. Some girls even put omo detergent in water and drank the mixture. Some people said that abortion should be offered just like any other form of healthcare in hospitals so that women would stop taking malarquina and omo, and dying. Lately, I had not heard stories of tablets and detergents—probably places like The Place were conducting safe abortions. Perhaps something more would be done if we got a new government. The opposition Coalition had pledged to give free primary school education, to offer free medical services, and to create jobs. They had promised so many things—would they do everything?

Someone now emerged from the theater and all our eyes turned toward her. A patient moaned in the operating room, her teeth gnashed and she piled a heap of abuses at the man who had caused her this: *Son of a bitch, the devil; he’s having a good time...leave me alone... let me go... mama yooooo. Jesus, Jesus.* The one who had appeared from the now noisy place was transfixed as she attempted to move forward to the registration desk. She seemed to be listening to the curses coming from surgery. Her face changed and her cheeks appeared to shrink. Was she hearing the approach of an earth tremor? She closed her eyes slowly—was she praying? When she opened them the receptionist was holding her hand and leading her out. What did she remember as she stood in the middle of the room and heard cries across the shut door, probably from the bed she had used some minutes ago? Did she feel the pain of the screaming person or her own agony? Was it the whimper of a helpless life being denied entry into the world that reached her? Was it the condemnation from her own baby whose life she had willingly ended some time ago? Was that what nailed her at the spot like one struck by lightning?

As she was escorted out, the voice from across the wall went low. And in our room, there followed grave silence.

My immediate elder sister had suffered a miscarriage in her first pregnancy. When I went to visit her she covered herself with a blanket and sobbed. For some time after she did not get a child, and she mourned that the lost one had taken away her good luck. As years passed without a conception, she loudly lamented that soon she would reach the age at which she would bear no baby, and then she would die like a chicken. She would go
from this world the way she had come—like a dog, she said. Then after five years of waiting she gave birth to a son. When I visited her she cried the same way she had when she miscarried. Wasn’t she supposed to be full of joy? That day as I left she told me that she prayed that I too would one day be blessed. She now had three children. What would she say if she learned that I had strangled what God had given me to cuddle? What of Gati’s statement that God did not reject any child? Had I not seen many doctors to assist me get a baby, while Chacha visited a few and said he was getting poor?

I held my forehead. I was now the next in line to the consultation room. I could see the girl seated outside, and her image of closed eyes in what seemed like plaintive prayer refused to leave me. I heard echoes of the earth tremor. Wankio, the people here are young. They will get children. How old are you? Wankio, after seven years of marriage, you get a product, then you grind it? Wankio, this is your only child. Wankio, Wankio, Wankio....

Satan would be defeated. I rose. “Where is the toilet?” I asked the receptionist.

“But you’re the one next?” she said.

“I’ll be back quickly,” I said. My voice trembled.

She pulled a drawer of her desk and took a padlock key. We walked to the door, and she pointed out, “Use the one on the right,” she said.

My heart raced. Bells tolled in my mind: Wankio, Wankio, Wankio ... I entered the latrine and tried a short call—there was something little. I attempted the long call—there was nothing. I listened: Outside, not far away, children played and shouted. From here, they would fly into their mothers’ arms for a warm lunch.

I stayed in the toilet hoping that I would relieve myself. After about ten minutes, I slowly opened the door. It creaked so loudly that I thought the entire compound knew I was leaving. I walked out stealthily. Someone was waiting nearby to use the key so I gave it to her.

I went right, away from the door to The Place. I moved cautiously, noiselessly. I felt like a thousand eyes stared at me. God, let me get out of this place, I beseeched. Let them not see me. I thought I heard the receptionist’s voice: Hey you come back! This is
the way. You've not yet seen the doctor! My leg hit an empty kimbo tin and I still
marched ahead. One part of me said that I should run—that I was being chased. Another
side urged me to look behind to make sure I was safe. No, don't, don't. Move on! I
moved. Moved.

**Chacha Three**

The *matatu* climbed the steep earth road from Kehancha, and I looked through a space
between two passengers perched at the entrance at the back of the vehicle and saw the
whirl of dust left behind. One could not tell that two days ago there had been rain here,
although the branches and leaves of trees and undergrowth beside the way swayed slowly
and seemed comfortable with the present weather. We were packed inside this Toyota
like sacks of maize in a store, and despite the early evening breeze outside, I perspired.

An old man in a long overcoat, seated next to me gasped, pushed me, and
complained of a lack of fresh air. The other passengers in our bench heaved and elbowed
for space. I clenched my teeth, placed my baton between my feet, and gripped an iron bar
in the car's roof. In the seat opposite mine, sweat balls formed on people's foreheads.

"We shall die inside here," a woman moaned.

The youths at the door laughed. "Who told you to sit there?" one said.

"Mama, that is freedom," another said. "Dictatorship is over!"

"Report to the chief," another giggled, and almost everyone—even the drenched
ones—laughed. The grumbling woman tried to smile.

Some passengers had probably not bathed for three days as they stayed at the
Kehancha County Council hall and kept vigil over the counting of votes for the
parliamentary and civic seats for our district. Now the young men hanging at the sides of
the vehicle sung about the victory of the National Coalition.

I had put a lot of hope on our KANU parliamentary candidate, but this afternoon
the seat had gone to the opposition. I believed that the results had been tampered with.
This loss was the last nail in the coffin for me; it added insult to injury, because late
yesterday the radio had broadcast that the KANU presidential candidate had conceded
defeat even before all the ballots were counted, and the Coalition immediately opined that they were ready to receive power from his Excellency. These overzealous people would never rule our country well—why hadn’t his Excellency refused to leave, or called in the military so that anyone who showed resistance would bite the bullet? And from then on the armed forces would rule by brutal force and retain some of us as chiefs to help maintain law and order. Instead, his Excellency had failed us chiefs and other members of the provincial administration, who had selflessly served him for all these years. Already everyone at Kehancha town was saying that it was a foregone conclusion that we chiefs would lose our jobs and this scared me. I would wait and see how things unfolded. But how would the common mwanaanchi be governed without us chiefs? The day after tomorrow the Coalition person would be sworn in as the new president of Kenya. Why couldn’t something happen before then? Why couldn’t the military take over to save us from the misguided elements?

When it was announced that the Coalition candidate had taken the victory, law and order seemed to have broken down at Kehancha. A number of disgruntled people bent on causing disharmony had chanted out of the County Council hall, broken twigs in the compound and danced in the town’s main road. This uncivilized behavior had definitely extended to other places such as here at the back of the vehicle where the young men dangled precariously at the door and rudely used unlicensed language without respect to whoever was inside the matatu or to whoever was passing by the roadside. If the opposition ruled this country, it would be an administration of lunatics!

We left behind the hilly part of the road, turned a corner and were now on our way to Tarang’anya chief’s Camp. The driver accelerated and the people at the entrance swung their legs wildly and shouted in excitement. Someone seated in our bench, close by the door, told the conductor to signal the driver to pull up at the next station—the chief’s Camp. The youths whooped and raised their fists as the vehicle screeched to a stop. “Super!” the conductor complimented the driver. The conductor yelled and jumped down.

I pushed my way and stepped off the vehicle. I glanced across the road, at the chief’s headquarters, at my office, and shook my head. A group of people, who were
gathered at the kiosks opposite the Camp must have been gossiping and idling. That was where Magita had shouted obscenities and confronted my mother. Did what he had said, that I would never get children, have any truth? I brushed the thought aside; those must have been the mere words of an insane mind. I pocketed my hand, bowed my head, and walked down beside the road in the direction the Toyota matatu had gone. In the far distance on my left, thunder tore the sky and Maeta hill rumbled. It was only about five, but the skies here were darker. I moved fast and was glad to be away from the jubilation of the undisciplined crowds.

Soon, I left the road, and took a footpath over our land and walked slowly toward our compound.

“What is this I hear?” my mother asked as I neared our house. She had emerged from the kraal. “That a different government has taken over? That they’ll sack all chiefs?” She paused.

I yawned and stretched my arms for an unnecessarily long time, and frowned. “What do you mean?” I asked her, and faced the door of the building ready to walk on in.

“Muniko has told me that a new administration has begun to rule.”

“He knows better,” I said. “Ask him.”

Lightning sparkled over Maeta across the river. It must be raining beyond the hill, I thought.

Muniko shouted from the kraal and soon limped out holding a radio, and he was hurriedly chewing something. “The military has said...” He swallowed. “They’ll respect the wishes of the people.” He had not noticed me yet and when he saw me he put on a false sad face. He was excited as if it were his father who would become president, I thought.

“Don’t worry,” my mother said to me. “God in heaven will give you something else to do.”

I did not wait for her to begin a long sermon to me; after all, I was no longer in the Church. I had left because I would not allow pastor Samuel to pretend to dictate to me how I should run my family. Some time ago the pastor came here one evening in the
name of trying to resolve the differences between Wankio and me. I had just entered our house and was removing my uniform when I heard a knock and his voice. I told him to come in, and I took my time to organize myself and join him in the sitting room.

"These are good photographs, chief," he said when I came over. He had placed his pocket bag on the table and was looking at Wankio’s and my pictures hanging on the earth wall. We exchanged greetings and he still continued with what he was doing. After some time he sat down and we talked about many issues such as the weather and the coming elections. When Wankio brought tea to us, she lingered around touching things here and there, and finally she sat slightly away from us.

"Take a cup and have tea with us," Pastor Samuel told her.

"Pastor, I’m okay. I had mine in the kitchen." I wondered why she did not want to leave.

"Living the holy life that God has asked us to is not easy," Samuel said after some time. "Families are not easy to run. I’m a married man and I know." He was silent as if he had completed whatever he was saying. Our cattle entered the kraal and I saw him look at his watch. "So it’s already evening," he said. He probably had to visit another family before he went to bed.

"When one has done wrong and one confesses we should forgive." He looked at me seated opposite him and then looked at Wankio to his far right. Since he was about ten years older than me, he assumed that he could come here and instruct my wife and me. I placed my chin in my hand and gazed at him.

He coughed to clear his throat. "When one repents, we forgive. You two should forgive each other."

"Has anyone confessed?" I asked him.

He hesitated for a moment and I saw that he did not want to look at Wankio. "One can even avow to our father in heaven. He sees everything." He abruptly turned the way he usually did in church and looked at Wankio who bowed her head. "One repents to God, as He is the judge. If your wife has done anything wrong you should forgive her and
God will rule.” He stared at her as if he was expecting an answer from her, but Wankio did not talk.

I thought that he was simply wasting my time, and as if he realized this he read some verses from the Bible, and soon left. I heard him tell my mother that everything was now fine and that he had sorted out the problem.

I now stepped forward and almost bumped into Wankio’s chest as she came out with an empty traveling bag. She glanced at my face, then looked above my head and strode on without a word.

I heard the sound of the knapsack as she dusted it. I entered the bedroom, and immediately met a hollowness there that made me blink. When I left this morning, everything had been intact, but now her suitcase of clothes and virtually all her things were absent. What more did she want to carry in that bag? And where was she going? Was she going to her Swahili friend in Kehancha? I had gotten myself so engrossed in the elections that I had not gone to the Kehancha education offices to see the man who had promised me he would have the Swahili transferred. I should have moved quickly and sent Wankio to her home and gone ahead with my marriage plans, but then the security situation in this past season always called for my presence all time round the clock. Had I been overtaken by events? If Wankio was going back to her parents and was expecting me to go begging for her from her father, she was grossly mistaken. I took a deep breath and my heart pounded. Was this the hour of reckoning for me? “To hell with everything,” I muttered after a moment. I removed my shoes, crouched in the bed, and tried to understand what Wankio and my mother were saying outside. More thunder came from the hill.

Wankio Three

Across the river, lightning shone through the slopes of Maeta. I stood next to the gum tree, hummed softly, and cleaned the bag. I still had a few items to pack. I put on a no-nonsense face. Carelessness on one late-morning had led me to this situation. My womb was enlarging daily; Chacha said nothing about it, and as for Muniko he looked at me as
if I had some contagious disease that he had to keep away from. He probably feared that I would confess what had occurred in the maize farm. But I did not want to cause strife in the family; instead, I would leave and let the family remain peaceful.

I was not sure whether my mother-in-law had seen me steadily remove my things all day and give them to a cousin of mine to take them to my parent’s home in Nyamotambe. Lately, she had been peering at me as if she expected me to talk about contractions, and yet she knew that the baby was not due for a long time. I had hoped to be gone by the time Chacha returned from the vote counting at Kehancha, but his presence now could not stop me. I lightly beat the bag against the grass and stared at the hill. I struck the bag again and some dust rose.

I looked furtively at my mother-in-law who stood some distance to my right. Slowly, she started moving closer. I hummed and walked away, broke a twig, and brushed the knapsack. But she still pursued me.

"Wankio," she said, "I thought we handled this issue."

I did not speak.

"Didn’t pastor Samuel speak to the two of you?" she said and looked up at me. I avoided her stare. I thought that she needed to do more than just invite the pastor here to sort out things that occurred in this family.

What had happened was not a matter to be dealt with by the Church. The pastor only spoke about the confession of one person, as if he were sure that I had sinned, but he did not tackle the issue of the other transgressor. I did not want to tear the family apart—I would keep whatever happened on that morning at the maize shamba to myself and the family would stay in harmony and united in Christ. The way ahead would not be easy. People would turn their heads and look at me as the one who was immoral, the one who broke the marriage. Even my parents would probably tell me to come back to my husband and “stop putting a lot of book views into the matter of marriage.”

“Where are you going at this time and in this approaching rain?” my mother-in-law asked.
“Anywhere,” I said and plunged my hand into the bag and got some dirt. I broke more twigs and cleaned again.

She sighed and looked at the ground. “Sinda is responsible for this,” she said. She always blamed Aunt Sinda, and yet she spent hours talking to Aunt whenever she came here. My mother-in-law was now silent for a moment. Then she said, “God will help us.”

I entered the house.

Chacha lay in the bed facing the wall. It seemed that he had been listening to us. He turned toward me, and bent his arm over his face. He folded his legs as if sleeping, but I felt his eyes all over me as I put the last items into my knapsack. I took my handkerchief from the top of the cupboard. When I turned, he had straightened his arm and was staring at me. He feigned a cough and moved for a moment as if he were getting himself into a more comfortable lying position. He shifted again and faced my direction. I walked to the door, stopped, and looked back around the room one more time. He yawned. I waited. He possibly wanted to say something or expected me to speak, but I had talked enough all these seven years we had been married. He was the one who should have tackled his issues, cleared his mind, and faced his problems.

I walked out.

“Where do you think you are going?” Chacha said.

I did not look back. I passed the cattle pen’s gate, went right, moved past the gum tree and walked down the compound. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Muniko standing outside his house looking at me, and at the kraal’s gate appeared my mother-in-law. Chacha had come out of the house. He bent at the gum tree and tried to pick something as he too watched me. I gripped my bag and took the path toward the river.

I still felt Chacha’s stare at me—even after the grass and undergrowth made it impossible for him to see me—but I refused to look behind. I branched right toward the earth road. On the horizon over Maeta hill, a rainbow emerged—there likely would be no rain here today.
The Story and The Story

One by one, sometimes in twos, Tantwi picked the texts. Flung to the other end of the room, on his left, close by the door, was the letter he had received from the B.B.C telling him that his short story would be broadcast on the World Service Radio today at noon. He took the envelope, stood at the door, and lightly slapped the paper against his left palm. He made as if to unfold the sheet, but did not. He would wait and listen to the actual tale itself. This would make some point to Tantwi’s wife who did not seem to believe that there would exist such a thing as her husband’s story on the B.B.C.

Tantwi straightened his shirt and lightly patted his stomach. He touched his head, which was becoming bald from the front, and looked ahead. In front of him was the inner cattle pen, surrounded by the outer kraal. From time to time Tantwi’s wife used the space between the kraals to spread out cassava to dry, and to pound millet. The homestead had four houses. The edge of the outer kraal went round until at some point it met a house. From one house to another were poles and sticks fixed into a tunnel. Directly opposite where Tantwi stood was Tantwi’s younger brother’s house. Next to it, on the left, after some stretch of the outer kraal, was Tantwi’s wife’s kitchen.

Mosabi, Tantwi’s six-year old son, appeared at the entrance to the outer kraal. The boy rubbed his eyes, wiped his face, and coughed.

“I told you not to go near the smoke,” Tantwi said.

“I was far away,” Mosabi said. He wanted to speak something more, but he coughed again. He removed his pullover.
"Is all the rubbish burned?" Tantwi asked. "You should stay there until all is over." Tantwi had been collecting and lighting trash this morning, and when he saw that all was nearly done, he told his son to watch over the fire.

"It's almost cleared," Mosabi said.

Mosabi went past his father and entered the house. He seemed to be looking for something, Tantwi thought. Although Tantwi did not trust the boy being left alone with Tantwi's books, he walked out of the kraal and looked at the burning rubbish some distance from the outer kraal's gate. All was almost burned. He hurried back. Mosabi was rummaging through things in his parents' bedroom.

"What is that moving in there like rats looking for leftover ugali?" Tantwi said.

Mosabi did not answer. Tantwi walked to the bedroom door.

"Father, has it begun?" Mosabi asked.

"What?" Tantwi asked.

"The story," Mosabi replied and continued to search. Tantwi now realized that the boy was looking for the transistor radio. Mosabi may have overheard Tantwi tell three or four of his friends about the B.B.C story. Tantwi had wished that only a few people know this issue. He had noticed that some of the few he told doubted that anyone from this Ihore village, at the far end of Kenya, would have his story broadcast on the B.B.C. Sagara, for instance, seemed to indicate that the B.B.C radio had more important issues to deal with.

"The radio is nowhere," Mosabi said.

"It's not yet time," Tantwi said.

Mosabi was disappointed. He seemed eager to have the radio next to him hours before his father's story was aired. Tantwi could not blame his son; at the boy's age Tantwi and his elder brother sat by the radio hours before the beginning of a live broadcast of a football match on the local Voice of Kenya station. Mosabi crawled under the bed; he seemed not ready to give up soon. Tantwi held his shirt and pulled him back. "It's not yet time," Tantwi said. "Your mother knows where the radio is." This seemed a reasonable suggestion to the boy who rose and rushed out toward his mother's kitchen.
Tantwi pushed back a carton that his son had pulled from under the bed. He went back to the sitting room, pulled a chair close to the table and made as if to sit. Instead, he went to the bookshelf. He passed his eyes round. He did not know what, in particular, he was looking for. He took Ian Gordon’s *Looking for a Rain God and Other Stories from Africa*, considered the cover, flipped through the book, and returned it to its place.

He opened *The Sea Gull*, and quickly turned the pages over. He placed the book to the other end of the table, on his right. He sometimes promised himself that he would not buy any new text until he had read all the ones on the shelves, but he never kept this promise. As he bent down to buy second-hand books lined up beside the streets in Migori town, he felt sorry for breaking his pledge, but quickly consoled himself that Mosabi would get something to read in future. Now that the boy even wanted to listen to a BBC story, there was reason to buy more books, Tantwi thought and smiled.

He took the story he had started writing two days ago, but set that aside, and picked a newspaper, but threw it to the ground. He walked to the door, stood there, and sharpened his pencil. Through the grass thatch of his wife’s kitchen, smoke spiraled into the midmorning sky. He returned inside. He fished out a paper here, another there, and got his notes and spread everything across the table within his view. He felt like a preacher preparing a sermon in which he would quote from various books of the Bible.

* * *

From where Nyangi sat in the kitchen, she could look through the door and see the gate into the outer kraal, and could as well see the entrance into the main house where her husband was. When Tantwi stood at the door brushing dust from some envelope and stroking his stomach, Nyangi watched him. Later, when he stood at the doorstep sharpening a pencil like a pupil about to take an examination, she observed him too. And now she saw her son run out of the house like a calf let loose to suckle. Mosabi did not go round the inner kraal; he seemed to fold himself, bent under the partitioning sticks of the inner kraal, cut across and rushed toward his mother’s kitchen. This morning, Nyangi had emptied cow-dung from the kraal so Mosabi did not have to worry about dirtying himself.
Mosabi stood at the hut's door. He was panting like a cat that had just returned from a fruitless chase of a rat.

“Move, I want to look outside,” Nyangi said. She touched a dark spot on her cheek below her left eye. One would think that she had been burned, but her mother told her that she had been born with this mark.

Mosabi did not move. “Father’s story will be narrated on radio today,” he said.

“Is that why you are panting?” Nyangi asked.

Mosabi nodded.

Nyangi moved briefly in the low three-legged stool. She was short and she felt that she had lately lost weight. Shortness and lightness both at the same time were not good things, she thought. She watched the fire and monitored the boiling porridge. She hoped to be more careful today; yesterday half of the food had spilled over the sufuria and mixed with the ashes as she checked what was happening in front of doors and gates.

She sneezed loudly, and Mosabi jumped slightly away. “So you get scared by little things,” Nyangi said. She sneezed again and held her mouth. This building, which was a low and dark thing, was the reason for her bouts of sneezes, she thought. Even though she saw outside well, she could not see things in here until she moved closer to whatever she was looking for. The kitchen had one little window that she used to survey the world outside the outer kraal.

“Father’s story will be broadcast today,” Mosabi said into Nyangi’s ear.

“You’ll destroy my eardrum.” Nyangi blocked her ear. “I’m not deaf.”

“Mother, did you hear what I said?”

“I know,” Nyangi said curtly. She waved a hand across her face as she would to a housefly flirting in front of her. She grabbed a stick nearby and hit the floor. “You!” she shouted. A cat, which had just crossed the gate to the outer kraal, turned back. Mosabi laughed at the scampering animal.

He sat on the floor.

“There is a lot of smoke in this hut,” she said. “You better go out.”

“I want you to listen to the story,” he said.
Nyangi quickly pulled some wood from the fire. The food had almost streamed down. She had to be more watchful and not get carried away by Mosabi’s stories of the trickster Hare.

“I want you to listen to the story,” he said again.
“‘I will do so,” she said absent-mindedly. She scooped some porridge in the ladle, put it into her palm and tasted. She lifted the bowl from the fire. “Get your cup.”
“It’s still hot,” he said. There was some silence. “Will you listen to the story?” Mosabi asked. He did not seem satisfied with his mother’s earlier response.
“I do not understand the language in which your father writes,” she said.
“English?” Mosabi asked self-importantly.

Nyangi continued stirring the meal to make it cool. “Yes, *Englis*. Do you know the language?”
“That is a simple thing,” Mosabi said shyly and looked at the floor beside him.
“I’ll tell you. I’ll direct you.” He stretched himself, and with his finger drew an imaginary line across his leg.
“Thank you,” Nyangi said. “But even then, I’ll not understand.”
Her son stood up. He made as if to run out, but suddenly seemed to remember something. Today he did not care about food, his mother observed. He was full of his father’s *Englis*.
“People say that my father has been given a lot of money by the Europeans,” he said.
“What people say so?” Nyangi feigned serious attention to what her son was saying. She stopped stirring the porridge.
“Gisiri,” her son confidently replied.
“And who told Gisiri?”
“He heard his father tell some people.”
Mosabi waited for the next question and seemed ready with an answer, but his mother instead went back to her work. He whistled his way out of the house; he probably thought he had defeated his mother with his trickster-like responses.
A lot of money indeed! Nyangi hissed. At one corner of the kitchen table lay a packet of salt, two kilograms of sugar, thirty centimeters of bar soap, and 500 grams of steel wool for scraping *sufurias*. That was all that “a lot of money” had purchased. The other day, Tantwi walked in through the gate of the outer kraal, and in a rather pleased mood, handed a paper bag of the items to Mosabi and told the boy to hold them carefully and give them to his mother. One would have thought that he was giving Mosabi some delicate things like glasses made in England. When Nyangi saw the items, she did not know whether to pity herself or her husband.

Her husband couldn’t pull her out of this daily huddling in a smoky hut from where she inhaled diseases as she prepared the same meals everyday. He should have changed the diet of the household and reshaped his wife’s physical appearance. Nyangi looked at the over-repaired dress that she wore, and shook her head. It was demeaning to the wife of a B.B.C writer to hop around in the same clothes like Bunyige the lunatic while her husband proudly walked in with heaps of second-hand books every time he went to Migori. She was sure that half the B.B.C money had gone into paying for the books that lay in a corner accumulating dust.

Her life with Tantwi had begun well eleven years ago, but things started to change some time in the fifth or sixth year of their marriage, when Tantwi developed obsession with books and wrote little notes on tiny pieces of paper. He said that he would one day write bigger books than the ones he read. Nyangi hoped that that “one day” would never arrive and her husband would realize that those who wrote did not live in some village bush called Ihore.

Then, one evening Tantwi showed her a short story he had written. Nyangi simply nodded and said it was all a good idea. What did he expect Nyangi, who had not gone beyond Class Four, to say about things written in a language she did not understand? Every time he showed her something new he had written, she gave the same nod and sometimes a tired smile too.

Nyangi was a bit excited when her husband told her that his story would be broadcast on radio, and that he had been paid some money. Although she did not know
anything about written short stories, she knew that not many people around Ihore ever got mentioned on the B.B.C. But when she saw what “a lot of money” had bought, her excitement ended.

And then two weeks ago, Tantwi was interdicted from his primary school teaching job. He said that the headmaster had a family grudge against him, but Nyangi was certain that the interdiction had to do with her husband scribbling notes on pieces of paper when he was supposed to teach math in Class Four. But how could someone whose story was to be broadcast on the B.B.C be stopped from his job? Wasn’t such a person unmovable?

* * *

At his writing table, Tantwi held a blue biro pen whose short tip was sharp and pointed. The pen was halfway used and at this stage it wrote smoothly. He removed the lid and peered inside as if he wished to invoke some writing power. He blew air into the lid to cast out dust lodged at the sides and bottom.

Tantwi wrote: *The ants scattered briefly.* Tantwi paused and wanted to write something about a boy and a stick, but instead wrote: *For a moment each ant seemed to be on its own. But that was not for long. Instead of the straight line as they previously had been, they regrouped and formed a circle. Then there was no movement, as if they were held in reflection and supplication before they would resume the journey that the boy’s stick had interrupted.*

Tantwi stopped. He read the sentence and considered the words “reflection” and “supplication.” He made as if to delete them. He let them stay. *The setting sun hurried toward the west. The king ant led his subjects on.* Tantwi thought: The setting sun would sink before they arrived. That was going ahead, he thought.

He read what he had written. With the pen, he tapped at his bulged cheek, which made a sound like the drum that announced the dancing competition in the arena. He imagined that he saw dancers strike their feet on the ground, shake their shoulders, and tilt their heads. He heard the drum beat louder. The dancers stamped their feet, a whoop rose from the audience, and a whistle was blown. There was silence. The competition would soon begin.
He dropped the pen and searched through some papers. He read a blue paper and set it aside, then saw some pages on his right, and pulled them.

* * *

Zoom, Mosabi said and drove his vehicle up and down the yard. Zoom, zoom. He had made a road for his matatu. Some smoke still rose from the burning rubbish his father had told him to watch over. He had taken enough care of that. Then he had picked some passengers into his vehicle and he was now taking them home. Zoom, zoom. This vehicle was really a master of the way; it moved faster than the matatus he saw on the road at Gwikonge or Kehancha whenever he went to these places. Once in a while he went to Gwikonge. But his father said that Kehancha was the big town near here. Mosabi had been to Kehancha only once when he went with his father to buy his school uniform for the beginning of school this year. When he became older he would go to other places when his school went to play football or do running competitions. This year he was in Class One in his father’s school. His father had not gone to school for some days and some pupils said that he was sacked because he refused to teach and because the headmaster did not like him. Zoom, Mosabi said. Zoom. Refused to teach and the headmaster did not like him, Mosabi thought. Zoom, zoom. When he asked his mother she said don’t bother me, ask your father. When he asked his father, his father said that he would go teach next week. Mosabi’s vehicle swerved and skidded. He smiled; he was happy with the way it was moving. Zoom, zoo, zoo. His matatu was a plane like the one he saw zoom across the sky the day the president came to Kehancha.

“Tell your father that we are here,” someone spoke from behind Mosabi. Mosabi turned. A little smoke still went up from the rubbish. Two people sat by the cattle-dung hillock. He greeted them. One was Gisiri’s father. Mosabi had seen the other one, but he did not know his name.

“Tell your father that we want the radio,” said the one whose name Mosabi did not know. He wore a black overcoat.
“How much did you weed today?” the overcoat one asked. He scratched into his long hair and yawned. Mosabi parked his vehicle next to the wall of his mother’s kitchen. He told the passengers to step down.

“Mosabi, don’t you understand?” Gisiri’s father said.

Mosabi had first to park his vehicle properly and allow all people to get down, he thought. He ran into the kraal.

Mosabi stood at the door of the main house. “Father, that person …” He was breathing fast. “Gisiri’s father wants the radio,” he said.

His father did not look up at him. He had his eyes very close to a large book as if the book had some soup he was about to drink. He put a finger on the big book the way Mosabi’s teacher pointed at A, B, C …

“Who?” his father asked. “Sagara?”

Mosabi nodded and his father went to the bedroom to get the radio. Mosabi entered the house, took his father’s pen and started writing things in the big book that his father had been looking at as a person drinking beef soup from a bowl. Hot soup burned one’s lips, Mosabi thought. His father returned and Mosabi closed the big book and looked at his father. His father stared at him and said nothing. He gave Mosabi the radio and he grasped it and remembered that Gisiri’s father’s radio had fallen from Gisiri’s hand and got destroyed. There were several pieces on the ground. No more people talked from the radio. Gisiri’s father had a big radio. How did people enter the radio and talk from there? Mosabi wondered. His father had once told him that there were wires in the air that transported the voices. Mosabi still wondered and did not know whether to believe his father. Mosabi held the radio tightly and moved slowly round the inner kraal and then walked through the gate of the outer kraal and went out.

He heard more voices, looked up, and saw more people. While at Kehancha he had seen many people and his father had said that it was a market day. He clasped the radio. Maybe there could be many people coming to listen to his father’s story. Maybe he would have a big story to tell Gisiri on Monday. Maybe he would tell Gisiri that with the
Europeans’ money his father had bought him another vehicle. He took each step slowly. Someone attempted to get the radio from him; he clasped it.

“Give the radio to me,” Gisiri’s father said. He was the one his father had called Sagara. Gisiri’s father brought his hand closer, but Mosabi still clung to the radio. He did not want to see many pieces around him. If there were pieces, likely the people inside would not talk.

“Mosabi, give it to me,” Gisiri’s father said. Mosabi took his fingers from the radio handle. He wanted to tell Gisiri’s father to hold the radio carefully, but he kept quiet. He followed Gisiri’s father down to the group seated around the cattle-dung mound. That was where his mother used to throw dung but now the place had grown grass. Last week, Mosabi had uprooted a mushroom from the hillock. His mother now threw the dung somewhere near the papaya tree.

A man with a big scar on his forehead asked, “How much have you worked today?” Mosabi had seen Big Scar several times. Mosabi’s elder brother was the one who called him Big Scar. He said that Big Scar was burned when he tried to eat vegetables direct from the cooking pot. Mosabi’s elder brother gave everybody names. Today he had taken goats to the grazing field and he would miss this story from the radio. Mosabi would tell him the story.

“What!” asked the one with holes in his trousers. “What can one do on a day like this?” His jembe lay next to him; he had mud on his feet; he was from the shamba.

Two people crossed the cypress hedge and entered the compound. Those ones, Mosabi had not seen. Could there be other people coming whom he had never seen? It maybe like when he went to Kehancha and there were people and people and his father grasped his hand. And there was music from loudspeakers. Cars, bicycles. And people. Many people.

Mosabi now stood next to Gisiri’s father. Where was Gisiri? he thought. Would he be coming to listen to hear the story? Mosabi wanted to know whether these people next to the hillock could say something about when the story would begin. Was it about to start?
“When will the story begin?” Mosabi asked Gisiri’s father.

“At twelve, boy,” Gisiri’s father said. He looked at Mosabi and smiled.

Someone was talking and they all listened. “Tantwi is Ihore’s lion,” shouted the one whose bushy beard had some strings of white blanket.

They continued talking. Mosabi walked away. He would drive his vehicle for some time.

* * *

Nyangi heard Sagara tell Mosabi to fetch the radio. Through the kitchen door, she saw her son walk out of the main house holding the radio as if it were a pot with this lunch’s vegetables. But the radio was really the size of a cigarette packet. She had never seen Mosabi walk as carefully as he did now, stepping on the ground as though it were lined with thorns. If someone scared him, the boy would run faster than if bees were chasing him, and the radio would go into a thousand bits. Nyangi felt like laughing at the boy.

She rose slowly, stood near the window, and watched the B.B.C lot as it surrounded the hillock. She took record of every vagabond who arrived. She knew the whole pack. One of them, Monanka, who sat comfortably on the pail that Nyangi used to gather rubbish, taught in the same school as Tantwi. That pail would be ruined today, she thought. They must have felt good that Tantwi had cleaned the area around and burned all the rubbish. Had he prepared the place for these idlers? She wondered whether this horde would call itself “men.” Instead of working in their farms on a Saturday morning, they were swaggering in unashamedly to hang onto a story that another man had created from his fantasies. Take Monanka, for instance. What he did was get himself drunk most of the time. His wife had left him and gone to loiter in towns where it was said she was selling her body. She had left because Monanka could not feed her well.

It pained Nyangi to remember that her husband was out of his job because he had been found conjuring up dreams to entertain this contemptible group. Tantwi must have been found peeping into some little, dirty, goatskin-like strips of paper. He claimed that he wrote his story thoughts on the strands of paper.
She could not follow what the men at the hillock were talking about. Once in a while one shouted above the others and asked Sagara to say when the story was about to begin. Another looked at his watch and announced proudly that there was still plenty of time. Why had he come this early, then? Nyangi wondered. She thought they had all come simply to rejoice at the misfortune of her husband. These people, who had consumed the second half of the B.B.C money paid to her husband, were pied-crows revisiting the slaughter-place to peck at the remains.

The first half of the B.B.C money had bought the useless books and the items on the kitchen table. She turned and looked at the packet of salt; then, at the two kilograms of sugar; then, at the thirty centimeters of bar soap. She looked through the window and saw more people arrive—was this a funeral?

* * *

Tantwi heard murmurs outside. He scratched a tiny growth in his wrist, which was wide at the top and gave the appearance of tree branches supported by a stem. He held the pen more possessively and moved on. He did not need to spend countless minutes waiting for the broadcast.

_They reached a rock, which was tall and sharp at the top. The king slowly peered up and squinted. He could not actually see up to the top; he was tired and he lowered his head. All his followers’ eyes were directed at their king’s mouth, waiting for his word. He went round the rock in search of a point he and his followers could climb. He noticed a groove where he thought they could ascend. He moved closer and touched the place. He walked back to his subjects._

The pen seemed to agree with Tantwi now more than ever before. He wrote without a second thought, without crossing out any word. He arranged the letters the way a plow pulled by two well-fed oxen splits the earth and arranges layer upon layer of soil. He visualized the title of the story: _“Descending Uphill.”_ He kept writing. The pen placed the words in their places as Tantwi had done when he sorted cured tobacco leaves into various grades. He was once a tobacco farmer. Now he planted only maize and had been
teaching until he was temporarily stopped by a headmaster who did not understand the meaning of taking some time off to prepare to write a story.

Then without any sign whatsoever ... Tantwi grimaced and rubbed his long chin. He crossed the “whatsoever” and continued. ... darkness fell upon the rock.

“There’s something that’s happening,” the king said. “It’s something we need to sit down and discuss.”

They all stopped, almost at once, as if they had been expecting this statement.

“What is it, King?” the travelers asked, nearly in chorus.

The leader turned and looked up and down each individual at a time, and moved onto the next. Each member waited for his turn and when the king went past him without a word, the follower seemed relieved.

The king wondered how darkness had come upon them in the middle of the day.

“You’re the cause of this,” he blurted, pointing at one of his warriors.

The warrior stood still, seemingly unmoved.

Tantwi thought he had seen someone walk into the room. He now looked up.

“Mosabi, what do you want?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Mosabi said. “Tell me a story.”

This boy would waste his time, Tantwi thought. “Which one do you want?” he asked.

“The one of the crow and the weaver bird,” his son replied. He knelt on a stool and stretched his hands on the table.

“That is a good one,” Tantwi said. The boy was wasting his time, Tantwi thought. “I’ll narrate it in the evening.” The king, Tantwi wrote. “Go and listen to my story,” Tantwi said. The king went ... B.B.C, Tantwi thought.

“Tell me the story,” Mosabi said. “As you write yours, I’ll listen.” Mosabi scribbled on a paper.

“Mosabi,” a voice called from outside. Good, the boy would now leave, Tantwi thought. The boy continued scribbling. Did he hear that he had been called? What was he
writing? Tantwi continued writing. “Mosabi!” the voice came again, triple forceful this time.

“Someone is calling you,” Tantwi said.
Mosabi dropped the pen, and ran out.

* * *

“What did I tell you,” bellowed the one with a bushy beard. “Call your father!”
His beard was like that of the he-goat Mosabi’s father slaughtered when Mosabi’s aunt visited last week. “Call your father, call your father,” Mosabi muttered to himself as he ran back.

He stood at door. “The story is about to be broadcast,” he told his father and sprinted back. The bushy beard, the bushy beard, he thought. The story was near, he thought. He would tell everyone in school that his father had been on the radio. The people had now surrounded the radio. Mosabi wanted to be near it; otherwise, he would not hear even one word. These people should know that it was his father’s story and he had to tell it to his classmates. He went round looking for an opening to go through and get close to the radio. He bent between two people: one person was the torn-trousers one; the other person, he did not know. He knelt and pushed his head between the legs of the two people.

“Quiet everybody,” someone said. That was Gisiri’s father.

Mosabi retreated. He stopped. He could go no farther; there were people behind him. He turned, and like one bull homing another, he pushed his head and knocked against somebody’s knee. Something on the ground pinched him. An ant. He had to look for Gisiri’s father and go through where he sat, he thought. Gisiri’s father could even carry him and put him on his shoulders. Were children not supposed to be put on the shoulders? He should look for his father so that he can place him on his shoulder. Where was his father? Mosabi crawled back. People were breathing above him; he could not even hear the voice of the radio. There were legs in front of him. He took another route. Where was his father? Where was Gisiri’s father? In this confusion, he would have no story to tell Gisiri on Monday. He cried.
“Shut up,” someone said. “This place is not for children.”

“There are no children here,” another said.

Mosabi went silent. He pushed back, but the route was again blocked. He would miss the story. Where was his father? Where was Gisiri’s father?

“Here comes the king,” someone said. That had to be the torn-trousers. Mosabi tried to recall his name and gave up. Until later, he thought.

He had to get out of these knees. Someone could get lost here, like one of his classmates went into the market at Kehancha and his mother reported him missing at the police station. There was something in his hair now. Could be another ant. So many ants here. He would deal with the ant later. He saw some sunlight. He pushed his head. Pushed again. No one moved; nothing moved. He was tired. Everything was quiet. He took a breath and waited. He was sweating.

* * *

Nyangi was sweeping the floor of her kitchen when some urgent voice brayed at Mosabi, commanding him to call his father. She let the broom of twigs fall to the ground and she walked to her position next to the window. She removed her headscarf whose end was obstructing her view. She threw it on a chair; she wanted to have the best look at the dream outside. The assembly now numbered about thirty, she thought. Another person, with jembe slung on his shoulder, joined the group. The man must have interrupted maize weeding to be in time for this imagination. He asked something, and a stream of voices told him to shut up. A few people lifted their heads and saw the newcomer and without a word, they bowed back at the radio. Some sat, others knelt, others bent, others stood, but they all seemed on the same level like grazing sheep seen from a distance. The sun beat down hard. Didn’t they feel the heat?

Someone said something. There was some movement in the kraal to her left, but Nyangi did not turn. She had to keep focused on the illusion near the hillock and take in every second of this fantasy so as to tell its details later. She knew that some dreams, especially those that occurred close to dawn, were elusive.
Everyone was silent and all ears were directed toward the radio. The people were like mourners at the graveside. Then, Tantwi appeared from the kraal. Someone called him king. Nyangi shook her head in disbelief. It was sad that this funereal crowd had deceived her husband.

* * *

Tantwi stepped out of the house and the sunlight struck his forehead. He blinked. He touched the bald portion of his head and thought of going back to get his hat, but moved on. He emerged outside. He had not told all these people to be here; he had only informed Sagara and one or two other people. From the far end of the compound Mangana, with a jembe on his shoulder, crossed the cypress hedge. The group had surrounded the radio. How could he get near it?

Someone called him king. Could he be king? Some people lifted their heads. He walked slowly, placing one entire foot on the ground before lifting the other. He wanted to wave his hand, nod, and tell them that he had arrived. His face shone. He passed a hand across his head.

"Hurray, the hero of Ihore!" someone said. Tantwi was not sure that he recognized the voice. "You should become chief!"

"No!" another voice said. "Member of parliament."

They moved and created some way for Tantwi and he went toward the mound on whose top was the radio. The radio broadcaster said something.

"Be quiet," Sagara said. "An action is about to happen."

Tantwi stopped there before he reached the foot of the hillock.

"This is the B.B.C World Service," the voice of the announcer came through to this still world. "Today's short story is entitled Waiting for the Broadcast by Kwesi Kwena of ..." Tantwi ceased listening. When he heard the title of the story, he thought the editors had re-titled his story and not informed him. But when he heard some name that would never be his, the thought of a reworked heading was blown away before it settled. His lips suddenly became dry and he felt weak at the knees. He wanted to sit down, but how could he sit when all these people were looking at him? He imagined that
he saw trees race by as they had ran when, as a child, he first traveled in a bus. What had he heard? Kwe ... Kwame ... Kwa-tantwi ... “Waiting ...” No. Had it been a lie? What had the letter said? The letter had said today.

Mosabi crawled out of the crowd.

* * *

Nyangi saw the group’s king march toward the center. Then, he stopped. But in a minute, there were murmurs from the crowd. Then, grumbles. Someone asked his neighbor something; the other simply gestured his hand as if he were cutting a tree. The two men moved away. More people left the hillock. Those at the back asked what was wrong. Someone shook his head and shouted that there was no story. Another did not believe him and swaggered near to the radio that Sagara now held by his ear. There were more voices from the group. Loud voices.

“This person is a liar,” someone said. The sun shone bright on his head, which was shaved as clean as a whetstone. Nyangi now saw that that was Burure. He dropped a panga, snatched the radio from a snuffling Sagara; shook it and held it close to his own ear. Nyangi feared that the radio might slip from Burure’s hands and break, for he was said to be abnormal sometimes. Did he even understand English? Sagara wrenched the radio from Burure; Burure cursed, took his panga, and joined some people nearby.

“This is a waste of our time,” said someone in Burure’s group.

Tantwi was left alone, standing. Sagara handed the radio to Mosabi, walked to Tantwi, and shook the other’s shoulder as if to exorcise demons from his friend’s head.

“Come back to earth,” Sagara said. “You’re no prophet!”

Monanka whooped. He grabbed his jembe, dug a lump of soil and hurled it toward the kitchen. The soil hit the wall, near the window, and Nyangi crouched away.

“Pretenders,” Monanka shouted. He yelled several times as he left the compound.

* * *

Tantwi wondered whether he had ever claimed to be a prophet. The crowd had trodden on the grass around the hillock as if they had been jumping in a harp dance. And now they were all gone. Mosabi placed the radio on the ground and moved toward his
father. “Father, I want to draw,” he told Tantwi and stretched his hand for a pen. Tantwi scooped sweat from his son’s face; the boy closed his eyes and his father wiped him again. His father’s palm seemed to soothe him.

Tantwi held his son’s hand, and the two started walking into the kraal. No more smoke rose from the burning rubbish. A cloud covered the sun and the weather became cool for a moment. Mosabi put his fingers into his father’s hip pocket, and seemed to be searching for a pen. “I’ll draw with you,” Tantwi said. Did it matter that his story had not been aired? Tantwi thought.
Counting the Remnants

Marwa turned slightly and stared outside. He removed his cap from his head and scratched his temple. He knitted his brow, squinted his eyes, and peered long into the approaching night. He turned back, stretched his legs, and almost stepped on the foot of the village elder seated to his right, taking snuff. Inside this hut, it was getting dark. Marwa put back his hat, touched the sides of his coat as if in search of something, but he did not know what specifically he was looking for. He attempted to put his hand into the hip pocket of his trousers, and almost slipped from the log in which he sat. The earth floor of this building had several depressions and he needed a good balance so as not to fall. He stopped the search inside his clothes, excused himself, and relaxed.

The old woman, Suguta, who knelt by the hearth some distance in front of Marwa, gave him a glance and continued her efforts to make the fire. She examined the fireplace as if she were preparing to offer a prayer to ignite what seemed like half-dry twigs. There had been a drizzle this evening, and Suguta had probably not had the time to collect proper firewood before the rain fell. What she had now was not really firewood, but little sticks which could very well have served as playthings for children creating smoke. Under the present circumstances, Marwa had to hurry up with his census work and leave the hut to its darkness.

He arranged his papers on his lap; he re-clipped them, and held a pencil. He coughed to draw attention to himself. He had to carry out the count of the old woman’s household so that he could move on to other compounds. When Suguta heard him clear his throat she seemed to frown her wizened face, knelt more firmly, bent methodically, filled her mouth with air, and blew at the sticks and grass between the three stones. She halted. She angled forward again, and with chest heaving and narrow shoulders swaying,
she made another attempt. When she thought that the place was about to go ablaze, she calmly retreated, squatted, and adroitly studied the situation. She gave Marwa the impression that this was a sign that something positive was about to arise. Nothing occurred. She sighed.

As they all waited for something to happen, a figure, a girl, approached the doorstep, lowered a small bundle of firewood from her head, and held it into the room. She greeted Marwa and the village elder. The elder had accompanied Marwa to lead him into the homes in this Nyatechi village. Although Marwa was from Nyatechi, he was not conversant with all the ends of the place and he did not know the location of each compound. As chief government administrator of the area, the elder knew every homestead.

“Wansato, is this all you got?” the old woman asked.

“Grandmother, it’s dark out there,” the girl said. “I was afraid of snakes.” The girl, who wore a long purple dress, was about twelve.

Unlike many homesteads, which had a cattle kraal that joined the houses, the old woman’s place had only two huts standing some distance from each other. The other structure, which Marwa had seen as he came in this evening, was not used as a house at all, for that was where Suguta locked her few goats. Quite close to her buildings was tall grass and bush that could very well have been a good abode for reptiles.

“Snakes have gone to sleep by now,” Suguta told her granddaughter. “Give me some of that to try in this fire. I hope that they were not touched by the rain.” She did not wait for the girl to pass the sticks to her; rather, she rose in one stroke and started helping her granddaughter untie the sisal rope around the wood. She pulled the string with her tough, iron-like hands. “These ones look good,” the old woman said as she sorted them out.

Marwa had to do something to get information from the old woman so that they could proceed to the next family. He looked at the village headman. The two had already spent more time than was necessary here. When they arrived the old woman had told them to wait for all her household members to be present. Marwa knew Suguta, but he
was not aware of the number of people who lived with her. He wished for some indication from the elder so that he could go ahead with the census exercise.

"Suguta, is this the girl we’ve been waiting for?" the elder asked. He put his snuff pouch into his pocket.

The old woman did not reply. She continued sorting the rods and setting some aside for immediate use.

The headman assumed that the old woman did not hear him so he spoke again. "Suguta can we now begin? We’ve many other compounds to count." He tapped his walking stick on the floor.

“How can we begin in this darkness?” the old woman asked.

“We have a flashlight,” the elder said and turned to Marwa on his left as if to urge him to use the spotlight and put down the details that Suguta was about to give. However, Marwa, who was saving the batteries for later in the night outside, was not sure if the moment to employ the torch had been reached. Furthermore, he had imagined that every homestead had a candle or a lantern. He fidgeted for a while, then, got the flashlight from his coat pocket.

Suguta went back to the fireplace.

Marwa sent beams through the room. There seemed to be someone sleeping at the far end in front of him, to the right of the hearth. He let a spark linger at the lying figure for some time in order to make sure that there really was a human being. The type of darkness that was creeping into the hut could bring along anything sinister. Something could even sneak in quietly and remain unnoticed. This was the kind of building that invited hyenas to gnaw at people’s feet in the night. Marwa saw that the person was crouched, and that his legs projected out of a piece of blanket that covered him.

“That is my grandson,” Suguta said.

Marwa moved the light away from the sleeping boy on the floor.

“Sometimes strange things may just walk in,” the elder said.

“I’ve nothing for them to take,” Suguta said and tightened her face.

The girl walked over and sat on a small log next to where her brother slept.
"Hold this spotlight for me," Marwa told the headman. "Old woman, how many children do you have here?" Marwa looked at Suguta, who having put new wood into the fire was about to blow. He had to be forthright; after all, as the census officer he was now an official of the government of the Republic of Kenya, and he had to give direction to everyone in here.

The old woman stopped her work at the hearth place, and looked at Marwa as if she were going to answer his question. Marwa made his pencil ready. The elder directed the flash more pointedly at the papers. When the old woman said nothing, Marwa looked up and saw that she was giving him the sort of look she would offer a self-important suitor come to woo her granddaughter. The elder focused more light toward Suguta. She turned to her left where her granddaughter sat and her grandson rested. Beholding the children, her deep-set eyes seemed to falter. She tightened her craggy face whose ruggedness was made more distinct by tattoo marks on both cheeks. The warm metal placed at the cheeks had left star-like inscriptions, dents that in her earlier days may have caused young men to turn in the hope of glancing at her beauty a second time. Drops of tears went down her eyelashes. The elder quickly moved the light from her.

Marwa was worried that he was not making any progress with this woman. But to divert her from her pain, he told her to go ahead and ignite the wood. She went back to the work as if she had been waiting for his word.

The room was becoming smoky. Suguta stoked the fire. She had to parry the darkness; it was significant for her to have her own flame in order to see these government representatives who now visited her. She did not recall having been informed that they would come. A visit by the people of the administration was announced at the chief's *baraza*, which she did not attend, and broadcast on radio, which she did not have. Even when there was a big famine and the authorities were to distribute food, this was communicated at the *baraza*. These government people in her house now did not seem to have brought anything to be eaten, and she needed to get the glow going so that she could boil some sweet potatoes that she had obtained from the small farm at the far end of her plot. With the nightfall and the government representatives in the building, she had to be
careful and make sure that her grandchildren did not sleep hungry. The intruders were locusts come to devour the little she had.

She prepared to give the ultimate try. Before she could blow, a wind passed outside, the trees swayed and wheezed, and in came a gush of air as if it had been pushed in one big heap. The fire went up in a blaze and illuminated the entire hut. In the face of this brightness, the four-battery spotlight seemed dim. The elder appeared to have forgotten that the flashlight was on, and Marwa took it from him and switched it off. The old woman was satisfied; after all, this was her home, her territory, and she would not allow darkness and feeble torches to rule.

And then there stood a dog at the doorway. Whether the animal had been ushered there by the haul of wind Marwa could not tell. Perhaps he arrived there at the very time that the room was lighted. The hound’s eyes shone. He sat on his hind legs for a moment, but then decided otherwise, and rose and crossed the entrance to the hut.

“Get out,” the granddaughter said. The dog bowed, put his tail between his legs and slowly walked past the elder and sat next to Marwa.

“Get out.” The girl took a stick from among the firewood and strode toward the animal.

“Leave him alone,” her grandmother said. “He will hurt nobody when we are here.”

Fear crept through Marwa. As the elder and he came to the old woman’s compound this evening they had seen a dead dog. In fact, they had not seen the hound himself, but bits of what was the animal. Marwa assumed that the dog had been mauled and eaten by wild beasts. The dog’s skin had been peeled off and laid aside, while the flesh must have been consumed. It was perhaps not strange that wild animals should choose to eat the flesh and ignore the legs, head, and skin. What seemed unusual was that the skin had been hung neatly in a nearby tree. The headman studied the skin, and shook his head and said nothing. When Marwa probed him on what he meant by the wave of his head, the elder said that the pinning of a hound’s skin made things look bad.
“Furthermore, black skin...” The elder shook his head, and spat in the direction of the tree as they walked away.

Marwa now brushed aside the thought of the dog. The blooming fire made him feel that his wide nose glistened. He positioned himself well in his seat. He thought he had arrived in this home early enough so that he could record the specifics of this family before the setting in of total darkness. According to his training, he had to be in the first compound after six as this was the time one was likely to get every member of the household in. It was the government requirement that people stay in their houses during census night, and only those present were to be recorded. Although in the past census Marwa had been counted during the day, he did not want to list anyone at that time as it would not be possible to get people in their residencies. He wanted to follow instructions as much as possible.

Nightfall had set in before he could begin on Suguta’s place, but now the fire had taken Marwa’s side. At least the woman would stop her restlessness and answer the call of government. He did not have to use his torch and that would save him batteries to use later to track porcupines that invaded his crops. Although the firelight seemed to be powerful enough, he had to hurry up since one could not tell what would win in a battle between firelight and darkness.

“Okay, old woman, sit,” Marwa said. “I want the details. I’ve other homes to go to. Tell me your names.”

The girl looked at Marwa as if to say her name, but her grandmother tugged at her dress. “Do you think we shall eat your stare?” Suguta asked her granddaughter. “Get that pot and place it on the hearthstones. And be steady.” She seemed to be cautioning her not to take interest in these ‘suitors’ who having not yet impressed the old woman could have no chance to speak to the young one. It seemed as if she would not allow her granddaughter to stride into darkness while hyenas howled. Marwa was a wild animal of sorts, as his father-in-law to be had once called him. When Marwa eloped with the police inspector’s daughter, her father vowed to put a bullet through the face of the beast, but he did not honor his pledge when he realized that his daughter was pregnant.
Suguta moved a little away from the fire, looked at some place to rest, then sat on a sack full of some foods, probably cassava. She sighed, and looked intently at the flames. The elder seemed unsettled by her conduct, but must have decided that that was the business of the census officer. The girl sat back in her log and stared at Marwa. She appeared to know that Marwa had the beginning of the tale that everyone waited to listen to. Marwa fidgeted as if he were making himself at ease, folded the arm of his coat, and carried his rather worn-out chair and put it close to Suguta. He sat carefully. He removed his cap and put it in the pocket. The woman gave him the same granddaughter-suitor glance, but this time Marwa thought he sensed some welcome in the marked cheeks. He marshaled himself to pose the question, and prepared to put it differently this time. He had to present it more endearingly since as a suitor he seemed to have passed the first stage of the process of convincing the grandmother that he was worthy of her granddaughter.

"Take care of that fire," Suguta told the girl. Damn it, Marwa thought. Damn the fire, damn the gloom!

"Let me know the number of children that you have here," Marwa said. He thought that his words were polite, but somewhere at the back of his mind rang an incomplete note. Was what he had said a statement or a question? If a question did it seek everything? He had to ask a clear, direct, unambiguous question, the training had told him. We are teaching you the skills of interviewing and human interaction, the training officer had continued. Do not give responses for the population even when you know the answers, even when you are counting your own family. We want the official figures, not the position that you know at home. Let the people themselves give us the official position, the officer said. Everything the officer said was to do with official position, and about this being an important exercise for government planning, and that the government wanted legitimate accurate numbers.

"You can see for yourself," the old woman now said and paused. Marwa bent as if to write, but realized that nothing official had been said. Suguta contoured her forehead as if she were about to make a statement worthy recording. "You can see the children that I
have here,” she said and put her hands across her chest. “Aren’t you Marwa, the
grandchild of Bwiru?” She peered at him as if she were seeing him for the first time.
“Don’t you know me? Don’t you know Suguta?” She looked at the fire. It was getting
dark again. “Wansato, push the wood,” she told her granddaughter.

“Pass that flashlight to me,” Marwa told the elder. They could not rely on the old
woman’s gleam to carry out this activity.

“Don’t you know Suguta?” she asked again.

“Suguta, it’s the authorities who want to have the particulars,” the elder said. The
call to hand over the torch seemed to signal the headman to get involved. “This census is
not for Bwiru’s grandchild,” the elder said. The headman assumed that he had to join in
and give a contribution from his training as a census guide. The way he moved in his seat
seemed to indicate that he was satisfied with his assistance; he felt that his statements
were significant ones that would rescue the young man who looked defeated by the wily
old woman. Marwa glared at the elder to let him know that what he had just said was not
part of his job description. His stern look made the elder’s beam of contentedness go dim
and then get swallowed by soot. The elder’s gladness was reminiscent of a flashlight
whose batteries had lost power, and a little shake of the torch gave some light that quickly
faded and disappeared. The responsibility of the village headman, as Marwa understood
it, was to accompany the census officer, guide him into homesteads where he was a
stranger, and introduce him to the heads of such families. Thus far he would be the census
officer’s torch and ray. In a manner of speaking, he would have led the officer from
darkness to light.

After the “leading” preliminary, the elder was to let the counting official proceed
uninterrupted. That was as things had been told to Marwa in his training, and if similar
instructions had been given to the elder in his own training, then the elder really did not
have to open his mouth at this point in Suguta’s hut. The headman had so far conducted
himself according to regulations. The elder was supposed to talk only when necessary,
and at the end of the exercise he would receive his pay, which he would use to buy snuff.
The elder was like the scout sent out to spot the enemy—he could report back about the
approaching adversary, but would not give direction on the escape route to be followed. In any case, Suguta’s homestead was not a place where Marwa required to be introduced. Who did not know Suguta, even beyond this Nyatechi village; Suguta, who had gallantly held her family together to prevent them from plunging into extermination in the short span of five years?

“Why have you come to count us?” Suguta asked and screwed her eyes.

“We want to record the number of houses that you have,” Marwa replied rather absent-mindedly. He was thinking about the skin on the tree. He was a bit embarrassed by his response, and to try to assuage himself, he added: “The government wants to give you more roads, more water, more hospitals.” Suguta moved slightly, placed her elbow on her lap and chin in her hand. She more intently fixed her eyes on the speaker and seemed to be interested. Marwa smiled, delighted that his training had not been in vain. After all, he merited the job. Before his beam could fade, he hurriedly summed up: “Health for all by the year 2020... your grandson will be cured.” He relaxed and sat upright. He felt like an orator who had just recalled and uttered the key words—the ultimate sentence—to his speech.

At the mention of a cure, the boy resting on the floor made some movement. He attempted to lean on his elbows, and tried to raise his head. He mumbled some syllables. He fell softly back on the cowhide where he slept, and was thrown into fits of grates, coughs, and hisses. He clung onto his sister’s leg, and after a moment he went quiet. His sister sat still. Suguta rose and touched her grandson’s brow. His head was almost completely bald and the features of the skull stood out pointedly. The eyes had sunk deep into the sockets and the jawbones were panga-sharp, pushing the cheeks inwards. His grandmother gathered the bit of blanket and covered him as much as possible. The boy had recorded his presence so that even after his gesticulations were over, a deafening silence reigned. Only echoes of his grunts filled the building. Marwa did not wish to remain in this place any longer; he did not want to be here during another movement of the boy, for one would not tell what it would bring.

“Suguta, how is he?” the elder asked.
“He is all right. Today he is fine, and tomorrow he is bad. Just like that.” She went back to her sack.

Suguta disentangled herself from the rest of the group and took a detour. The mention of the expected outcomes of the census did not shake even a single eyelash of hers. These enumerators were master recollectors; they indeed had one excellent common memory because they had given her the very same pledges in the past five exercises. She was first counted before she went through initiation into womanhood. And then the other four instances that followed—each coming after every ten years—saw her through marriage to widowhood meekly answering the national call. Five times she had been asked the changeless, repetitive questions, and in these five occasions she had given the almost monotonous replies. And now the sixth moment the same questions were again being put at her. *How many children do you have, when were you born, when were your children born, has any of them died, what was the cause of their death, how many houses do you have, how many pots, how many legs, how many dogs ...*

“What do you want?” Suguta suddenly burst from her reverie.

“But Sug …” Marwa had now to call her “Suguta” in the way one sometimes addressed his own grandmother by her name. He was getting irritated, but Suguta being his grandmother’s age had to be approached as though she were senile. When he treated his own grandmother that way she agreed with him on many issues.

“Look here,” Suguta interrupted him, “these are the children left. Since you last came to take our number, their parents have gone.” She stopped as if to recall something. She seemed satisfied that she had given some response.

Marwa waited.

“Have you now come to take away my remaining descendants?” Suguta asked.

Marwa’s hand dropped on the clipboard and the pencil slipped to the floor. He wished he could have the words and courage to assure the old woman that there was no direct relationship between whoever had taken her grandchildren’s parents and what he was here to perform. He was just a messenger of the government, and for only a brief period. When the census was over—in less than a week—he would resume his usual life.
and wait to go back to college when the next term began. He would be a civilian again, just like her—both of them would be at the same level.

Everyone in Nyatechi felt sorry for Suguta. She had buried three close relatives in a span of just five years. The next calamity did not seem to be far off since the illness in her grandson’s body was the same one that had killed his mother, and his father before her. And even an uncle. The disease had no cure. It was spoken of in hushed tones, the same way people talked about night-runners come to exhume remains of the dead. Since people likely thought that it was sexual immorality that caused the pandemic, no one would admit that a family member had been wayward and contracted the disease lest the entire home be termed wicked and shunned. According to some people, one who suffered from this sickness was said to be bewitched. How could this illness direct its eyes at my family, a person could say, if this disease were not led by an evil hand? The disease was rarely mentioned by its proper name; even the government seemed scared to mention the scourge. Instead, the hospitals called it malaria, or pneumonia, or typhoid, and wrote on a death certificate that the deceased had succumbed to one of these sicknesses, or even a combination of more than one them. Nevertheless, many people knew the real name of the pandemic.

“Tell me, grandson of Bwiru,” Suguta now asked. “After I answer your questions, how many more potatoes shall I get to put into that pot?” Her reassuring tone somehow surprised Marwa. He had to move quickly and usurp this opportunity.

“Ah, that is simple,” Marwa said. “You know, the government has everything.”

“I see.” Suguta scratched her ear, and thought for a moment. Marwa felt some hope. The darkness was being driven away—he pointed the torchlight close to the form he had to fill.

Outside the hut, the wind whistled. It had risen in intensity since the arrival of the visitors. The dog rose, stretched himself, and gave a little yap. “Go bark outside,” Suguta threw a piece of stick at the hound. “You’re a coward.” He growled as he leaped out through the half-closed door. He gave some loud spats of yelps, then settled on a long snarl, and ran back to the hut’s entrance as if he were being chased.
“Tell that dog to keep quiet,” Suguta said and looked at her granddaughter. “That cry is not good.” The girl did not move. The headman rose and took a stone outside the hut and hurled it in the direction he thought the dog sniffed and barked at.

“It’s very dark out here,” the elder said. It was the type of gloom in which wild beasts roamed the land and snatched goats from their pens, and night-runners banged at people’s doors and performed their sky-hitting dances. The dog persistently snarled, and ran across the compound, and soon went quiet. The elder returned.

“It’s dark, but the moon will soon be out,” the elder said.

“What did the dog see?” Suguta asked.

“Maybe it sensed the presence of a porcupine,” the elder said.

“Those porcupines have finished my crops. What will my grandchildren eat this year?”

Nobody answered. Perhaps each was thinking about how to individually deal with porcupines or something more than them. Suguta’s mind journeyed to a prior time. In the past that she met, a light wind blew. Then, it moved slowly and gathered some leaves and turned to a whirlwind. Like the arrow of a seasoned archer, the spin advanced and struck the face of a sick man crouched in a mat under a mango tree. A sneeze seized him and that quickly increased to two sneezes, then three sneezes. Then, a thunderous cough. In about two minutes the cough matured to convulsions. By the time the man’s movements ended, a group of people stood around him. They simply gazed: First at him on the ground, and then at one another. Each looked at the neighbor with prompting eyes that communicated more than any words could. The man’s mother did not immediately join the gathering. She stood far away, and then started moving her right bare foot as if she were scratching for something in the low grass. She clawed hard. Then spat. She moved to join the others in the circle. They gave way as she came. She passed them and looked at her son. She turned and stared at the rest. They were probably waiting for her to say something. Her son was now sprawled slightly away from the mat in which moments before he lay. She touched the feet of her offspring. They were warm, but that warmth was not a good one. She felt his forehead, and something left that brow into her hand that
made her fingers cold. The cold of stream water at dawn. She felt as if her belly left her. She glanced back at the people still staring. She moved a few steps away. Head bowed, she sobbed.

Later, the chief urged her to get a paper to indicate that her son had died. She saw no use of documents that did not bring her children back. She was tired of collecting papers, she told the Chief. Her old legs could not reach those offices to see someone write another of her offspring into death, she insisted. They have plenty of my people in their register of the plague; those are enough for the book, she said. A relative of hers brought the death certificate. The dead never die, the kin said and consoled the bereaved mother.

Time was now running out. "Old woman, name the people that you have here!" the census officer said. Duty required that Marwa speak in a tough manner. His first responsibility was to his job and his employers. For now, he was a government agent and not Bwiru’s grandson.

"Matiko Swagi," Suguta said. She poked into the fire.

Marwa wrote. When the task was over and done well, he would then sit and watch her stare at geckos on walls as she dreamt. "Age?"

"He used to say that he was born soon after the war in Burma."

"Exact age!" Marwa pursued the line of seriousness. Business demanded. He was a government representative.

Suguta thought for some time.

"Age, old woman?"

"About fifty." She stirred the fire and screwed her face. "Write 'fifty'."

Marwa held the flashlight in his left hand and pointed it at the record form. Pencil stuck tightly between his fingers, he took notes. He put down numbers, crossed, subtracted, and wrote the same figures that he had earlier erased. This exercise had to move forward; he had many more homesteads to visit today.

A man’s whooping cry tore through the world outside. The dog, which had come back to the hut, yapped and went out. Marwa looked at the village elder as if to alert him that he had been summoned to a mission. The headman seemed to be dozing and
appeared not to have heard the whoop. Another whoop thundered nearby, and Marwa thought that the elder would respond this time. The elder rubbed his eyes, and stayed in his seat as one who well remembered the tenets of his training. He was possibly indicating that he had not been instructed on how to respond to howls of marauding night wanderers. Another yell followed and the dog went into a frenzy of barking. All the noise meant that thieves had broken into someone’s kraal and driven his cattle away.

“Wansato, close this place,” Suguta said.

“Suguta, don’t worry. We’re here,” the headman said. The girl moved past him and latched the door.

“Another person in the house?” Marwa asked. His pencil slipped from his hand and fell. He clicked his tongue. He bent and flashed the torch near his legs. He rose. Moved around. The pencil was nowhere. He lifted his seat. There was nothing. He clicked again, and searched in his pockets for another pencil. What if there were none? This would mean that he had not followed one of the training’s principles: Carry more than one writing tool. In fact, each census officer was given three pencils and a pen. The training officer said that only pencils had to be used in the field, but if worse came to worst, a pen would do. As Marwa searched for the lost item, Suguta patiently waited like a pupil taking dictation from her teacher. Marwa got another pencil from the breast pocket of his shirt. He clucked.

Marwa heard footsteps outside at a distance. They all listened. More snarls.

“Who is the other person in this building?” Marwa asked.

“Lizabethi Matiko,” Suguta replied after some thoughtful silence.

The elder seemed to awaken when he heard the name Lizabethi Matiko. He frowned and turned his head as one positioning his ears to be sure to get where a sound he heard came from. He made as if to speak, but most likely remembered the severe look he had received from Marwa earlier, and decided to confine himself to his terms of reference.

Another whoop shook the skies, and the hound heightened his howling passion.
“How old is she?” He had to be steady and get this activity done. He had to put this household in the records.

“She was born during the Ikorongo migrations,” Suguta said.

Some flash of recall passed through Marwa’s mind. The Ikorongo migrations were not an event of long ago. People had migrated to Ikorongo, Tanzania, in search of better lives despite a prophesy that warned them that “the Ikorongo you go to will vomit you.” Some had faced difficulties and come back to Kenya only to find that they had no pieces of land, no property here. Marwa gazed at the roof. What year was that? So what year was that? He gave up. He wrote: “Ikorongo.”

“Grandmother …”

“Take care of the fire!” the old woman said.

Marwa made more entries. He stood up. He started putting his items into a paper bag.

“Is that all?” Suguta asked. “What about the others?”

“We shall take care of them … we know them. I know them. I will fill in their details.” Suddenly, he stopped what he was doing. He sighed. He slumped to his seat. He felt warm. Heat crawled through his body. Drops of sweat streamed down from his armpits. He gasped again. Slowly, he shook his head. He had counted the dead: Wasn’t Elizabeth Matiko this old woman’s daughter-in-law who had passed away some time ago? Did Suguta think he was a fool?

He began pulling out the forms from the bag, but the papers were rock-heavy in his hand. He pushed the documents back. He was tired; he felt like one who had climbed a steep hill. He sat for what seemed like an eternity.

He stood up. Figures were what mattered, he thought. The official position. The authorities wanted numbers so that they could plan for the country’s future. He had the numbers. He knew of many people who had been listed in the census roll yet had not been present at the time and place of counting. In the exercise of ten years ago his own father had been included while absent for he was not one to forego a visit to the beer place because the government demanded to put him in some register. In the same year the
census officer had arrived at Marwa’s home during the day and found his elder brother gone to the farm across the river. His brother had not been summoned; instead, his mother gave the details of all her children, sometimes lying about the dates of birth of some of them. Had his father’s absence, his brother’s absence, and his mother’s lies changed anything? The government required figures. Nobody would come to Nyatechi village to look for Lizabethi Matiko.

“Let’s move on,” Marwa told the baffled, mouth-staring elder. The headman’s posture seemed to say that one of the worst offences, according to his training, had been committed. Marwa shook the headman’s shoulder to tilt the older man from his dazed state.

Outside, other dogs had joined in the barking. When the two men had walked some distance from the hut, they stood for a moment. Marwa did not talk to the elder but suspected that like him, he was thinking of the safest route to take. More whoops followed. Shouts. Heavy footsteps at a distance. That had to be the work of livestock invaders. Although kraal invasions took place frequently in Nyatechi, 8pm was rather early for that.

They walked on. Marwa led the way—he was the younger man and was expected to be fearless. “We cannot continue with the counting,” he told the elder. The other said nothing. Marwa flashed the torch.

“Switch it off,” the elder said. “They’ll think that we’re the police.” He did not dare mention the word “thieves.”

Marwa put off the spotlight. Cattle rustlers did not want to see someone else’s light for this would only mean that the authorities were after them. The robbers would seek to eliminate the representatives of the government before they were themselves eliminated.

Before long, a stench reached the two men. Marwa held his nose and hoped that he would soon pass the place. When he released his nostrils, the foul smell hit him even more forcefully. He sneezed. He quickly put his hand back and covered the mouth as
well. He imagined peeled skin on a tree and thought he saw a limping creature that resembled a wild dog cross the path in front of him.

The two men hurried away. A cry came from the direction they had left; the old woman was mourning. Marwa had not yet put her grandson's name in the record. Would he include him in the census list?
Conversing with the Letter

Mogesi could not remember how long she had been sitting in this position, on the sofa’s arm. Several times she had wanted to settle properly, in the chair, but each time some thought came up in her mind and she forgot to leave the seat’s arm. She stared at the letter in her hand. She moved closer to the back of the sofa and leaned, but that did not make her feel comfortable. She sat upright, back in her former position. The chair made a noise like a stick breaking and she jumped a little, but did not think there was any need for the seat to complain to her lean body. It might complain about her height, she thought, but perching on a sofa’s arm had nothing to do with height. She rubbed at a scar below her lower lip.

She looked back at the letter that she had already read many times. Some woman had written to Mogesi’s husband, Wambura, and claimed that she had borne a son with him.

Mogesi slowly squeezed the letter, tightened her face, and rose. She straightened her trousers and pulled down her T-shirt. She did not bother to put on her slippers that were some distance away and she simply walked across the sitting room toward the door leading to the kitchen. She had to aim this letter into the rubbish bin, but she did not reach the kitchen door and the trash can. Instead, she went to the bathroom, opened the tap, and briefly washed the hand that did not hold the letter. She splashed some water on her face, and walked back.

“Mama, you’ve not closed the bathroom door,” Robi, Mogesi’s seven-year old daughter said. Robi, who sat at the far end of the room, looked down at the toy game that
she was playing with her elder brother, Mwita. She was about two years younger than Mwita, but she was bigger than him in size.

Mogesi walked on into the sitting room. She had to watch over her children since the maid was off-duty today.

"The masks of Nairobi will come in," Robi said without raising her head.

A month ago, a family who lived nearby was robbed of all their electronic equipment. It was three in the morning, when some movements in the sitting room downstairs waked them up. The man came down and found three masked men packing the items into boxes. Mogesi used this story to warn her children about what would befall them if they strayed far from the house. Robi sometimes wandered far from the compound, especially when the maid was not around, and went to visit a girl her age. She went that distance to see her girlfriends since not many of the immediate plots had been settled on in these Kahawa Sukari Estates. The plot behind Mogesi’s house, for instance, was still bare. Her neighbors to the left had completed building and she had seen them move in this morning. The residents in the estate had formed groups to deal with insecurity, but Mogesi believed that the greatest protection was to have neighbors who lived close by.

Robi and Mwita continued with their play. They had spread their toys and for now they were fitting together variously shaped pieces to construct a toy house. From where Mogesi sat, she could monitor her children’s activities and make sure that Mwita was doing well. Mwita had trouble balancing things and making proper movements. This irritated Robi, who did not always remember that her brother had an illness.

Mwita did not utter his first word until he was three years old. Initially, that did not bother Mogesi, but she later reflected about this delay and concluded that it was probably one of the earliest signs of her son’s sickness. When Mwita finally mumbled something, Mogesi thought that the word he spoke was “mama.” Mogesi was reluctant to say the “mama” word to her son when there were visitors in the house because she did not want attention drawn to her for teaching Mwita to say “mama” before she trained him to
say “baba.” She went through much pain to instruct the boy to mention “baba,” but she did not succeed.

The earliest doctors Mogesi consulted told her that Mwita would become all right as he grew older, but the signs continued to show that her boy was not improving at all. He spoke no more; his tongue got tied at the “mama” that Mogesi imagined he had said.

Robi now murmured things and gave instructions to her brother.

“You’ve not closed the door,” Robi said without looking up. “You’ve not closed the door. You’ve not closed the door.” She was turning the whole thing into a sing-song.

“Okay,” Mogesi said. “Be quiet now. Show Mwita how to play the game.”

“You always tell us to shut the door,” Robi continued. “You’ve not shut the door.”

Mogesi tiptoed and closed the bathroom door. She threw the crumbled letter into the rubbish bin by the kitchen door. Her daughter stared at her.

Mogesi sat back on the sofa’s arm and thought about the letter. It was written on a single-ruled paper pulled from an exercise book. The piece seemed to have been plucked from the book in a hurry because certain parts of the left edge had been eaten into. It was likely written in a hurry, too, scribbled the way a child scratched at a paper while he learned to write. Some food—looked like porridge—had spilled on the letter. Did the son she had borne with Mogesi’s husband stain the page as Martha, his mother, wrote hastily? Or was it smudged as she pushed him away, telling him not to distract her from this important assignment? Did the son hold the pen and want to write something to the father? Did he know that he had a father somewhere in Nairobi? What name did the boy use as his surname?

Was this woman, Martha, married? Did she scribble because she did not want her husband to find her writing to another man, a man whose son he was raising? Since Martha had assured her husband that she had no connection with the man who had given her a son, Mogesi thought, Martha did not wish to be found communicating to this man who was once a boyfriend. Mogesi immediately dismissed the idea that Wambura and Martha had been intimate. This Martha must be some useless village girl who wanted to
spoil her marriage, Mogesi thought. Where had this Martha been all these years? Why now? Mogesi had been married for ten years and had never heard of a Martha. Why did she appear now when Mogesi’s husband, who was a major in the army, was out of Kenya on a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia? Did this woman have to wait all these years to tell such a lie? If this Martha really had a son with Wambura, she should have come out earlier and made herself known to everybody else. And if she was a worthy woman, why didn’t Wambura marry her?

Did Wambura communicate with this woman regarding the son? Had they been in touch the whole time that Mogesi and Wambura were married? Mogesi shook her head at her lack of foresight, for how could she not have known that a woman, who had a son, corresponded with her husband? With all her education—from Certificate level to Diploma level up to Degree level in Secretarial Studies—how could she not have been aware that her husband had a relationship with some Martha who now claimed that she had a son fathered by Wambura?

Mogesi felt warm. She got a tablemat from a stool next to her and started to wave it in front of her neck. The T-shirt was feeling tighter on her body. She pulled it at the neck and fanned.

“Mama, is it getting hot?” Robi asked.

Mogesi glanced at her daughter, who was probably wondering why her mother fanned at herself on a morning that was not hot at all.

Robi hurriedly gathered some pieces of toys scattered around her. She had made the first few levels of the house they were constructing. She loved building things.

“Look here, Mwita,” Robi said. She held Mwita’s hand. “You put this V on top of the M, then, you get this one and make it a window here. Then, you … Are you watching?”

Mwita seemed to be looking at his parents’ wedding photograph that hung on the wall facing him. He lifted his hand; probably he wanted to point at the picture. Or was he interested in his own photograph, to the left of her parents’? He lowered his head—he was likely already feeling tired. Doctors had said that from time to time Mwita would
show signs of weakness, but they had noted that it was encouraging that Mwita did sit on
his own—something that other children with the same brain disorder rarely did.

“Stop gazing at those people,” Robi tapped at her brother’s hand. “Those pictures
have always been there.” Robi stood up and blocked Mwita’s view. Mwita tried to lift his
hand. He seemed defeated by Robi, and he turned his attention at the work on the floor.
Would anything come from Robi’s efforts?

Robi knelt. “Okay, you see this small one … Mama, he’s not following.” Robi
shrugged and walked toward her mother. “He’s not concerned.” She held the end of
Mogesi’s T-shirt and pulled it. “He’s not keen.” Robi scratched her mother’s lap in
helplessness.

“Give your brother some more time,” Mogesi said.

“But I have. I explain …”

“Do it again.”

“You always tell me to do it again, give him another chance. When will he learn?
Such a big boy and still …” She paused.

Mogesi continued fanning herself and Robi jumped back to the construction work.
She seemed not to understand why her elder brother could not do the simple things that
she did. Sometimes Mogesi could not blame her daughter because even she, Mogesi,
forgot why her son did not perform mundane activities that his peers carried out. But her
forgetfulness was perhaps different from her daughter’s refusal to understand. Mogesi
wondered why this disease had picked on her son.

This room smelt of fresh paint. Mogesi’s family had moved to this house about
three months ago. Acquiring the plot, let alone building on the premises, had cost her and
her husband a lot of money, but they were proud of the property. She was pleased with
her contribution and was thankful to her father for teaching her the value and joy of hard
work.

Her father had only completed Class Eight of those days, and although he was
bright, he could not go to secondary school because his parents did not have the fees. He
was later employed as a police constable. While most of his workmates drunk all their
pay by the fifth of the month, he saved his money and used it to educate his children. Mogesi was the first-born and her father told her that when she obtained a job he would hand over the schooling expenses of some of her siblings to her. After secondary school, Mogesi joined the National Youth Service and trained as a secretary. Later she was employed at the Ministry of Works. She took courses to improve her skills, and at the same time paid fees for her four siblings. In fact, her father left every fee commitment to her.

Because of the responsibility in her siblings’ education and to her own career advancement, she delayed marriage. She turned down several suitors, and only accepted when her father raised concern, for he was worried that Mogesi, then 35, might not get a husband. Mwita was born about a year after Mogesi wedded. She had continued to develop her career and she was now a secretary with an international organization in Nairobi.

She now turned her head and looked at the radio on top of a sideboard behind where the children played. The sitting room was fully furnished, Mogesi thought, but the place could still take another set of sofas and dinning furniture.

She turned, continued waving the tablemat to fan herself, and went back to thinking about the letter. What sort of woman was this Martha? Where and when had Wambura met this woman? Her name could not tell Mogesi what part of Kenya Martha came from. Immediately after high school, Wambura had worked as an accounts clerk in Kericho, and then moved to Eldoret before he joined the army. Was this the time he got this child, this son? That did not seem probable, for were that the case the boy would be older than he was. The boy was likely born two years before Mogesi and Wambura married. Martha said that her son was in Class Five, which meant that he was older than Mwita. Two years before Wambura and Mogesi married he was already in the army and was based at Kahawa Barracks in Nairobi. Where, then, had Wambura met this Martha? Had he met her at home in the village? The thought that Martha was probably from Mogesi’s home area made Mogesi terrified, as this could possibly mean that Martha knew what was happening in the village and that Martha and her son were known to
Wambura’s relatives at home in the village of Kebobono. But why had she never heard of this Martha? Mogesi consoled herself by thinking that this Martha was from some distant land.

What was Martha’s son like? The woman had said in the letter that the boy was healthy and well. Maybe he was the type who took sorghum porridge and roast sweet potatoes before he sprinted to school every morning. Maybe the boy did not even put on shoes to school; he just ran bare foot, treading the ground with confidence, not feeling the pricking stones on the village road. His mother must eat the same food. What was it in Mogesi’s diet that sometimes made Mwita’s saliva stream from his mouth uncontrollably? All the doctors had assured her that she was not the one who had caused Mwita’s disorder since during the pregnancy she had not consumed alcohol or anything that could have led to Mwita’s brain damage. Instead, the physicians had said that Mwita’s problem was as a result of a low supply of oxygen to the brain at the time of birth. But still Mogesi believed that she had likely eaten something bad that had affected Mwita. She now stretched her left arm and examined it. She spread the palm, looked at the back, then the front. She folded and straightened the middle finger several times. Was there something in this hand that had made Mwita unable to hold things? What were Martha’s fingers like?

Mwita cried and attempted to stand up.
“No,” Robi said. “Ask him.”
Mogesi wiped Mwita’s tears and told him to stop crying. She held his hand and lifted him from the floor. His legs wobbled; she steadied him. Slowly, she walked him across the room and opened the door next to the sofa. They went out to the veranda.
“Look there.” Mogesi pointed at a lizard on the grass. “See.”
“What are you saying, Mama?” Robi followed them. “What are you telling him to look at?”
Mwita mumbled some words and waved at Robi to go away.
“He does not want you,” Mogesi said. “You mistreated him.”

Robi wanted to hold Mwita’s other hand. He drooled.

“Mama, hold me also,” Robi said, and grasped her mother’s other hand.

“You’re a big girl.” Mogesi shrugged.

“Mwita is also a big boy,” Robi said. Looking dejected, Robi walked away and sat at the other end of the veranda. “Mwita, let’s go and play,” she said after a moment.

Today, Mogesi had forgotten to water the thorn trees along the barbed wire fence that Wambura planted before he left. This plot was about sixty square feet. Wambura and Mogesi planned to build a servant’s quarter that they would either rent out or have their parents sleep in when they visited. When she had properly settled here, she would plant something little on the plot. Some people in the estate had papayas, oranges, and even bananas; those who had settled here some time ago—probably four, five, years ago—had full grown trees of these fruits. Many people owned larger plots than hers.

“Let’s go and play,” Robi pulled Mwita.

“Bring your things here in the veranda,” Mogesi said.

Robi went into the house and soon returned with the bundle of toys and spread them on the ground. Mogesi made Mwita sit properly, and she entered the house to get a seat for herself.

She went past the chair, tilted the rubbish bin, and took the crumbled letter.

“Mama,” Robi said, “what have you got from the rubbish-bin?” From where Robi sat she could see inside the house. Mogesi ignored her daughter’s question, carried a stool, grabbed a shawl, and went to the veranda. She sat at some distance from the children.

She unfolded the letter as though it were the leaves of a book that had been rained on and had now dried and she did not want to tear any paper as she separated the pages. She laid the piece on her lap, and smoothed it. She placed her chin in her hand and started reading as she would a newspaper article she had just gotten from the public trash ground.

This woman used language that Mogesi never used to address her husband. *Dirty language.* That they had had “fanatist” (just see her spelling of the word—oh, oh!) times
together. That they had sat in the moonlight ... had joined their hands as they went down to the market, singing their future in harmony. *Wait a minute: Did Martha write this sentence?* Mogesi read the sentence again. She shook her head. That could not be Martha. She must have been coached on these words. How many people were in league with her?

The paper Martha had written on seemed to have stains of meat. This paper was so tiny to have wrapped beef in the village butchery, but she could very well have used a newspaper which sellers used to pack meat. Poor girl, she could not even afford a writing pad. It was not likely that Wambura was supporting Martha and her son; otherwise, she could have afforded decent writing material.

Mogesi rose. Her children were making good progress in setting up the toy house. It seemed that today they did not want to do anything else other than build the house.

“Mama,” Robi said, “he’s not following again.”

Mwita’s right hand trembled, the fingers fumbled, and the toy parts fell. He stared at the pieces. He moved his hand closer to the ground and suddenly, the fingers stopped shaking. Mogesi leaned forward. Would anything come of this? With mouth partly open, Robi stood on tiptoe.

Mwita held a toy with two fingers. The item was the letter X. Robi made some movement and halted. She stretched out her hand, and gestured up as if she were guiding a music band. Mwita wanted to place the X, the cross, somewhere, but it could not move. His fingers gave way and the cross fell. Mogesi sighed. Would anything come of this?

There was silence. For a moment, Robi seemed unaware that Mwita’s attempt had failed. She remained at the same position staring at her brother.

“Mama,” Robi said, “he almost made it!” She gathered the toy pieces and placed them closer to Mwita. “Come here, Mwita.” Robi clutched his hand that seemed limp, perhaps, due to the effort he had made. “You’ll build this house for Mama,” Robi said as she jumped here and there collecting the toys. “You must build this house for Mama. Mama will stay in your house!”

Robi knelt. “Now, hold this wall,” she said. “Look round. Yes, this way, this way ...” Mwita did not seem to be concentrating. “Then, we look for the door,” Robi
continued. “The door will fit here. Yes, if you turn the U upside down, it will make a
door. No. Let’s see. Let’s get a proper door that Mama will get through. You know,
Mama is not very short.” She rushed into the house. “The door must be somewhere,” she
spoke to herself. “Mwita, don’t touch the house until I come.” She pulled a drawer. She
banged it back.

“Don’t break my things,” Mogesi shouted.

“Mwita, don’t touch the house until I come. I’m looking for the door.” There was
another slam. Robi dashed back. “Did you spoil the house? Okay ... good .... We shall
try this piece.”

Mwita seemed crestfallen and Mogesi doubted that anything would result from
Robi’s running up and down.

Mogesi had misplaced the letter as she watched the children’s house construction.
“Robi, have you seen the letter?”

“You’ll build this house,” Robi said. “What ...? House?” She was dismantling the
structure. That was her nature—constructing and demolishing, and constructing again.

Mogesi found the piece of paper out on the grass. She would have to keep it and
confront Wambura when he came back. She entered the house and lowered the volume of
the radio. She turned back, but returned and switched it off altogether; after all, was
anyone listening?

“Mama!” Robi stood at the door. Her eyes were those of Mother Dog protecting
her puppies.

Mogesi turned the knob, and slowly raised the volume until she received a nod
from her daughter. Mogesi started to walk back, but cobwebs that had formed around her
wedding photograph caught her attention and she stopped. She wanted to clean the frame,
but decided that she would do that later.

She had a mind to return to the veranda, but instead she walked over to the
telephone in the corner on a tall stool and removed a piece of cloth that covered it. She
started to dial, then stopped. What number was she calling? Whom did she want to talk to
on a Saturday at noon? She replaced the handset. She took two steps away, and looked back at the phone that seemed to glare at her and mock her.

“Mama, where do you want to call?” Robi asked. She craned her neck into the house. “Use the mobile,” she said.

“I told you that it was stolen,” Mogesi said.

During Wambura’s first call from Bosnia, Mogesi clung to the phone and moaned her loneliness. It was a shame that she almost wrestled with Robi and kept the poor girl waiting for a long time to talk to her father. From then on when Wambura called Mogesi was careful not to behave like an infatuated teenager. He usually told her when he would call; he wasn’t going to do so until the following week, but Mogesi thought that the phone should click now. She imagined it ringing.

“Hello,” Wambura would say from the other end.

“Yes,” Mogesi would reply. Her heart made short sharp beats in the veins of her neck.

“Yes, dear,” Wambura would speak. “How are you?”

“What?” she would ask in disgust as if to tell him that it was not his business to know how they were. Her hand would be shaking.

“Dear, are you okay?” Wambura would ask.

She would try to clutch the handset. She had to give the important statement before the thing slipped to the floor. “Go dear the bushes!” she would say. After all, Wambura was now sleeping with white women in the jungles of Bosnia, Mogesi thought. He must be luring the whores into the shrubs the same way he had ensnared Martha. Wambura must have used his position and cunning tongue to draw the innocent girl into the grasses. At the time they had this son, Wambura was likely an army officer and with his status Martha, a mere village girl and hardly educated, could not object to his advances.

“What’s wrong?” Wambura would ask in the telephone conversation. “Are the children okay?”
Just say that you want something bad to happen to Mwita so that you can bring your illegitimate son over, Mogesi would think. Mwita has not died, Mogesi would think of saying. “Go ask your primitive wenches,” she would say. “Go manufacture more bastards!” She would be barely holding the handset. She would hang up.

That could serve Wambura right, Mogesi now thought.

She walked back to the veranda, sat in her stool and leaned forward. For a long time she maintained that posture. One would think that she was keenly watching the toy-play, but her mind was elsewhere. So Wambura had a son? she posed, probably for the hundredth time. The fact that the boy was born out of wedlock would not matter in the end. Mogesi recalled the story of her cousin who had a son before marriage. When the cousin got married she went with her boy to her new home. Soon, she started complaining that her husband did not treat her son well and looked at him with a vicious eye. With this husband, she gave birth to a boy and a girl. Then, six years into the marriage, she died. Her husband now declared that he did not want any child who was not his. The birth father finally took his child—one’s son was his own. Did Martha have a husband? The letter said nothing about marriage. If she were married, was there a chance of her husband accepting the illegitimate being?

Things took some shape in Mogesi’s clouded mind. This Martha woman was the begetter of someone who would connect Wambura to future generations. She would make Wambura proud when he ultimately went to meet his ancestors to account for his life on this earth. He would tell his makers that he had a son who would make sure that the ancestors’ names were carried forward and remembered by future generations. Wambura’s name would be remembered through his bastard boy, but Mogesi’s would disappear like chaff blown away from treaded sorghum. Was it of any significance that Martha could not construct a proper English sentence? What mattered was that she had fed herself well, and borne a healthy baby, and she had given Wambura a worthy descendant. The lad would marry, bear a son and name him after Wambura. She, Mogesi, would have no son to name her; her Mwita would never marry.
Even if Robi had a daughter and gave her Mogesi’s name, that would be the same as being buried outside the homestead because Robi would by then have been married and left. Mogesi’s name would be uttered by alien tongues, which did not know the original name’s bearer. When one was named by one’s own son or by a grandson through a son she was assured that her identity remained at home and was called by people who were familiar with her. This would never be the case with Mogesi. She would be a sojourner in her matrimonial home as she was already a foreigner to her parental place.

Only two months ago, she was reminded that as a married woman she no longer belonged to her father’s compound. During an earlier visit to her parents, Mogesi noticed that the roof of her mother’s kitchen was caving in and might one day collapse on the old woman as she prepared a meal. Her mother saw Mogesi examine the hut, but she quickly told her daughter that that was not Mogesi’s responsibility, but her brother’s. Your duty is to visit me and bring me one kilogram of sugar, and the repair of houses in this home is the work of your brother, her mother said.

But by Mogesi’s next visit, her brother—who was Mogesi’s second follower and the eldest son in the family—had not done anything about the damaged place. Mogesi gazed at the rafters, but her mother again told her not to bother. If your brother wants this structure to kill me, let it, and then his age-mates will laugh at him, the old woman said.

During supper that evening, something rushed through the top of the building and a lump of soil and bits of grass fell into Mogesi’s bowl of beef. The following day, Mogesi organized with her youngest brother on how the roof would be redone and left the young man with some money. In any case, this was only a kitchen, Mogesi reasoned. No one would harm her for mending a mere kitchen roof. After all, she had done greater things. She had educated almost every sibling in the home. What could be more important than that?

Two weeks later, Mogesi returned and found all work done except the thatching. This was fixed the following day. The work was done well, and while she was paying the three workers, her second follower brother—the eldest son in the family—emerged from his own compound. He calmly examined the thatching as if he had hired the people who
did the work. As he went round the hut, he nodded knowingly. He stood at some point and touched the grass, felt its texture. He listened as if the grass were talking to him. He nodded. Slowly, he continued his journey.

Mogesi quickly settled with the three men, and when they left, she waited for her brother to emerge from his tour round the house. Her brother was behaving like a cowardly cock that came to the battlefield after a fight and flapped his wings when he knew well that no one was interested in a tussle anymore.

“*What is this?*” he said when the workers had been gone. With his left hand, he pointed at a spot overhanging the door.

When he turned his face at Mogesi, she looked at him in an unmoving position. She ignored a strand of hair that fell across her forehead, and said nothing. Like a bull asking for combat, she simply dared him. She felt like placing him in a shovel and, like some dead worm, hurling him across the hedge.

“What type of workers did you people bring here?” he said and smiled derisively.

Mogesi’s mother strode from the kitchen where she was sweeping and setting the various items in their places. “What are you saying?” she asked her son. “I am asking you: What did you say?”

Mogesi’s brother pocketed his hands and whistled softly.

“Look at him!” his mother raised her voice. “Can’t you be ashamed of yourself? Why didn’t you complain when the workers were here so that they could rectify the place?” She turned to return to the hut, but looked back. “Why can’t you do the work yourself? Get out of my way.” Murmuring, she entered the kitchen.

Since the son likely knew what his mother was capable of doing, he hurried away the moment the old woman disappeared into the house. All the while, she continued muttering. She returned with a cooking stick.

“Where is he?” she said. “Come here, I cook you.” She went round the hut and saw her son cross the sisal fence to his own compound. “Why didn’t you wait so that I can slap you with this thing?”
“Mogesi should go and take care of her home,” Mogesi’s brother shouted. “What she has done is nothing!”

“Hehe, look at him!” Mogesi’s mother brandished the cooking stick.

“Even if she puts up a five-storied building here, that will be nothing!”

Her mother turned to Mogesi. “Why do you allow him to spit at you?”

“I don’t have time for mucus-licking boys,” Mogesi said.

Mogesi now sat upright in the stool. Her stomach pained. She pushed her chest backward, belly forward, and stretched her hands. With her fingers, she lightly poked at her stomach. She was probably hungry. She vaguely heard the radio say the time: Half past noon. Since the housegirl was away, Mogesi would have to rise from this seat and prepare lunch for her children. She stood up.

Robi slowly handed a toy to Mwita. He ignored Robi’s piece and looked at one on the floor. It was the X. His fingers trembled like leaves blown by a breeze. He waited. He moved his hand closer to the ground, and the fingers now shook as if they were catapulted by a heavy wind. He seemed to marshal his nerves to calm down the quaking parts of his body. He touched the cross and lifted it. Was Mogesi dreaming? He attempted to clutch the cross in a fist, but his arm tottered, and he halted. Did he pause to take a deep breathe for one last haul? Robi held her own toy in midair and watched her brother. Mwita’s hand was being pushed down, weighed down. Robi spread her palm below Mwita’s fingers, lifted Mwita’s hand, and together they fixed the cross to the toy house. The level of their building had risen. Mwita’s arm drooped and shoulders sagged—he must have struggled a great deal.

“Mama,” Robi called.

Mogesi ignored her and turned into the sitting room.

“Mama!” Robi rushed and grabbed the back of her mother’s T-shirt. “Mama, look. He has made it.” She did not seem to know that her mother had been watching.

“What?” Mogesi turned uninterestedly.

“We’ve built it. Mwita has built it.”

Mogesi said nothing.
“See, Mama,” Robi said. “He has completed it.” She paused and seemed to be waiting for her mother to say something.

There was silence.

“Airiririririri,” Mogesi ululated, and swayed her hips briefly, tiredly. She continued moving toward the kitchen.

Robi followed. “Mama,” Robi said, “I’m the one who built it.” She pulled her mother’s hand. “It’s me, Mama.”

“Aiririri.” Mogesi entered the kitchen.

“No,” Robi said. “You’re not dancing well,” she complained. “Mwita and I constructed it.”
Glossary

Baraza—Kiswahili for the chief’s open-air gathering of the people in his/her area of administration.

Bhang—hemp.

Changaa—Kiswahili for a form of alcoholic brew.

Harambee—Kiswahili for “pulling together.” Helping others by donating money or other items.

Iritongo—Kikuria for the people’s mass gathering.


Jembe—Kiswahili for hoe.

Kikuria—the language of the Kuria people of South-western Kenya and North-western Tanzania.

Kiswahili—the most widely spoken language in East and part of Central Africa.

Luo—A Nilotic-speaking people, living around Lake Victoria. They border the Kuria to the North.

Matatu—Kiswahili for public service vehicle.

Mosaiga—Kikuria for men circumcised in the same year.

Mwananchi—Kiswahili for common citizen.

Obosara—Kikuria for light porridge made from sorghum and millet, regarded as the greatest thirst-quencher.

Panga—Kiswahili for machete.

Shamba—Kiswahili for farm.

Sufuria—Kiswahili for cooking metal vessel.

Sukuma wiki—Kiswahili for green collards.

Ugali—Kiswahili for corn flour meal. The staple food in Kenya.