

ABSTRACT

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Set in part in a remote Ugandan countryside and in part in the squalid slums of Kampala, *The Footsteps and Other Stories* explores the pains and the struggles and the aspirations of wretched, lowly folks when the state not only abdicates from its responsibility of protecting them but also turns its repressive instruments against them. In their flight from misery, in their unrelenting quest for the ever elusive security, personal or economic, they discover a voice for themselves—the one thing the state cannot take away from them. In spite of themselves, their attempts to make sense of their lives, of the events that they find themselves caught up in, are often times quite comical, sometimes bordering on the farcical. And the landscapes, depicted in a language that is quite lucid and lyrical, often times mirror the situations that the characters themselves are caught up in.

THE FOOTSTEPS AND OTHER STORIES

By

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The Night of the Serial Burglar

Inspector Cypriano Ayesiga reports to his office at 7:15am as he has been doing for the second week running. His office, located on the second floor of the four-storied CPS Building, has two notorious doors: the first, which in the building is better known by the code Uncle Tom's Keyhole, opens into the corridor, directly opposite his desk. He leaves it gaping whenever he isn't busy so that he could keep an eye on the corridor, for the door, being the first from the staircase, commands a pretty good view. Long ago, before he moved to the present suite, he too, like most of his senior colleagues, operated from the fourth floor, which meant more time spent on the winding corridors and staircase, or waiting at the ailing lift. The other door, accessible through his secretary's office, has acquired the notoriety of heaven's gate, opening ever so narrowly that, with his patriotic belly, he can manoeuvre his way through it only sideways—what with all the case files, dossiers, and thick, yellow-leafed volumes stacked behind it? No other person, except his secretary, uses this door. In any case, he doesn't receive visitors in his own office: he prefers to attend to them in the secretary's office or in the Board Room, where he finds it easy to, well, if necessary, urge them to cut to the chase.

The interior of the office bears the signature of one consumed by work. Every inch of the wall is strewn with stickers detailing appointments, schedules, and other details on open and pending cases. There's hardly any open space. The three office chairs, too, are piled with documents as every other space in the room—the shelves, drawers, desk, and even the floor—are already overwhelmed. His secretary has long given up on tidying up the office, not that she couldn't manage it, but rather that the inspector would remind her, whenever she tried, to leave each document just the way it is.

On the wall is a whiteboard on which he notes down each day's schedule. Lately, he's divided it into two parts: the left is headed "Chogm," as in *cho-gum*, i.e., Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting, in preparation for which he's been appointed to the Security and Accreditation Committee, along with Assistant Commissioner of Police, Deo Makumbi, and the Inspector General of Police himself, to work with officers from other security agencies.

The right hand side is headed "Other Activities." He's already suspended or delegated most, if not all, the regular schedules falling under this category, and so the right side of the whiteboard is largely redundant. Time is galloping, and Cypriano Ayesiga, perhaps more than any other member of the Chogm Security and Accreditation Committee, is on his nerves ends.

When he enters his office this morning, he wipes out the heading, "Other Activities," ever so hesitantly; and under "Chogm," makes the necessary adjustments for the day. Against the topmost subtitle, "Countdown," he adjusts "15 Days" to "14 Days." The other entries he makes are mainly about meetings, appointments, and specific daily tasks to be accomplish in the run up to Chogm. He makes other entries in his organiser, as necessary, and, as he always does before embarking on the day's work, flips through the dailies he's picked from the counter. As a man with ears to the

ground, keeping track of news is a sacred obligation he won't neglect even with flurry of schedules in the run up to Chogm. He can't do otherwise, or so he believes. Actually, he has, over the three decades of his dedicated service to the force, earned himself the reputation of an officer who wouldn't spare the rat as he chases the elephant. To his credit, he's been known to skewer both preys. And so, as he flips through the papers this morning, a story on the front pages of the dailies catches his attention.

The New Vision, a government-owned daily, runs, "Serial burglar targets Shoprite." He skims through it and at first doesn't give it much thought but when he switches to *The Daily Monitor*, a similar story under a rather riveting headline, "The serial burglar steals the Queen's Show," catches his attention. In both stories, the serial burglar reveals he'll break into Shoprite at ten o'clock on 22 November—the eve of the Official Opening Ceremony—just thirteen days away.

He reads *The Daily Monitor* story more closely, tracing with his pen the reporter's thoughts on the matter. The emerging pattern is disturbing, for here is the target, Shoprite, a company from a member country—a member of the Commonwealth, that is—stripped off just before the country's president arrives. What a welcome! Then there's the target's location—Entebbe Road, the gateway to Kampala, the hosting city: fifty-two other heads of governments and, well, Her Imperial Highness, Elizabeth II, Queen the United Kingdom and Head of the Commonwealth, herself will be arriving in the aftermath of the attack to bear witness to the shame. And the timing of the attack—the eve of the Opening Ceremony of the Chogm; and perhaps the most exciting one—the response of the security agencies in the build up to and in the aftermath of the night of the burglary.

Cypriano Ayesiga finds one other point in the story terribly disturbing, and he circles it with his pen. Both dailies have, in describing the public mood in the wake of this serial burglary saga, have talked of *the serial burglar craze*, identifying *The Red Pepper*, the city's leading tabloid, and FM stations as its main perpetrators. Naturally, he wants to figure out just how much of a *craze* this case really is, and why no one has decoded in time the clear sinister plot behind the whole burglary saga. Like the reporter, he, too, feels this is no ordinary burglary: he sees in it a calculated act of political sabotage.

The inspector remains transfixed long after he has read the stories, gazing blankly at the wall. He sees as his most urgent task the need to winnow the millet from the chaff. He sends for a copy of *The Red Pepper* and when he gets it, his eyes are immediately caught by the shouting headline: "COUNTDOWN TO THE NIGHT OF THE SERIAL BURGLAR." The piece is sensational right from the lead and Inspector Ayesiga immediately realizes how hopeless it will be to try to mark revealing bits of it. His pen slackens just after the first two paragraphs:

It is now thirteen days to go, and our crews are reliably informed that the police have not yet made any move to identify, let alone arrest, the serial burglar. The MD of Shoprite on his part told our crew yesterday in his office that they're on top of things and that customers should not scream.

Perhaps they know a thing or two about which we have no clue, but from our own investigations, we can exclusively tell you that the plot is on and come 22 November, the serial burglar will strike.

The Red Pepper is a paper overly given to sensationalism, and true to that reputation, the article ends by urging the readers to do their shopping in good time for there is no telling what will remain of Shoprite when the serial burglar is done. The inspector flips through the paper and in its commentary column finds yet another related article under the heading, “The Serial Burglar Scores in the Queen’s Net.” The article maintains that the foretold Shoprite burglary bears the markings of a well-planned scheme whose motive is apparently far too complex for a common act of burglary; one that seems more like a ploy to divert public attention away from the Queen’s arrival and from Chogm itself.

He feels an urgent need for action, discreet action. But there are still many gaps that need to be filled in and many assumptions that require further corroborating details. As a starter, he sets for himself the task of gauging the extent to which the case is really the craze the papers are painting it to be. He feels Dinah, his secretary, is well placed to give him a dependable picture. It’s already well past eight o’clock so he expects her at her desk. When he calls her she appears at the connection door in keeping with the habit they’ve established and asks him what the matter was, he tells her come right in.

Let it be said here that the relationship between Cypriano Ayesiga and Dinah is somewhat standoffish, but marked by mutual respect. To Dinah, Cypriano is just her kind of boss: he’s clear and consistent in his instructions and expectations, and although he doesn’t openly lavish her with appreciation, he has over the years jealously blocked attempts to have her transferred to other sections. To Cypriano, Dinah is meticulous, prompt and stern—three qualities he values most, having spent the better part of his career fighting bushy-tailed sloppiness. In short, Boss and Secretary are both satisfied with the way things stand between them despite their impassivity towards one another.

Once in a while though, they can get somewhat casual. This morning, for instance, Dinah, as she enters Cypriano’s office, remarks on how tired he looks, even going as far as suggesting that it would do him well to slow down a bit. Cypriano dismisses her concerns and tells her not to mind him; that he doesn’t really have any life outside of work to slow down for. Whenever conversation veers to the subject of life after work, traces of sadness always flutters on his face. He is sixty-three, and, at least on paper, only a couple of years from retirement. Dinah insists he should be mindful of his health. And Cypriano, dismissively, says something about the ingratitude of the body. They laugh it off as good piece of joke. Moments like this for them are few and far between.

When he feels they’ve exhausted the small talk, Cypriano hastens to the point. “I saw this serial burglary story in today’s papers,” he says. “I was wondering whether you’ve heard anything about it before.”

“Oh, that’s *Red Pepper* stuff,” Dinah says. “I haven’t been following it that closely but I know it’s been around for a while, well over two weeks, I’d say.”

“Two weeks! Dinah, you should bring things like this to my attention in good time.”

“I’d not really given it that much thought.”

“See, you may think there’s nothing much to it but still—”

“May be I should have. But then I’d have new stuff for you every day. All crazy stuff, especially where *Red Pepper* is involved. They just make things up.”

“I know. But you see the point here isn’t so much about the substance of what they write about. It’s the impression it gives; the atmosphere it creates. The power of the media is what I’m talking about here. See—” he says, tapping the front pages of *The Daily Monitor* and *The New Vision*. “It’s not only *Red Pepper* anymore.”

“I guess they’re all the same. They’re all after sale figures.”

“That’s right. My concern is they poison the mind of the public in the process.”

“May be they give the public the poison they’re just as eager to take. I think that’s exactly the kind of stuff the public wants. Stick to serious stuff and your paper is as good as dead.”

“I know; I know,” he says nodding. “But how did *Red Pepper* come by this precise date and time of the burglary?”

“I wouldn’t say I know exactly how. But I think it has something to do with that pastor’s daughter they say he’d kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped? Was there any such case was reported to the Station?”

“Well, it wasn’t reported as such. It was more of a media thing. Allegedly, she just showed up and said she’d been kidnapped, and that it was the serial burglar himself that kidnapped her—at least that’s how he identified himself to her. It’s *Red Pepper* story, of course. And there’s another interesting twist to it: the girl in question is kind of an imbecile.”

“Damn! Did they reveal her name?”

“Yeah, I think there was even a full photo of her on the front page that day.”

“And you’ve the issue here with you?”

“I’m sorry I don’t. I just flipped through a copy I got at the Canteen.”

Inspector Ayesiga clasps his hands over his head, leans back and sighs, gazing at the ceiling.

That’s all he gathers from the secretary. The picture is still far from clear, but at least he can now, in abstraction, fork out an intelligence briefing should anybody push him to it. And very he’s sure somebody will. He’d have felt more secure if he had the case under his feet. But from the coming week he’s hardly going to appear in office. In his absence, he needs an officer adept at crisis management; an officer whose judgment on critical matters he can count on. To inspector Ayesiga, the only other smart officer at the Station is Assistant Superintendent of Police, Engena Atyene.

Inspector Ayesiga dials him on the intercom and asks him to come to his office right away. He clears one of the chairs of its load and pulls it closer to his desk. When ASP Engena Atyene steps in, Inspector Ayesiga indicates for him the empty seat and, without preamble, asks the latter whether he’d by any chance cast a glance at the day’s papers. The latter says he hasn’t yet.

“Well,” Inspector Ayesiga says, “The media appears to be taking this serial burglar case to a new level. And I guess you know the embarrassment such publicity, if left unchecked, will give us as a force and as a nation.”

Engena, who has all the while been furtively glancing at the headlines on the dailies says, “It’s only today that *Monitor* and *Vision* have joined in. All along, it’s been *Red Pepper* and a few FM stations.”

“You see?” Inspector Ayesiga says, stretching out his hands despairingly. “So you knew it all along? And it never occurred to you that a situation like this can easily flare out of control?”

“We’re closely monitoring the situation, Sir. And from our record, there’s as yet nothing substantial to make us say the case merits more than the usual media sensationalism it has so far attracted.”

“That may well be true,” said Inspector Ayesiga, pointing Engena with the tip of his pen. “My concern here is that the situation continues to fester right under your nose, and what do you say? ‘We’re closely monitoring it.’ You’re better than this, Engena.”

“Sir, in the event that there’s no such fellow out there as the serial burglar, as you may well guess, what more can you do? Gag the girl? Impose a total media blackout? I’m only a police officer trying to do his duties.”

“Yeah,” Inspector Ayesiga, intensely staring at ASP Engena Atyene, says. “A police officer who should know that this is PR we’re dealing with here.” He pauses for effect and leans forward. “My concern, Sir, isn’t about the substance of what *Red Pepper*, or *Monitor*, or whatever media outfit comes up with. It’s about the impression they can create. The media can be harnessed, without much ado. We could seek court injunction, for instance.”

“In that case we’d have to argue before court that there’s substance in the case which continued press coverage would jeopardise. If you asked my opinion, nothing would be more detrimental to our cause than giving, or appearing to be giving, credence to this publicity.”

“I’ve been trying hard to figure out one thing: from where did the press pick this idea of serial burglar?”

“They invented it,” Engena says and pauses warily as though expecting to be contradicted. “As one officer to another, I can tell you there’s no single individual out there whom that reference would fit. What happened was, sometime back—about a month, I think—there’d been cases of high profile burglaries in residential suburbs, mainly in Muyenga, Namuwongo, and parts of Bugolobi. There appeared to be something of a pattern to the burglaries, but that was merely a speculation, at least as far as we in Petty Crimes were concerned. The burglar had been cutting man-sized holes through the door panels to get into the buildings. In most of these cases, huge sums of money were reported missing, but nothing else was reported taken. Just like that: the spate of burglaries broke out all of a sudden, and just as suddenly sputtered to a halt. The cases are still open and it’s unfortunate that we haven’t yet brought anybody to book. But I guess I haven’t answered your question about how the obsession with the serial burglar started.” The Inspector makes no comment so he continues.

“In the wake of the burglaries, the public got concerned that the police wasn’t making much headway. So one day, a reporter from a local FM station, I can’t recall, came to get our perspective on the issue. He specifically wanted to know whether we’d made any arrest, or were following any promising lead, and whether we were treating the burglaries as the work of a serial burglar—and that was his own invention. The officer who talked to him clearly said until we get solid proof to that effect, we’d treat the burglaries as isolated cases. In the news stories the station ran, the reporter said—and I recall this very well—he said the police can’t as yet tell for a fact whether the burglaries are work of a serial burglar, but that, they said, is a possibility they’re taking into consideration. It was after that news story that *Red Pepper* took up the matter, and has been blowing it out of proportion since then. In one of their issues, they even alluded to an incident where the serial burglar left behind a note to the effect that he only targets the rich, and so the poor shouldn’t lose sleep; that his mission was to redistribute income. So, there you are! That’s kind of stuff we’re dealing with here.”

Cypriano Ayesiga is taken aback. The account Engena Atyene has given is totally different from the picture he’d developed, and the theory he’d constructed out of it. “Well,” he says with a sigh, “so where does the pastor’s girl fit in?”

“Oh, the pastor’s girl was a later development, a mere embellishment, if you will. Again it was a media creation. *Red Pepper* to be exact. They ran a story about the girl whom they said was kidnapped by the serial burglar and taken hostage overnight. Upon her return, she began spinning these fantastic tales about the serial burglar, and the fact that he’d take on Shoprite on 22 November and relieve them off their cash registers, or something like that.”

“That reminds me. What happened to that kidnapping case, if it was indeed a kidnap?”

“We’re yet to figure out whether there was indeed kidnap. In any case, it wasn’t reported us.”

“Did you try to figure why it wasn’t?”

“Sure we did. The girl’s parents’ first statement about the alleged kidnapping appeared in the press. When we asked them why they didn’t report the matter to police they claimed they didn’t know it was a case of kidnapping until their daughter was released the following day, which was all that mattered to them. You see, what complicates the whole matter is that the girl in question is kind of a loony. We tried talking to her but it was all hopeless. She’s charmed by this burglar fellow, or whoever took her hostage that night, and regards him as nothing less than an angel sent down to her from heaven. There seems to be something of a sexual nature in the whole affair, which actually was *Red Pepper’s* initial interest in the story.”

“Well, well,” says Inspector Ayesiga, cracking his knuckles. “I think that gives a different spin to the matter. This girl may be a loony, but she can still be an asset to us. If this serial burglar fellow was in it for sex”—he says, setting off *serial burglar fellow* with signs of quotation marks—“chances are pretty high he could still be seeing her. In that case, we can use the girl as a decoy. Once we have our guy, we can then obtain a public confession from him. That, to me, would be a smart way to close this case.”

Engena Atyene finds the inspector's idea brilliant and simple. He wonders why he, or any other detective on the case, didn't hatch it up before. He assures the Inspector that all will be fine.

"Time's of the essence here," Inspector Ayesiga says. "But you got to do it right. Assign your best detectives on the case and emphasize the urgency. Impress on them there's the right way and the wrong way to handle a case."

"We'll try our best, Sir."

"Don't just try. Do it. Too much modesty lulls the spirit. You got a job at hand, stake your pride on it and just do it."

"One can only try," Engena says, almost inaudibly. He's seen the report of the officer who interrogated the pastor's daughter, and so can't be overly enthusiastic

Inspector Ayesiga considers taking on the ASP over his insistence on only trying but decides against it. Instead, he tells the latter to avail him with a comprehensive report on the serial burglar by evening. He'll be leaving for Entebbe later in the evening for the usual weekend retreat they have been holding for the past four weeks, and he's apprehensive that the issue of the serial burglar may come up. He doesn't want to be caught unawares.

As ASP Atyene is leaving, Inspector Ayesiga, banging on the desk, says, "Time; time. Seek out his identity. Arrest him." To him, those three faltering statements contained the magic solution to the problem that was the serial burglar.

It's Friday evening, 9 November at Imperial Resort Beach Hotel, Entebbe. Events take an unexpected turn. Inspector Cypriano Ayesiga notices right on his arrival, that besides the usual nine members on the team—the three from the police, three from Presidential Protection Brigade, and one from each of the three other security agencies represented: the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence, Internal Security Organization, and Joint Anti-terrorism Taskforce—there are two other men, the Chief of Protocol and another from President's Office. His instinct tells him the new addition, ignoring the Chief of Protocol, is more of an eye than an extra muscle. By all indications, the latter is a redundant presence, indeed misplaced, on the team; his inclusion has been merely to lubricate that of the president's man.

Inspector Ayesiga can't tell what is coming but he senses it won't be to his liking. When he arrived at Entebbe, the elation he'd felt for much of the day, owing to the new spin he had, together with ASP Engena Atyene, given to the serial burglar case quickly dissipates. Each of his colleagues, save for the two other police officers, is pretty sure the serial burglar saga is an act of political sabotage, and that there are hidden hands feeding it to the media from behind the curtain. From what he's so far gathered, this theory about political sabotage won't deliver results to the final detail. Yet from the looks of things, no other explanation is likely going to satisfy the theory's faithfuls.

The meeting starts, to the inspector's displeasure, with the serial burglar as the first and hottest item on the agenda. The IGP, as the chairperson of the Security and Accreditation Committee, easily shifts the burden to Inspector Ayesiga as the one most qualified to brief the meeting on police's investigation, a task he could have

easily taken care of in his own communication had the report not been too scanty, grossly underplaying the gravity of the serial burglar saga.

But Inspector Ayesiga having long before toyed with the idea of forking out a brief in abstraction if it ever becomes necessary now has no other option. Besides, it's no longer the IGP he has to reckon with but a bunch of self-opinionated spy chiefs.

"Gentlemen," he begins, "this case, no matter how you look at it, is a most complex case." He looks around at the eyes staring steadily at him. Everyone seems eager to hear how the case of a burglar who has revealed his plan ahead of time could turn out to be the most difficult case an accomplished officer of the inspector's calibre has ever had to handle.

"We in the police," he continues, "are looking at this serial burglar case from three different perspectives. First, we've the actual burglaries that have generated a lot of excitement among the public. These are on-going cases and purely criminal ones which are not of any relevance to us here. But there's the craze arising from the burglaries which is largely a creation of the media. The portrait of the serial burglar they've painted is a far cry from the facts as we in the police—in Petty Crimes—have it, but which is of interest to us in as far as observance of public order is concerned. As we draw nearer to Chogm, we won't be found wanting in as far as that responsibility is concerned. We're looking at two possibilities: one that the serial burglar craze is purely the usual media sensationalism, and we're working out the best response to it. Our main objective here is to strike off the topic from the spotlight so that the media and, in effect, public can focus on the main event that is Chogm. Second, there's the theory of political sabotage and here, we're working on the assumption that there're dissidents and opportunists who're are either controlling the scene from behind the curtain, or who will take advantage of it to advance their own political agenda. In this case—"

"Er... sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Inspector," Sam Atuahire, the Director of ISO says. "But I think we've got you well enough. We've got your point about media sensationalism and political sabotage. I find the distinction you're making rather superfluous though. I'd rather we treat this matter simply as one with ulterior motives behind it. Whoever is behind the motives, journalists or politicians, isn't the issue. The issue is, what facts do we have? How do we deal with them? To me, that's more practical."

With that interruption, the focus slips back to the direction Inspector Ayesiga hope to have salvage it from. Sam Atuahire goes on to say in ISO they've gathered actionable intelligence and have precisely singled out the political forces funning the craze. His undercover agents, he tells Inspector Ayesiga for the benefit of everyone around, have thoroughly infiltrated the saboteurs causing the unrest; and that their hangout is the infamous *Ekimezza*, the People's Parliament at Club Obbligato, operating under the guise of interpreting policy decisions and actions for the benefit of the public while, actually, distorting issues for their own agenda. His other peers concur that the ISO is spot-on and that the police should follow suit.

The policemen shift uneasily in their seats, each afraid to deep in his oar. For a moment tension hangs in the air. But the president's man, PK, as his friends call him, leans on his left elbow to adopt an upper bearing towards the IGP and, lightly tapping the table with his other hand, throws a direct challenge: "What do you think Mr. IGP?"

It appears this burglar thing is dragging on much longer than it should. What we have here,” he says, turning to the rest of the members, “is just another wayward child bending in front of important guests to show them his naked bottom. As a good host, you simply snatch away the child to spare the guests from the embarrassment. The Big Man won’t be amused if we allow this burglar fellow pull off his stunt.”

But the IGP, not a man to be spoken down to, especially by one he considers a minion, coolly says, “We’ve each come here to put our ideas on the table, not simply to direct. That’s why I don’t want to look at myself as the moderator of this meeting. So Mr. PK may well feel free to share with us his ideas on how best to handle this matter.”

“I thought,” says PK, “we’re dealing with the case of a fellow daring us from the rooftop: ‘Arrest me, here I am!’”

There is general laughter, and in between, Inspector Ayesiga says, “We all wish it were so!”

“I think what PK here is hinting at,” says the MI Chief, Maj. General Kale Kabanda after the laughter has died down, “and what Sam had earlier suggested is for us to identify the key players in this burglary saga and put them out of circulation, at least for the duration of Chogm. That’s the only practical way to drain out all this excitement—”

“If we do that, General,” Inspector Ayesiga hastens to say, “we’ll simply be chasing our own tails. And we may just as well prepare ourselves for the real crisis. You can bet on hordes of rioters pouring out on the streets. I hope we’re aware that already the city is swarming with foreign journalists. As much as possible, we should avoid any situation that can easily flare up into a full-scale riot. This is no time to blunder—”

“For once, Mr. Inspector, just ask yourself why we’re caught in this dilemma in the first place,” Gen. Kabanda says. “I tell you frankly: whoever it fell to was just too smart for the job—that’s why. Had we not been too obsessed with this need to be ‘extremely careful to guard against provoking the public,’ there wouldn’t be any serial burglar on the loose today.”

“That’s a guess at best,” ACP Deo Makumbi says. “I still think we need some sort of risk-benefit analysis here. First, let’s not jump ahead of ourselves. Even if we agreed about the arrest, whom are we going to arrest? Will the arrest, or arrests for that matter, bring to an end this serial burglar saga? After answering these questions positively, we’ll then need to weigh the outcomes of our own action against the serial burglar’s—assuming we just ignored him.”

“Bless the police, oh God!” Gen Kabanda says.

Deliberations drag on, pitting Inspector Ayesiga’s camp urging for restraint against Gen. Kabanda’s camp for whom the saga is a full blown emergency to be dealt with as such. PK raises the stakes even higher, cautioning that whatever decision is taken, the one thing everyone wants to avoid is regret. But, at least, everyone is agreed that the best course of action will be to arrest the putative serial burglar. Once again every one turns to Inspector Ayesiga, who brings up his earlier idea of using the pastor’s girl as a decoy. The idea sounds practicable enough, and it’s generally resolved that no resource—financial, technological, human or otherwise—is to be spared in an urgent all-out manhunt for the serial burglar.

Hordes of undercover agents are immediately unleashed all over the city. Inspector Ayesiga, weighed down by expectations, is closely monitoring the investigations. But a tinge of fear is beginning to creep into him: the best efforts of the security agents continue to yield no major breach while the serial burglar's impending stunt continues to drive the city to fever pitch. Anywhere two or three are gathered, the one topic freely rolling off their tongues is that of the serial burglar.

For an undercover agent on a mission, the obsession means a barrage of junk intelligence to pore over. Inspector Ayesiga heads for the Ekimezza at Club Obligato later on Saturday. It's 2:50pm when he arrives with two detectives in tow, taking separate tables at the back. The chairperson, his timekeeper and two guest speakers are sitting on the platform, their table packed with assortments of sponsors' brands—Bell Lagers, Guinness and Ruwenzori Mineral Water. Most of the other patrons have already assembled, eagerly waiting for the session to kick off. The transmission equipment, too, has already been set.

At 3 o'clock, the Ekimezza goes live on air, with the Chairperson thanking the dedicated members and the dependable sponsors. "Tonight's a special session," he says, "which will be transmitted live till 6 o'clock. Our topic is *the* special one! 'Countdown to Chogm: How well-prepared are we!?' As usual, we'll tackle the debate from the perspective of the ordinary man and woman on the street. Do they think they have any stake in the event? To set the tone for the debate, our guest speakers tonight are Hon. JB Onyango and Hon. Hadijah Ankunda. As usual, we'll give each of them five minutes to set for us the tone of the debate: the rest of the speakers will take three minutes each. So, without further ado, I hereby hand you over to Hon. Ankunda. Five minutes."

Hon. Ankunda is a Movementist, a pro-ruling party zealot. She's mainly concerned that with only a couple of weeks remaining, the public is still largely apathetic in the face of an event that should ordinarily excite all patriotic citizens. It's an unprecedented blessing to be hosting Chogm and she passionately calls upon her compatriots to put aside their differences and show to the world what a wonderful land their country is. Uganda, she reiterates, remains the pearl of Africa, a land bountifully gifted by nature. The country has been challenged to showcase her best. "But it's pathetic," she says, her voice descending, "that we should be shying away from the spotlight. Instead of rising up to the challenge, we're busy trampling over one another to jump into the band wagon of some reckless burglar." The culprit, to her, is the media, which has continuously been detracting attention away from Chogm; and "some political elements," whose only obsession is to see the government dragged in mud before foreign dignitaries. "A disgrace to the nation," she says, "is a disgrace to each and every one of us gathered here tonight." She ends by urging for restraint from politics of manipulation and opportunism, calling for greater responsibility.

Hon. Onyango, who comes next, is a radical from the Uganda Young Democrats. To him, the preparation the serial burglar has made dwarfs that made by the nation. "And if we must credit the Chogm Taskforce," he says, "let it be for their ingenuity in inventing a convenient scapegoat for the poor preparation they've made towards

hosting so far the biggest event in our nation's history. As we gather here tonight, ladies and gentlemen, the city is teeming with security agents, all searching for the serial burglar. They're baffled: why should this fellow's popularity rating overshadow that of Chogm and its combined fifty-three heads of governments plus the Queen's? What we see in all these, ladies and gentlemen, is a people desperate for a hero, *their own hero*. They didn't find one in their leaders and they hope they'll find it in this serial burglar. But who's the serial burglar, if I may ask?" Mixed cries of *Tell us!* and *Tell them!* pour out from the audience; and after Hon. Onyango says, "It wouldn't be farfetched, ladies and gentlemen, to say he or she or it is a ghost-incarnate from the dark underworld of our nation's politics. We've bred ghosts before. They fought alongside our army; and taught alongside our teachers; and served alongside our doctors and nurses. All over the country, our institutions are full of them. It didn't bother us before. It shouldn't bother us now. If the serial burglar is anything than a phantom, I, too, like Hon. Ankunda, stand to be corrected. And, if anyone knows his or her or its whereabouts, let him or her point it to our befuddled security personnel."

Shouts of acclamation sweep through the audience. Hon. Onyango holds to the microphone, his lips pressed tight, and after the audience has calmed, he says, "If we need to do any serious soul searching, we know where to start. Hon. Ankunda has told us the serial burglar is a creation of the media and "some political elements." Let's unanimously say, 'Yeah, you're right, Hadijah. What we have here's nothing but a ghost burglar.' The rest will be easy. We all know how to exorcise ghosts—constitute a commission of inquiry so that we can thereafter concentrate on real issues. I thank you." Hon. Onyango receives a standing ovation. The audience splashes their drinks in the air, chanting, *Hear him! Hear him!*

The rest of the deliberations are variations of the two tones, each more passionate than the one before. Away from the podium, the rest of patrons, fueled by the plenteous booze, are locked in their own mini debates, just as lively. By the end of the session, neither Inspector Ayesiga nor his other two detectives feel they have pieced together any actionable intelligence. They're certain there're plenty of other agents at the Club but doubt whether they've fared any better.

On Monday, 12 November all public discussions and publication of any material on the serial burglar are banned under a special court injunction. Over the next couple of days, three journalists, four FM presenters, seven local politicians, and unknown number of idlers are put behind the bars or, as officially put, taken in for questioning. Special emergency units of police community policing are set up in several stations and outposts across the city and put on a twenty-four hour alert.

The ban hits FM presenters the hardest. They find it hard dealing with callers who'd take none of it, so the smartest thing to do is to simply take such callers off air. But soon, the callers, who are themselves nobody's fools, are up in arms, asking what, then, FMs are good for if they can't allow talk-in time.

Soon, a new—and arguably safer—means of publicly talking about the subject in is evolved from a most unusual source. A pastor preaching over Power FM, a Christian FM station, about the return of Christ, says of it that it'll take people

unawares, and so people should be prepared all the time. The pastor likens the return of Christ to a thief, striking at midnight when least expected.

By the time Inspector Ayesiga catches up with the new technique, it had become too infectious to contain. He's returning home, his car radio tuned to Kabozzi FM. An excited caller is saying he's puzzled as to why Christ shouldn't announce his second coming so that he receives a fitting reception upon arrival. And the presenter is saying Christ doesn't want us to merely put up a show of readiness; he wants to catch those who are off guard and reward those who are genuinely ready. But the caller insists it's only fair and Christ being fair himself should know better. And the presenter asks him whether he thinks he can cheat Christ. Another caller says all thieves should, like Christ, take people unawares. It's foolish to announce one's assault to the most precise details. Still, another says people are naturally deaf and daft. No matter how much you try to make things easy for them, they simply never get the point.

Inspector smells a rat. He switches to K FM and finds there an even thinner veil over the topic. A caller is saying something about the first coming, wondering why so many people didn't believe. The presenter says Christ revealed himself only to the lowliest of society but that on his return, he'll come in a flourish, heading a mighty army yearning for nothing but destruction. Another caller snaps in, claiming that some people are saying he's coming to destroy Jerusalem as an act of vengeance. But he wonders whether Christ doesn't simply want to trick the Emperor into concentrating his guards in a wrong city. The presenter says the simple man that he is, it's beyond him to read the mind of Christ. But he points out the same Christ once outsmarted the guards at the tomb.

By and by, the talk about the second coming of Christ becomes an avenue for the rumor-hungry public to appease their appetite for the serial burglar saga. It doubly delights them to gird their good burglar in Christ's own robes. There's nothing the police or anyone can do about it. The national constitution, after all, guarantees religious freedom so the serial burglar continues to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Christ.

By November 22, the city is bubbling with expectations. The ten days of media blackout has made people hungrier and more curious to sort out the millet from the chaff. The serial burglar has, by now, evolved legendary credentials and everyone is convinced he'll keep his word. The security agents have, unwittingly, fanned the excitement. By sunrise on this fateful day, anti-riot officers in robot-like gears have been deployed at virtually all the main corners of the city. Security at and around Shoprite, particularly, has so much been reinforced that all the hype about the serial burglar is beginning to take the shape of a bad joke.

Even so, there are still many whose faith doesn't waver. They may well be aware the assault will take place at ten o'clock; still, they begin hanging around the site early in the morning, just in case. By midmorning a ravenous crowd has gathered around Shoprite, engaging security officers in running battles. At such moments the rumor mill spins even faster, becoming ever more infectious, with many claiming the serial burglar has been spotted raking the site.

By six o'clock, the balance is steadily tilting in favor of the resilient crowd. The security officers, spent from trying to hold them back the entire day, have finally come to accept them as a nuisance that won't go away. A tacit understanding evolves between them whereupon the crowd takes it upon themselves not to bother the security officers anymore and, in return, the latter decides to ignore them. The deal suits both sides. The crowd can peacefully catch up on the latest news on the serial burglar; and the security officers, who haven't been relieved since morning, can somewhat relax.

There hasn't been anything eventful save for the skirmishes between the officers and the crowd, and twice when the officers intervene, each time, to rescue a pickpocket from the jittery crowd. The second pickpocket, a boy hardly fifteen, has been stripped naked by the time police rescues him. He's dripping with blood all over, his face utterly disfigured; against a nearby streetlight, his body is steaming as though fresh from a boiling pot. As the police are snatching him from the crowd, one of mobsters shouts, to the amusement of the others, that there're so many people who still have a great deal to learn from the serial burglar.

Engena Atyene, from his tactical office at Shoprite, continues to update Inspector Ayesiga who has had a tight schedule the whole day. He knows the officers are exhausted; he had planned for a shift at six but the station has been slow in executing the request and the new shift arrives well over an hour late. With the fresh arrivals, Engena, too, under the cover of dusk and his plainclothes, takes some time off, milling among the crowd. Just then, he notices that several of the officers who have just been relieved are back among the crowd. The sharper ones among them notice him from afar and promptly melt into the crowd; not that he would have complained—they simply aren't eager to explain, even in jest, what they're doing at the scene. But a pair engrossed in an argument is oblivious of him as he sneaks up on them. The smaller of the two is saying the serial burglar sure won't stand a chance if he's stupid enough to come. His stout colleague is telling him he's got it wrong: if SB insists on his plan amid all the security around, then, for sure, he knows what he's doing. He simply won't go about it like a chicken thief. The smaller man is surprised at his colleague for believing anyone could outwit the security at the scene. The stout man tells the smaller one how naïve he still is: who in his right mind is going to lay his career on the line? And the smaller man shoots back with his own question: who in his right mind is going to stage a burglary in front of an all-out security alert, not to mention the crowd? The stout man dismisses his smaller colleague as one simply too young, folds his arms over his chest and turns his attention towards the scene. Engena comes up to the stout man and asks him what he's doing in the force. When the stout man doesn't answer, Engena checks his badge before walking away.

At 9:30, Engena gets a call from Inspector Ayesiga who is coming to Shoprite with other members of the Security and Accreditation Committee. Engena says everything is under control, and Inspector Ayesiga says there's no need to worry.

Few yards away, the security officers are trying to contain the surging crowd. There are scuffles along the frontline and the security officers are furiously and erratically battering the crowd, shoving them back; a man is battered and dragged away towards a waiting van; and Engena is excitedly issuing snippets of instructions to his aides. Inspector Ayesiga's car arrives and the occupants dash straight into the

building. The guards posted in the building are ordered to ferry eight cash registers to the waiting car. Engena is ordered into the car which immediately takes off towards the Station. Suspicion and confusion hang in the air. As the departing car negotiates the bend on Ben Kiwanuka Street, with part of the crowd in hot pursuit and another part surging towards the open yard in front of Shoprite, the police in their uncertainty are split between pursuing the departing car and guarding the building. Just then, a Chogm van arrives with Inspector Ayesiga and his colleagues. The guards at the site realize at once that they've been duped and immediately set after the departing vehicle. They are utterly confused and at a loss as to whether to guard the building or pursue the get-away car. The crowd has, meanwhile, overwhelmed the road and amongst themselves, everyone was shouting at one another, without anyone providing the answer: was that the serial burglar?

The Dark Cell

Save for Mukulu, everyone else had vacated Protected Villages by the time the demolition started. For even in those final moments, Mukulu still clung to the faith that no harm would befall the villages. The Evacuation Order had just expired the previous day, November 2. His family, like every other, had timely left for the newly opened camp at Bobbi Center. Mukulu chose to stay behind. He had told Chairman a couple of months ago that he would. Chairman, who liked to think of his proclamations as law, had told him matter-of-factly that like everybody else, he would have to move to the camp. But to Mukulu, the camp was out of question.

They could have gone on goading one another like that if they had wanted to. But it was still too early for confrontation. The camp after all had not yet even been erected. And, for all each could tell, the Evacuation Order might well be rescinded before it came to anything. Chairman knew this all too well. And in his wiliness, he acquiescingly told Mukulu that there was nothing to worry about. To say the least, he was a cautious man, a first-rate reader of times. He wasn't going to rile Mukulu unless he was pretty certain the time was ripe. His care wasn't unfounded.

For the past two years, rumor about the demolition of the villages had intermittently been on everyone's lips. But nothing ever came of it. The Giso man—the local security officer—always countered it, assuring the residents that he had never heard a wilder rumor. "This is our cradle land," he would say. "Nobody can uproot us from it. Where would he take us? Where would he get the food to fill the mouths of all our crying children, not to mention our own growling stomachs? All these tens of thousands—just come to think of it!" That would lay bare the absurdity of the rumor for every resident to see. And they'd chide themselves for having taken it to heart in the first place. But such reprieves were always short-lived. The rumor, ever more potent, would creep up on the residents, taunting their faith all over again. Still, they adjusted well to such surging waves. That is, until the final September wave. It came with a new urgency which didn't dissipate. The same Giso man began riding around the villages, pinning up notices along all major roads, making announcements—in schools, churches, market places, at funerals—to the effect that Government had given the residents only ten weeks to vacate the Protected Villages. Ten weeks, nothing more. Everyone was to move to Bobbi Camp. During the course of that grace period, Chairman himself, speaking in a church or at a funeral, stressed one message. "Government is doing what has to be done in the people's best interest." The residents grumbled but they had to yield their ground: Chairman wouldn't have added his voice to it if it weren't in his people's best interest.

What best interest? Mukulu had wondered. But no one else was keen to contest Chairman's words. It was a dumb, costly, and hopeless thing to try. Not for Mukulu though. He was a self-made man and he repeatedly told Lestina, his wife, or anyone who cared to listen that he was going nowhere.

"Out of my own hands and sweat," he said to Lestina, "I build myself a home, to live in it. Now, I won't move to the camp just because that's what others are doing.

No; that's not like me. If everyone decides they're moving to move to the camp, that's fine. But I, Mukulu born of Ogwal Apea, I'm anywhere."

The *mabati* on his imposing house sparkled in the orange glow of the setting sun. And the red wall tiles, shimmering, endeared themselves anew to Mukulu. In the days the house was still only a dream in his head, he would probably have received the news about the evacuation and demolition of the village quite differently. The house wasn't just a shelter. It wasn't just a fruit of his labor either. It was more of an expression of what a man could do when he put his mind to something. It was his ultimate pride.

"We won't be moving because we love to," Lestina said. "We'll do it for the children. My heart, while we're gone, will always remain here. I don't love this home any less than you do."

"It's not the home, Lestina," Mukulu said, his voice agitated. "It's the spite behind this whole demolition thing. The spite, Lestina."

"All the more reason we should get the children out of it."

"The children, well, how do *they* feel about it?"

"The children are upset," Lestina said. "But they appreciate the need to vacate. They don't want to be marked out."

That settled it for Mukulu. He nodded in quick, stiff succession, turning away from his wife, as though a matter that had long weighed heavily on him had just been logically resolved. A look of deep pain fluttered on his face but he immediately composed himself.

"You'll have to move with them to the camp," Mukulu said.

"What about you? You can't stay here all by yourself!"

"I'll be fine. It's the children you need to take to the camp."

"The children have their eyes on you; you need to think about them, especially now."

"No, Lestina. I won't have anyone around me. It's too dangerous. Besides, in a trying matter like this, it's one's deepest conviction that counts. Life in the camp is certainly not going to be easy. But it'll be even tougher here. Whatever you decide to do you need to be unwavering about it. You must feel it in your guts that that's what you must do. Take the children with you to the camp."

Mukulu never wavered on this question.

When the November 2 evacuation deadline finally came, Sunday Bongo, Mukulu's fifteen-year-old firstborn, said he would stay by his father's side. "I won't leave you here all alone, Pa," he said. "I'll stay here with you."

"You'll go to the camp, Sunday," Mukulu said. "In a matter like this, it's your first impulse you need to follow. It's not what you're *not* going to do that matters. It's what you *are* going to do."

"I didn't know you'd decided to stay behind, Pa," Sunday Bongo, in a hurt voice, said. He always wanted to impress upon his father that he was a dutiful firstborn son.

"You can still make yourself useful," Mukulu said. "But the place to do that will be by his mother and siblings. They'll need you there at the camp."

Sunday Bongo was somewhat placated. The family left for the camp. And Mukulu remained behind, alone. "Let come what may," he said to himself. "*Ka rac*

dong rac.” And having thus defiantly putting the matter in those terms, no doubt ever again lingered in his mind.

In the morning of November 3, Mukulu was sunbathing on his compound, sprawled on a rocking chair, when he heard the droning sound of heavy trucks making their way up the road adjoining his home. There was no mistaking the sound as it drew nearer. The demolition was at hand! His heart throbbed like a frenzied *ikoce* drum. Up till that time, he had braced himself well for the odds. The evacuation, he could understand. But demolition! What was the world coming to?

From the gear shifts and the revving of engines, he could tell that the convoy was turning along the long drive that led up to his compound. Craning his neck towards the driveway, he waited. The clatter of the bulldozer grew more distinct as it crawled up the rise leading to his home. Plumes of dark smoke billowed against the clear horizon where the sun, still low, was steadily rising up the sky. And the Chairman’s motorbike gradually pulled in at the head of the convoy. Closely trailing him was a truckload of AK47-wielding policemen. Behind that was a Land Rover loaded with drums of diesel, with club-wielding hoodlums perched atop it. And, bringing up the rear, was the bulldozer itself, bouncing over the bumpy road like a spirited, giant monster.

Chairman stood his motorbike at the edge of Mukulu’s compound as the rest of the squad pulled in. Mukulu, with the wariness of a man approaching a strange creature, ambled towards his unbidden guests. As he still did not want to accept the only possible explanation, he asked Chairman what all that flaunting meant. But Chairman carried on as though he had not seen Mukulu.

“Fast! Fast!” He said to his men. “Hurry up! Time isn’t our ally.”

The hoodlums scampered into the main house, dashing out with bulging jackets. Mukulu seethed with frenzy at their barefaced vandalism. He wavered between the hoodlums and Chairman. A red-eyed hoodlum shook a fist in his face. And he turned to Chairman. But the Chairman he faced this time was a god of vengeance, furious and unfathomable.

Mukulu tried, desperately, to reason with Chairman. “There’s absolutely no sense in demolishing the house,” he said.

The bulldozer heaved and Mukulu leaped in front of it.

“Drag that man away!” Chairman said. “People had been given enough time to clear out. We’ve plenty of work to do as it is without anyone adding us more trouble.”

“Those wretched huts at the camp!” Mukulu said as he was being dragged away. “Too cramped already to fit just a bed... You count that a replacement for my house?”

But no one was in the mood for argument. Mukulu, cursing, struggled to free himself from the two muscular hoodlums dragging him away. But he was no match for them. A look of pure rage fluttered on his face like a butterfly in a cobweb. It wasn’t the hoodlums that really enraged him. He didn’t know them. And they didn’t know him. But Chairman was different. He *ought* to be different. He ought to be standing by him. But Chairman saw his role differently. He was the harbinger of destruction.

Mukulu had all along regarded him a scoundrel but the belligerence Chairman exuded still petrified him.

Mukulu eventually allowed that his house was, indeed, marked for demolition. It gave him some subliminal pleasure to fault Chairman's spite for it. Not that it was going to change anything. Rather, he saw it as a moral contest in which he trampled Chairman. Chairman the weakling hounded by his own deep-seated inferiority. Chairman the pathetic man who envied his betters. Chairman the evil-eyed charmer who hated to see others prosper. Chairman the soulless man with the guts to celebrate another's death. Mukulu imagined that if the demolition were to be called off before being fully executed, it would satisfy Chairman to know that at least Mukulu wasn't going to be among the lucky ones. Else, how could the demolition start with his compound?

The bulldozer tore down his six-bed roomed house to a heap of rubble before heading for the boys' quarters and finishing with the two adjoining huts. Walls crumbled chunk by chunk and the roof sagged in as the bulldozer revved and clattered with unrelenting fury. Plumes of dust and dark smoke hung in the air. The hoodlums who were holding Mukulu eased their hold around his wrists when they felt he wasn't struggling anymore. The hazy forms of the chairman and the hoodlums and their raucous chitchat and the ear-splitting clatter of the bulldozer whizzed him to another world.

Mukulu felt weak and nauseated, drained and flaccid. He absently stared through the unfolding demolition back into the rough days he was putting his resources together. In those days, he'd rise out of bed at the first cockcrow and perspire under the scorching sun to prepare his cotton field, spending each passing day the crop was afield dreading the assault of hail and wilt. In those days, the fear of the vagaries of weather, an uncertain harvest and fluctuating prices attended him through the day and haunted his sleep at night. The fears reared their heads alongside his towering dreams but he rose above them. That way, he salvaged his dreams, the tallest of which was to set himself up as the leading produce dealer in the war-ravaged region. A dream he realized much faster than he had reckoned on. His breakthrough came from a most unlikely source. The insurgency that had been raging through the region had been a blessing to him, scaring off most of his would-be competitors as it got increasingly brutal. Before long, he emerged as the sole supplier of lint and grains from the region. Some people were whispering that he was a rebel collaborator. The security men monitored his every move. His business rivals badmouthed him. They wanted to know why his trucks safely plied insurgent-riddled highways. Why the insurgents didn't loot his stores. What was it that was so special about him? For all such folks, the demolition would be their merriest event, or so Mukulu thought. And it pained him to realize how they would delight at his misfortune. Chairman, for one, clearly enjoyed directing the demolition of his house.

The sight of the heap that had once been his magnificent house was heartrending. And he turned from the scene and dolefully walked away. Tumultuous feelings and recollections raced across his mind and he dreaded to think of what lay ahead of him.

For a long time, he couldn't think with any distinctness. His head was but an aching stump atop his neck. A deep, indiscriminate hatred began to take root in his heart.

Mukulu wandered across the desolate villages. Everywhere he went, he saw tales of destruction. There were heaps of rubbles where magnificent houses once stood.

And blackened, ruddy-rimmed walls were all that remained of the once grass-thatched huts. The demolishers didn't bother to ram the bulldozer into the huts. They just touched them. It was as if they were sparingly using their resources so they could spread destruction far and wide.

For the next couple of weeks Mukulu wandered aimlessly across the desolate villages. The realization that the demolition was total did not give him any relief. Granted, they did not single him out. But what could the misfortune of another do to repair his loss? He wasn't Chairman. The emptiness around him only accentuated his loneliness. All around him, everything was quiet and still; the November skies were bluer than usual. The birds and other chirping creatures seemed to have taken the cue and conspired to augment his solitude. Mornings, daytimes, nights—they were all quiet and still as though some powerful conjurer had cast a powerful spell over the land. It was only the ruins of his old homestead that gave him something akin to intimacy. After the second week, Mukulu erected a shack on his old compound. It was to be his new home for the next couple of months.

Every morning, he would bring out his rocking chair—the only priced possession that had survived the destruction—and bask in the sun. Chairman's rascality still surprised and riled him every time he thought of it. Not that he ever considered him a respectable man. Even before the demolition, Mukulu allowed that Chairman was a scoundrel. Once in the course of touring his jurisdiction, he stopped over at Mukulu's home. The scene still played in Mukulu's mind as though it happened just the previous day. It was a Sunday and Mukulu, as he did on Sundays, was ensconced under the umbrella tree on his compound.

As Chairman approached, he told Mukulu, in his high-pitched voice that invariably left the impression it was intended for a third person, how beautiful the compound was. Mukulu thanked him for the compliment, bidding him to make himself comfortable.

"I'm, actually, in a rush," Chairman said, nonetheless, taking one of the empty straw chairs under the tree and adding, "This work of ours is no work for comfort at all."

"It's the *juicy part* of it that you should thank God for," Mukulu said.

Chairman laughed and, adjusting the belt under his hanging belly said, "There isn't any juicy part, Mukulu."

"Come on, Chairman," Mukulu said, leaning forward with an affected caution. "You don't reveal your bird's nest by the fireside lest you find it abandoned the next day."

"Life isn't any easier for us in government these bad days," Chairman said, skirting around the proverbial bird's nest.

"If you begin to complain, Chairman, some of us will have to cry."

"Don't mention crying, Mukulu. We reserve today for laughter so when we wail tomorrow, at least we'll be able to look back and say, we laughed when we could."

Now, when you begin to talk in riddles, I know you're knocking on to the door of politics. I'm no politician, you know."

"Talking of politicians," Chairman said, leaning forward, "I was at the District on Friday and I stopped by the Resident District Commissioner's Office. The RDC, he's just ordered that the Protected Villages be evacuated—may the Devil take his soul!"

He guffawed at himself as though he'd just cracked the funniest joke. "That's the one politician you'd take to hell alive," he added.

"You must be joking," Mukulu said.

"It seems real this time," Chairman said, clipping his mirth. "As I said, I was over there at RDC's this Friday. I read the Order with my own eyes."

"If they demolish the village is, we each lose more than just our homes and land and community. It's a loss we can't shoulder."

"You've put it correctly. I told RDC that much but he wouldn't listen. I said, 'Mr. RDC, the residents, they'll need time. Enough time so they can understand why these things have got to be done.'"

"What do we need time for, Chairman? What we need more of is protection."

"That's right. I told him all that. I said the residents need protection. What did I leave out, Mukulu? The RDC, he said I'm a nagging Chairman. But one way or another, it doesn't matter to me. To serve the people, you've got to put up a brave face. RDC, he just said, 'Chairman, we've given them enough time. We've protected them. Given them food. The little help they receive with one hand, they extend to the rebels with another hand.' There are bad reports there, Mukulu. Very bad reports." He waited for Mukulu to react but Mukulu's mind seemed elsewhere. "They say there that rebels are getting in and out of these villages here at will. That our very own people here are tipping them off on the movement of government troops and other security details."

"See, Chairman," Mukulu said, leaning towards Chairman. "That's what I find amusing. If the RDC people get all such intelligence details, sure enough they know those involved. Why not just round them up? Why not weed the villages of the undesirable elements than impose this collective punishment. Sure, I see this whole evacuation thing as collective punishment."

"There's a plan underway. But as you said, you don't reveal it by the fireside."

"Why then the need to evacuate the villages? I've even heard of a demolition plan. Where are all these things coming from?"

"Now, Mukulu," Chairman said, cracking his knuckles, "you got to know one thing: people will always say all sorts of things." He leaned forward some more and whispered: "But take it from me. It's true there's a demolition plan underway. Government has thought about everything *very* carefully. The demolition will be highly controlled. Very few houses will be demolished. And for that matter, only the houses of those who have been involved in shady activities. Every single one of them will be driven into their burrows. As a law-abiding citizen you shouldn't lose sleep over this demolition talk."

"Well, well," Mukulu said. "Let's hope so."

Chairman assured Mukulu that all was fine and left because he had a few more scheduled visits.

Long after Chairman had left, the spite and cunning in his voice continued to ring in Mukulu's mind. He had barely disguised his excitement about the doom that hung over the villages. But despite his wiliness he had somewhat allayed Mukulu's worries. Now by benefit of hindsight, it was his cunning that enraged Mukulu the most. He kept wondering why he didn't do anything about it then. But what could he do?

As he strolled across the desolate neighborhood, all he could say to himself was, *that scoundrel!* But the wanderings somewhat soothed his rage.

There was something exciting about such wanderings. Something magical about it. For one thing, there was always the hope that he might chance on a fellow drifter. For another, he needed food. He had managed to salvage some grains from the ruins of his old house. But, to occupy himself, he preferred to hunt. The November sun blazed overhead. The bushes, serene and baked into a golden hue, stretched on for miles either side of him. Somewhere in the undergrowth, parks of rodent or even guinea fowls could be hiding from the sweltering heat. Occasionally, a squirrel appeared ahead of him, rose on his hind legs, regarded him curiously, scratching its nose as though honoring him with some kind of arcane salute, and leisurely disappeared into the bush. This was their paradise. He, Mukulu, was an intruder, an undesirable element. But Mukulu protested silently. He, too, belonged with these peaceful creatures. Whenever he saw himself losing the argument, he'd fling a stone or anything that was handy at the first creature he came across. Otherwise, he always let them relish their paradise. In the days since the evacuation, it had been easier than was previously possibly to come by many of them, big and small. Their boldness, as though the villages had been handed over to them, offered Mukulu an easy target whenever he felt like killing. All he needed was a small throwing stone. The neighborhood became a hunting ground, all his. Or so he thought for the ten weeks he was there, all alone. He longed for human contact all the while even though there were times he marveled at his own resilience, for, without much exertion, he'd adjusted well.

Now, for a couple of days, he had been laid up with fever and languor. Then around noon on the second day, a Range Rover and a pick-up truck that had earlier sloped down the road adjoining his home stopped by on their return. He lumbered out from curiosity and, to his surprise, he saw the occupants of the vehicle heading towards his shack. Or, rather, what had remained of his old home. There were nine men altogether—five in civilian clothing and four in police uniform. The policemen wielded AK-47's and he figured they were escorts.

At the head of the group was a fat man in flannel shirt and faded blue jean trousers, whom Mukulu was later to learn, was the Resident District Commissioner. He was holding a spirited conversation with a much slimmer man of Asian stock with whom he was walking side by side. Close behind them was another pair: an equally fat, flabby cheeked local engaging another of Asian stock in conversation. The Asian, like a wily conjurer, was excitedly making a point to his counterpart with swift circular motions of his hands. Mukulu couldn't pick what he was saying. But his black counterpart was stiffly nodding his head like an erratic contraption. A fifth man was walking by himself.

As they drew closer to Mukulu's shack, the civilians, as though approaching a ferocious creature, slowed down and the policemen, as though on cue, stepped forward. They warily planted themselves on either side of Mukulu and were momentarily at loss as to how to proceed. Then first man, who happened to be the RDC, addressed himself to Mukulu.

"Are you the one living here, Sir?" His tone, like that of a man used to formalities, was both polite and patronizing.

“One is forgiven for assuming I’m just guarding it,” Mukulu said.

“So one isn’t wrong to assume there are things here that require guarding?”

“Depends on how one looks at it.”

“How I look it: this is an evacuated zone. And I wonder: what would a peace-loving man want to do in a place like this?”

It was not for want of an answer for before Mukulu could say anything, the other fat man said for him matter-of-factly, “Abetting his friends, the insurgents.”

The RDC took that for Mukulu’s response. He turned to his companions, hands exaggeratedly outspread, and inquired, “Can he deny that?”

No one objected.

Turning to the policemen, Chairman said, “Take him!”

“*Yessir!*” The policemen chorused.

The policemen sandwiched Mukulu between them and led him towards the waiting cars before he could make sense of what was happening to him. The last thing he saw with any distinctness, as was being shoved into the waiting pick-up truck, was the inscription on its door: Office of the Resident District Commissioner: Apac District. “That scoundrel!” Mukulu said before he was handcuffed and hooded, only, rather uncertainly this time.

Inside the dark stuffiness of the hood, his thoughts and his grip on reality became fuzzy. The world was upside down and every image he could conjure in his mind was out of its proper dimension. The vehicles, when they came to life, seemed to him to have merely jerked in a forward motion only to embark inexorably on a reverse gear. The road was bumpy and gravels crunched under the tires. Sometimes they drove at a rocket speed, sometimes they crawled like tortoise. When they finally reached their final destination, Mukulu was aching all over, his legs hopelessly numb; his head, one big throbbing mass of bones and flesh. He was led to what, from the length of the corridor or corridors he follow, seemed a large facility. When finally the hood was lifted, he found himself in a dark cell.

The cell was stuffy. And the trapped air was saturated with the choking tang of bat and rat urine. But time and again, he could, for a fleeting second, pick out that distinctive bedbug or cockroach smell. Famished vermin crawling in the dark, he imagined. The silence was palpable. It didn’t take Mukulu long to realize that he had the cell to himself. He strode across it to familiarize himself with his new abode. Between the walls, he could take only three strides. The cell was a square, hardly six-by-six. From the cobweb through which he tore, he guessed it must have been unoccupied for a long time.

Mukulu remained sanding long after the guard who shoved him in had slammed the cell door and turned the key in the lock. After his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he noted for the first time that the cell was virtually empty save for a tattered mattress, hardly an inch thick, lying at the furthest corner from the door. At another corner, there was a small bucket which reeked of stale urine and excrement. Mukulu wondered how long he would have to endure the cell. His arrest had been swift. At first it had never even occurred to him as an arrest at all as he was being led away from his shack. It was only after he was handcuffed and hooded, and later locked up, that the full magnitude of his plight dawned on him. Were they arresting him for violating the Evacuation Order or for abetting the insurgents? He wasn’t

certain. But it had to be for violating the Evacuation Order. That made more sense to him. At first it even filled him with some vague pride. He didn't bother to figure what that pride consisted in. It didn't matter. He imagined he'd be detailed for a couple of weeks at the most. After that they'd rush him off to the camp, possibly with a full police escorts. His people would give him a hero's welcome. And his fight with Chairman or the Camp Commander or whoever was in charge, would from then on, take a new dimension, that is, if they insisted on goading him. He'd wanted to keep away from politics. But they'd already pushed him way too far. There was no turning back.

But things didn't play out the way Mukulu had reckoned. The first week went by. The second week also went by. And no one seemed interested in pressing any charge against him. There seemed to be no hurry to decide his fate. As soon as he was locked up, everyone seemed to have promptly forgotten all about him. His life quickly settled into a routine. He waited impatiently and desperately as days went by, seconds by second; minute by minute; hour by hour—all depressingly slow. The cell became agonizingly monotonous and all the more dreadful. It was always stuffy and fetid; gloomy and eerily still. Nights were chilly. And since he didn't have a blanket or any kind of cover for that matter, he'd double up to generate some warmth. And the vermin never left him alone. It was only with the cracking of dawn that he'd catch some light sleep. But the early riser that he was, he'd wake up from his tortured sleep almost at once as though alerted by some bodily clock. The gloom in the cell did little to uplift his spirit.

Seconds...minutes...hours... And then it would be ten o'clock. Ten o'clock had, in his mind, assumed some magical dimension. His heart would beat in anticipation, imagining himself being called for interrogation. And the interrogation establishing once and for all the absurdity of the charge against him. And him being turned loose. He didn't care what lay ahead. All he wanted was to escape the cell.

Ten o'clock came and his heart slumped upon realizing that it had ushered in only the guard who delivered his daily meals. Still, the arrival of the guard was a welcome break from the monotonous gloom.

When the guard opened the door, a silvery gush of daylight and warm, fresh air flooded the cell. The sudden brightness momentarily blinded him. The delivery guard, in the meantime, set down a small bowl of food and a cup of water, saying, "Lunch 'n supper," before snatching the previous day's containers and hurriedly locking the door for yet another agonizing twenty-four hours.

At first he was somewhat indifferent to the guards. That's before he realized that they were his only contact with the world outside the cell. Most of the guards were mean but there was one that was particularly good hearted. That morning, he received the friendly guard—a lanky, knock-kneed man with bulging eyes and drooping shoulders and quivering lips that seemed to have ready words for every situation—the one who had made it a habit to open Mukulu's cell door, saying, "You're the man they brought in from the Protected Villages?"

"That's me," Mukulu said, knowing the guard would again ask the very same question the next time around. It wasn't a question he asked for want of an answer. He simply asked it out of humaneness, out of a need to connect. Still, Mukulu answered him as one would to a genuine inquirer.

“You’re the strangest man I ever met,” the guard said, gathering the containers from the previous day.

“Why can’t anybody produce me in court if I’ve anything to answer to?” Mukulu said with a tinge of fury in his voice. “Why can’t they turn me loose if they have nothing to charge me with?”

The lanky guard briefly regarded Mukulu as blankly as though lost for words. And after a brief pause—a brief pause during which he assessed Mukulu and found him passably sane—he matter-of-factly said, “You better prepare to be here for a *long* time, man. Unless you’ve got a tall relative keeping a close eye on your case.”

“A tall relative?” Mukulu said. “What tall relative? When nobody even knows I’m here to begin with!”

“God in heaven!” the lanky guard said. “Then how you begin thinking about getting out?”

“You got to help me here...”

“Eugenio—that’s the name my mother gave me. She wouldn’t have me go by any name.”

“Yes, Eugenio. You got to help me here. You got to do something. Anything! I don’t sleep on a favor.”

The lanky guard, amazed, steadily stared at him and said, “Just to make sure you’ve your facts right. You know how you got here, right?”

“That scoundrel!” Mukulu said. “We got to do something about this. I tell you what? I’m sick of this place, through and through.”

“What do you want me to do?” the lanky guard said tentatively.

“Send word to my family. Tell them they’ve taken me.”

“God in heaven! And what do you think they’ll do for you? You think the RDC he’s some kind of LC I Chairman or what? It look to me you’ve got a long way to go, man. I seen it.”

LC I Chairman or RDC, I don’t give a damn! I just want to get the hell out of here, you hear?”

The lanky guard became genuinely piteous, leaning towards Mukulu as though he was scrutinizing some exotic creature.

“We got to sit down,” he said somberly, “and talk like two grown up men. That’s it. When I’m off duty, I’ll come here. And we talk.”

The exchange had been that brief. It was all that the time allotted for the daily delivery of meals could allow. But it was enough to cheer Mukulu up for a long time. Throughout that day, he felt a deep peace within himself. And he slept more deeply. That night, he dreamed that he was floundering amid vast marshlands for hours on end, trying to make it to a rising village behind some acacia groves. Each clearing he took glided on for a while before disappearing under the reeds that spread out towards the outlying groves. And he’d start all over again. The water was gentle and almost stagnant, but murky and itchy. In the deepest parts, it rose up to his waist, concealing the knee-deep mud below. In most parts, it was shallow and muddy. He waded through it, tumbling down now and again until every inch of his body was spread with mud and rippled with prickling sensations. He trudged along like a giant, bipedal reptile, his legs and arms, stiffly bent at the knees and elbows, spread wide apart. He stirred in nightmarish sleep, his hopes, his life trapped in the marshlands of the

nightmare. The marshy dream world seemed vaguely familiar, giving him a weird illusion of having been there all his life. In the morning, he couldn't tell whether the dream had spread throughout the entire night or whether it was a recurrence of previous dreams.

When the lanky guard called Eugenio showed up next, his gestures were still genial but Mukulu noticed that he was rather awkward, his salute rather hurried and unnatural. Sure enough he asked Mukulu whether he was the man they brought in from the Protected Villages, his tone, lacking its previous spontaneity, flat and at once assertive and inquiring.

"That's me," Mukulu said nonetheless. "I couldn't move to the camp. I simply couldn't, especially after they demolished my house."

"Why wouldn't you?" Eugenio asked, without bringing himself to wait for the response.

But Mukulu was delighted all the same. It was in the telling, in the breaking of the monotony of his solitary confinement, as much as in the promise of human understanding that he relished these brief moments with Eugenio. That morning, Eugenio left once again, saying he'd find a time he was off duty and then come and listen to the full story.

That time never came. For the cell door opened next morning at ten o'clock and behind it was a robot of a guard who was impatient with Mukulu and decidedly surly.

"I got my own problems without having to add yours to it," he said in response to Mukulu's simple inquiry about Eugenio's whereabouts.

For the next couple of months, he'd receive one robot guard after another, each dumber than the one just before. At first Mukulu was astounded. He was even more astounded to realize that his pleas only made the guards harsher towards him. He began to feel they were under a strict instruction—and that they, on their part, seemed to have added more of their own—never to engage him in any open, human exchange.

Mukulu hoped for the day his ordeal would end. He kept alive the hope that somebody would luckily come to his help. But how could anybody help him when nobody knew where he was to begin with? Such realizations only deepened his misery. He often thought about the lanky Eugenio. What happened to him? Would he ever see him again? Did he tell anyone about his plight?

All he could do was hope. Hope even when the future was one impenetrable concrete wall and the past a heartrending tale of devastation. Hope in spite of everything that there was an end to every kind of madness.

Hope was all that Mukulu was left with.

Hope was all he could cling to as he wrestled with terrors of solitude, when the guards were no more than phantoms, and when his body and soul, tormented, couldn't find anywhere to lean, when every air he breathed in and out demanded a strong act of will, when every muscle of his body, smarting, required a conscious effort to move. Hope was that realization that he still had warm blood flowing in his body; that his heart, in spite of everything, still continued to beat faithfully; that his senses still answered to his will and his nerves still protested any pressure unduly meted against his body. For as long as that contraption he called his body still harbored hope, still harbored life, he wouldn't give up the possibility of breaking

through that concrete wall that barricaded the way to his destiny. For hope was all that lurked at the corners of his mind when his rage and pride seemed to have all slipped into the void of no return.

It was that hope that eventually led him to the realization that he didn't need the lanky guard, Eugenio, for him to relate his story; and that the story of his life was more than just bundles of exploits to be handed out to the Eugenio or anybody for that matter.

From then on, it didn't bother him to tell his own story to himself for a story could well have its teller double as its audience. And it dawned on him that he had within himself the power to speak not only the story but also its audience into existence.

A new diversion was born. And from then on, he needed no lanky guard for he had attained something akin to self-sufficiency and the passage of time ceased to bother him anymore.

Several months went by before Mukulu was eventually dragged out of his cell. His clothes were tattered, his hairs wildly knotty, his fingernails were like the claws of a market dog and a cloud of stench hung around him. He was a strange creature on a strange land. The bright daylight blinded him and for a long time he capped his hands around his eyes as a guard led him to the Senior Superintendent's office.

The superintendent who had sent for Mukulu was a huge man, with tiny eyes behind thick glasses and plump cheeks and folds of skin on his neck and a potbelly to match. He directed the guard who had brought in Mukulu that he should first show the prisoner to the bathroom and get him something decent to change into.

Afterwards, the guard brought back Mukulu in an oversized creamy khaki pants and a wrinkled red cotton shirt. The wild look about him was tamed but not altogether dispelled. The guard shoved Mukulu in and he stepped out, closing the door behind him.

"Sit down," the Superintendent said generously.

Mukulu, before sitting, hesitated as though sitting on a chair was the strangest thing he's ever had to do.

The superintendent flipped two pages of a thin file on his desk and holding Mukulu with his gaze said, "It seems to me there's no more reason to hold you here any longer."

He broke into a magnanimous smile, pausing as though waiting for Mukulu to join him. When Mukulu just stared on, perplexed as though the Superintendent was speaking in a foreign language, he said, "You'll be released right away. But I want you to be exemplary when you return home."

"Home?" Mukulu turned over the word in his mind. What's there to return to? He had mulled over that question hundreds of times but every time the answer eluded him. He had seen his home desecrated before his very eyes.

He tried to conjure up the image of his family. He saw his wife and their five children, and every belonging they took along with them to the camp all crammed into single hut. His sons, like vagabonds, wondering because they were ashamed to share a single hut with their mother. Children ceaselessly crying for food because their mother had nothing to put in their hands. Gaunt and ill children. Children with

distended bellies, flies swarming around them. Children pelting rocks at elders. Boys groping young girls in the dark.

It was only with the numbness of hearts that anyone would tell him about returning home.

The Footsteps

I

A gloomy evening for the two of them; the sky spread with dark, thick clouds. Corner Iceme, that rural mockery of urbanity, which to the locals was simply Corner, fell behind them as they headed back to the heart of the village. Corner Iceme had its glorious days once before the war. Traders and travelers poured in from all the four wings of its two main crossroads. But the prolonged Northern War, the large-scale displacements in the surrounding counties, had gradually reduced Corner Iceme to the ghostly trading center it had become. Its dusty roads, lined with scattered, mostly empty, grocery shops and bars and restaurants and a couple of drug shops-cum-clinics told the story better. Nearby, a lone grinding mill, at which a squat, balding man worked with his scrawny, sickly son, punctuated the day, sporadically moaning all day long. In the whole of Iceme, the mill was the closest there was to a processing plant. There had once been a cotton ginnery. But it had long broken down. And the two lads felt they needed to try their fortune elsewhere, far away.

It was still drizzling steadily and dusk was thickening fast. Dripping and shivering, their shoulders hunched, they silently picked their way, one after the other, through the narrow footpath, lined with sodden, overarching wayside grass.

In front was Tadeo Orianga—his friends simply called him Ringa—a stout, unkempt boy of about seventeen, in tight-fitting gray jean trousers, threadbare at the knees, and an orange T-shirt that exaggerated his athleticism and heavy pair of *olal*, those hard-wearing tire sandals, that made his springy gait and wrestler-deportment more conspicuous despite the chilliness. He was self-assured and when he spoke—without gesture, without turning his neck—his voice, which he kept deliberately low but stern, came in monotone, his lips barely moving. His eyes, perhaps due to his lush brows and thick lashes, were dreamy and had about them some traces of innocence.

Closely behind him was his fifteen year-old, narrow-shouldered, round-faced and lanky friend, a boy named Ali. He was, in a sleeveless camouflage jacket with a white T-shirt inside, and faded-blue baggy jean trousers, and a driving cap pulled low over his face, touching the ground with only the tips of his big canvas as though, with each step, he was merely testing how firm the ground beneath him was. His words, whenever he spoke, were measured, tentative, terse; his eyes, deep, penetrating, scathing. And, with his upper jaw, he held his lower lip all the while, sizing up everything around him, as though he were a puppet master, wondering what tricks he could pull off of them.

They walked thus for a while before Ringa spoke.

“Ali,” he said gravely, “do you think *he* will ever put us through?”

The *he*, they’d learn later once they’d eventually made it to Kampala, was a man called Sendi. But for the moment he was the freaking bugger who, for no clear reason, couldn’t put them through to Amate, their only known link to the capital. Amate was Ali’s half-brother. But for a whole week, Ringa and Ali had been trying in

vain to link up with him. They desperately wanted to sort out the nitty-gritty of their impending journey to the capital. The only phone contact Amate had availed to the folks back home the last time he visited went to that man named Sendi whom nobody knew anything about. Not that anybody cared. All that mattered was speaking to Amate.

Ali didn't answer right away. But there was something unbearable in the ensuing silence that prompted him, as though he simply wanted to fill it up, to laconically say, "That's up to him."

"Tomorrow morning we'll call," Ringa said, "and again he'll croak, 'Amate isn't around at the moment. Try again in the evening.' And in the evening, he'll tell us to try again in the morning. Really, what do you do with a cranky bugger like that?"

"Well, it was worse the first day we talked," Ali said. "As if you've forgotten how he asked me in his deep, hesitant voice what I wanted Amate for? And how I was like, 'Hey, that's personal.' And he was like, 'Look here, if it's Amate you want, you got to leave the message with me.' How about that? I felt like saying, 'Look here, man, Amate is my own brother. Yes, half-brother, but still a brother. Not a god! And you are no priest!' And he had the nerve to tell me, before hanging up, that it's all up to me."

"You just don't understand, Ali," Ringa said. "Amate may be no god. But let's just allow that guy *is* a priest. I mean, that's what he thinks he is! And there's really nothing we can do about it. Heaven or hell, we shouldn't stick out a tongue at him."

"Just chill down, Ringa. No one's up to any crazy stuff. I only say he's no priest."

"It's all because of him that we're soaking up all this rain," Ringa said.

"Where the hell you get that bugaboo from? We're stuck here just because Amate got no phone of his own. That's why."

"Oh, you got to wise up, man."

"It's you that got to wise up! Come on! For all I know, it's Amate that we want."

They walked silently for a while, each mulling over his own version of wisdom, before Ali, as though there hadn't any break in between, haltingly said, "As for this other bugger... well, we'll, like two real country blockheads, just go on bugging him. And see what sort of rock he's made of. Or we'll have to cook up some real smart plan and see if he's too smart for it."

"That's how a man talks like when he's thinking."

Ali didn't respond directly.

"Amate shouldn't hear about our plan secondhand," he said. "We got to think some."

"If we didn't screw things up first time, we'd be in Kampala by now."

"May be; maybe not," Ali said.

They covered the remaining distance in silence. And, as he was parting, Ringa reminded Ali to think some before the next morning's call.

From the last bend leading up to their compound Ali steadied himself, peering at the shape of his father lumped at the porch and he took a bypath that adjoined the kitchen. Although he was out of earshot, he could tell that the old man was muttering. *That's all he's good for whenever he's in his self-piteous mood*, he thought. At such moments, the vulnerable old man—as his father lately regarded himself—saw a

tormentor in everyone who crossed his path. The cast was diverse, ranging from the balding local cleric, Reverend Melchizedek Olam, and his catechists, to thieves, herbalists, doctors, teachers, shop owners—known and unknown—and, well, soldiers, police officers, politicians and the government itself, which to him was embodied by Chairman Amone and Honorable Obala-Irel, the local MP. But often times, it was Ali whom the old man casted into the role, mainly for the sins of idleness, selfishness, naughtiness, disrespectfulness, ingratitude, name it. It was that pathetic apology for a father that Ali was most terrified of.

But the old man wasn't always like that. Indeed, there were days before his business collapsed—or, to be exact, was brought to ruin following the evacuation and the demolition of the Protected Villages and his eventual is eventual detention—when he carried himself as though he were the dominant rooster of the yard, and his will a favor to be bestowed on anyone regardless. If the price Ali had to pay for the restoration of all that was having a fist brandished in his face, or a punch rammed into his jaws, than having to bear with a father who was forever whining over his deficiencies, he'd do it willingly for he admired that former confident, assertive father around whom he tiptoed just as he abhorred his timid, whining shell that had despicably taken to muttering impotently as he stroked his steadily deepening sensation of self-pity.

Ali felt more conscious of his deepening adolescent voice for his father, alluding to it, always lamented over how even his son, whose mouth reeked of breast milk just the other day, had already become a full-grown man, doing as he pleased. That evening, he was in no mood to trigger another bout of despondent outburst from his father. So instead of going straight to his hut which was in full view from where the old man sat as he always did, he headed to the kitchen where he found his mother and Abit, his little sister.

“Just *look* at Ali,” his mother said as he entered. “A wet chick wouldn't look more pathetic!”

“You bother the wet chick needlessly, Ma,” Ali said.

“Why don't you change into something warm?” Ma said, ignoring his sardonic tone.

“I'm quite fine,” Ali said. “I'll soon be warm.”

“Abit,” Ma said, “Go get you bother his sweater.”

“Don't mind me, Ma,” Ali said. “I *said* I'm alright.”

“I know what Ali, he's fearing,” Abit said. “He fears Pa'll see him.”

“You shut up your silly mouth,” Ali said, careful not to raise his voice.

He picked a stool and sat by the fireside.

“Your Pa, he's been searching for you like a loss needle...” his mother said.

“But it's only Wednesday,” Ali said. “You know school always starts slow.”

“Well, 'tis your pa you should be arguing with, not me. Me, I've just given up on your generation. In our days, things were very different. You prayed to God so your father he could raise the school fees money—you wouldn't dare pray for more. Except, well, that God he should be move your father's heart so he could part with the money. And just hope that God he'll listen! Believe me, that was a lot to pray for.

“For you today, you're blessed. To have parents that care for your future! That's why I'm yet to get to the bottom of what this thing is you so much fear from school.

“Your pa, he’s been working so hard. And God knows how hard the time is. Now he’s raised the money. Now he’s handed it to you. And you still expect him to force you to go to school! Oh God! What a *generation* you’ve given us! Not that I’m complaining. Heaven forbid it that the Devil he should appear before God, accusing me of ingratitude.

“How can I be ungrateful? I prayed for the gift of children! And God he’s blessed me with them! Sure I’m thankful for them. I surely am...”

“Frankly, Ma,” Ali said, “you’ve said that thing more than a hundred times already. And if *that* God listens, you must have bored him stiff by now.”

“Don’t you sit there saying *if that God listens!* It’s *you* that got to listen.” For a while, her eyes fell on Ali, sitting with his ankles drawn together under the stool, swinging his knees with an exaggerated sense of relaxation. She menacingly held Ali with her gaze but he didn’t budge as though he was goading her on purpose.

“Give that stool respect and sit properly!” she said.

Ali drew his knees together and began tapping the ground with his feet.

“This is your third term, Ali,” Ma continued. “You don’t want anyone reminding you to take it a lot more seriously. For God’s sake, your certificate exam is just around the corner.”

“I’m going to tell Pa Ali he’s just shown up,” Abit said.

“You just shut up!” Ali said with a voice tinged with curbed vehemence, fixing Abit with his index finger.

He was keen not to cross paths with his father for there were occasions when the old man, seizing upon such moments as that evening, ranted for hours on end about how ungrateful people are. And Ali, cast into the role of the quintessential ingrate, had to carry the cross of all those other indeterminate ingrates. His mother, on her part, had a flair for sustaining hour-long tirades against her fate and her struggles to guard against slandering God. All that on account of the children! In her tirades children become one with Ali. Even on occasions when such tirades had been provoked by somebody else, they found a way of sucking him in. Ali, with assuaging tact, learned to put them out way before they could flare out of control. Thus Abit’s interjection gave him an opportunity to steer the conversation to a safer direction.

“About school,” he said as though responding to a question his mother had posed, “I’ve already told you, Ma. I’m soon leaving—tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow indeed! Isn’t that all you’ve been saying these past three days? Why don’t you come clean if you got a problem?”

“I got no problem. I told you that already. I’m leaving home tomorrow, anytime.”

“*Tomorrow, anytime*—they’re such sweet words!”

Ali shrugged and clasped his hands between his knees and said nothing more. Ma, too, in spite of herself, said nothing more. And Abit, that marionette to the wishes of her seniors, helplessly sat by as the bubbling tension between mother and brother burst into nothing. The firewood burned steadily in the hearth. And the gloom in the kitchen receded to the dark corners where a sack of charcoal and a bundle of firewood stood. Outside, it had grown utterly dark, still drizzling steadily.

II

Often times Ali wondered whether in quitting school he was making the right decision. His decision wasn't prompted by any other reason than to follow in Amate's footsteps. Amate had gone to Kampala when he was fifteen. Ali was only seven then but he could remember how, as a child, he adored Amate. It was Amate, who when Ali was hardly six, would take him along to the pasture whenever it was his turn to graze the cattle. The kraal was three miles from home. But to Ali, it felt so far away. And the farther village fell behind them, the more the landscape felt exotic. Ali adored Amate for ushering him into that new, adventurous pasture-world.

He fancied coming back with stories to tell. He'd heard a lot of tales, from far away jungles. He'd heard, for instance, of jumping *cocodo* snakes that preferred to bite one around the neck; of huge mambas that simply blew out their venom at an intruder because they are too lazy to bite; of cases where people had to cut their way out of a python's belly with a razorblade or a penknife they were luckily carrying when they got swallowed. Ali stole a blade from his father's razor—he couldn't think of a sharper one—and slipped it into his pocket. But this didn't soothe his fears. The forest was awash with many other meaner creatures. There were bearded monkeys who handed one a vine of a whip and kept a thorny one for himself and challenge one to a flogging match; and birds whose songs one couldn't imitate lest one's mother dies; and leopards that crouched on high boughs all day long, waiting. They'd leap down and peel the scalp off one's nape all the way to the face if one provoked it, cast a glance at it. The jungle was a desolate place; even if one cried out for help, no one would hear the cry.

Along the way to the kraal, they rarely met people. Thick bushes stretched on either side of the narrow track. Ali parted his way through the wayside grass that the storms flattened across the track. Time and again, Amate crouched down to examine a snake track left on the sand, and boldly say, "This one's a mamba's." A short distance away he spotted another slithery track and say, "This one's just a rattlesnake's."

Inwardly, Ali was glad they didn't encounter the snake itself. Having Amate by his side was reassuring for he'd no fear at all. At least he didn't betray it. But Ali felt exposed each time Amate had to track a bird or a hare deep into the bush. He'd tell Ali to squat down and make no noise and he'd duck into the thicket, leaving Ali all alone. Those were Ali's scariest moments.

And once they were out grazing the animals, Ali hardly ever saw Amate. He seldom appeared, and even so, only to change the course the herds were taking; or to bark at Ali for following the cattle too closely, rushing them along. And he'd vanish once again. Amate told Ali over and over how the herds couldn't graze if he kept following them too closely. And that if he wanted to make himself busy, all he needed to do was to keep an eye on the dominant cow. But doing so meant walking ahead of the herds, tearing his way through thickets, for the dominant cow grazed at the head of the herds. Ali preferred to follow the track that the herds had already beaten.

Grazing the herds was a gratifying adventure in itself. Ali discovered many wonders. There, for instance were rodents' worn-out tracks along which he set snares

and birds' nests from which he amassed his collection of eggs. If the eggs had already hatched, he waited for the fledglings to feather, take them home, and put them in a self-made nest so he could raise them by himself.

But Amate added to the fun. He didn't pack any food from home. Instead, he relied on his hunting. He was always good with his catapult and snares. So there was always a bird or a rodent to roast. Ali also learned from Amate how to set fire that would spark out long after they had left the scene. They set the fire in the swamp but the inferno always overran the adjoining bushes, burning all the way to the end of the forest where the earth touched the sky. There, several miles away, it'd merge with other fires whose dark smokes lined the horizon and the forest became one with the skies. By then, Ali would no longer be able to tell their fire from the others.

Back in the kraal, Amate milked the cows and gave Ali a cup of cold milk and another cup to take home. By the time they'd make it back home, it'd be making five o'clock and Ali would be utterly spent. His mother would affect anger at Amate for taking Ali to the pastures.

"Such a big man!" Amate said, regarding Ali admiringly. "Ask him if anybody forced him to go to the pasture. Ali," he said, regarding Ali who, wanting to be left out of the affected quarrel, scratched the ground with his big toe, gripping his jug of milk under his armpit. "Did anyone ask you to go the pasture?"

Ali, torn between the need to say no and the filial disloyalty that implied, scratched the ground all the more, mumbling inaudibly. And Amate, apparently vindicated, said, "You see? Ali is a big man, growing up the proper way." Ali's heart warmed up whenever Amate painted him in those terms. "Ali," Amate would continue, "tell your Ma that you're now a big boy. Tell her that you won't stay at home to poke fire under the cooking pot."

Ali sneaked away and Amate said, "Your boy's a rare one. And I know you're quietly proud of him."

"Don't say that, Amate," said Iyer, Ali's mother, with an affected sternness, "when you well know you're robbing the child of his childhood."

"You better believe that the boy knows what he wants," Amate said as he proceeded with the rest of the milk to his grandfather's place where he lived, another two hundred yards away. From there the milk would later be shared among the families of his grandfather's four sons.

Iyer never complained whenever she saw Ali trotting after Amate as he went to the pasture. But she dutifully protested when the pair returned home in the evening. Ali wasn't bothered by his mother's concerns. If she were serious, she would have just beaten him instead of complaining to Amate.

Amate was fifteen then. And that was to be his last year in the village. It'd take months before the village could realize that he had migrated to Kampala. No one knew why decided on such a step. And Amate never drew anybody into his confidence. All he ever said about the matter, three years when he visited, was that no one would have stopped him even if anyone had learned about his plan before he'd left.

When Amate left for the capital, all the excitement of going to the pasture died out for Ali. In any case, none of his cousins was keen on taking him along. Years

later, he would only do it out of duty, after he'd grown old enough to begin taking turns grazing the herds. He was then thirteen.

Throughout that time, Amate hardly ever visited home. But Ali thought about him all the time, wondering what must have prompted him to leave for the capital. And the more he thought about Amate, the more Ali himself began to entertain the idea of leaving the village for the capital. But the mere thought of it struck him as absurd at the beginning.

At fourteen, however, he began to believe that the only way he'd ever be fulfilled, would be to follow in Amate's footsteps.

He was fifteen when he reached form three in high school. And he felt it was the right time to quit. The urge was so strong it left him restless. But another inner voice urged him to first sit his certificate examination just a year away. And then he would be free to join Amate in the capital if he still wanted. But then he would be sixteen. Amate was fifteen, and in form three, when he left for the capital. Ali didn't know what prompted Amate to quit school. But he knew that if he didn't leave at fifteen, he would never be able to leave thereafter. He just knew it.

III

Once he'd parted from Ali, Ringa felt a sudden surge of energy rippling through him. It was as though his spirit itself was dancing inside his body. And he felt like bursting into a fervent, soulful song. Or somersaulting all the way home. Or punching the air until he broke into a sweat. He felt the urge to round up the entire village and break before them the great news of his impending journey to Kampala. Or grab the parish priest himself and shove him to the pulpit and have him preach that good tidings to his packed congregation. He had never felt so elated.

In some strange way, he felt that together with Ali, they'd made some vital headway; that the last milestone to their destination had already fallen behind them; and that the following day, or the day after, at the very latest, the village would be history. Kampala, he could feel, was beckoning him. He would have loved to dash to Ali's hut and cast one last glance at the life-like pictures of it, or at least some of its alluring streets and buildings and sites, plastered all over the wall, complete with people and traffic and malls and sundry all the details that make for a big city. His mind conjured up the pictures of the multistoried The Republican House and Bank of Uganda and the imposing Post Office Building and Bowman's House and Sheraton Hotel, etc, etc. And also the green, idyllic giant poster of the Constitutional Square, with prostitutes and thieves and idlers lying all over its cool tufts; and the magnificent Ruwenzori Courts and East African Developing Bank, forming its background; and a long stretch of Kampala Road with its magnificent structures, seeming to have sprung from a dreamland, etc, etc. They were all very fascinating, with people milling about, all looking busy and important.

Ali and Ringa, they'd examined those pictures several times already but it didn't tire them to go over it time and again. And every time, they discovered something

new, something more absorbing. That way, they became so impatient that every day they had to spend in the village began to feel like a wasted year.

But the village would soon be just another bad memory he'd excise from his mind.

A purpose—indeed, a sense of accomplishment—propelled him along, adding an extra spring to his gait.

And before he knew it, he was home.

Home was terribly modest any which way one looked at it. There were only two structures. The bigger one had three little rooms, a single door and two windows, and contained what passed for a kitchen and a bedroom for his father and, well, a store; and the other was Ringa's hut—oblong and grass-thatched, standing several feet away. Nothing captured the gulf between father and son better than that between their respective dwellings.

The father was a carpenter-cum-smith-cum-constructor. Not that he had any workshop as such. By the very nature of his work, which had to do with mainly repairs, he always traversed the village and whoever needed his service—and people only realized that much whenever he happened to pass by—would engage him on the spot. Sometimes all he had to do was to knock a nail into a piece of wood. Or fix the broken leg of some grime-coated table. Or replace a sheet or two that a storm had blown off. True, some people would even follow him to his home if their need was that desperate. And oh! They'd clinch the best bargain they could. Actually, they often ended up paying him nothing at all. Or a tiny fraction of a previous transaction to tickle the repairman just a little. In effect, he was always running after them to collect his dues. But most of them ended up simply offering him a meal as a way of tacitly settling a transaction. In short, he led a terribly precarious existence.

The son wanted nothing to do with the father's trade. And he expressed that distaste in no uncertain terms; making it clear, for instance, that he'd run no errand for his father nor deliver any message from clients. To show him how wrong that attitude was his father, a naturally soft man, would quietly make sure not to put any food on the table. But Ringa blamed all such failings on his father's contemptible profession. He had long ceased to expect much from his father anyway. And they rarely bothered one another. Any exchange between them was matter-of-fact.

That evening, home was palpably quiet. It mostly was, anyway, for father and son led quite a simple existence and no pet, no guest, indeed no creature, was a welcome presence.

When Ringa noticed upon entering his hut that his already-packed bag was missing and its contents scattered on the floor, he didn't have to second-guess who the culprit was. That it was no thief that did it was instantly clear to him for, except for his new canvas shoes, nothing else was missing. He headed straight to his father's house uncertain about what exactly he expected to find there.

The storing room was exactly as it always was. A bundle of metal plates here and there. A disorderly pile of pans waiting to be mended or returned. A stack of furniture. A bundle of dried papyrus fiber... The kitchen, too, was just the way it always was. A couple of water-filled jerry cans. A stack of unwashed plates and a heap of pans. A basket here. A sack there. Used polythene bags scattered all over the floor... And in the dark, windowless bedroom, the air was stuffy and reeked of

tobacco and stale sweat, with cigarette stubs scattered all over the floor and the bundle of *abuka* hanging from one corner of the roof. Ringa always marveled at whether it was the room that smelled like his father or his father like the room. The distinctive smell infected everything associated with his father—his room, his clothes, his tools, even his trail. There was a cloth line across the room from which the old man's clothes haphazardly hung. And whatever wasn't on the line was scattered all over the unmade bed. In the middle of the room was a small table, the only furniture in the room, on top of which lay a match box, a smoking pipe, an exercise book, and a manufacturer's tag that Ringa immediately recognized as having been yanked off his bag. Other than the tag, there was nothing unusual in the bedroom. Ringa picked up the tag and decisively put it back again.

"This is provocation," Ringa said to himself. He didn't even bother to focus his mind on where his father must have gone just in case some foolish idea got into the old man's head.

Back in his hut, Ringa kept wondering what his father needed his bag for. Why he didn't use his older bag if he really wanted to carry something in it. And why he had to scatter his stuff all over the dusty floor. And his canvas shoes! What did he need his canvas shoes for? He'd better come back with a very good explanation for that wanton invasion.

For a long time, he lay in his bed unable to sleep. All the deprivations he'd had to put up with owing to his father's failings raged in his mind like dry-season whirlwinds. It was as though the improvident father read his mission in life as consisting in nothing but tying his fate with that of his son. But Ringa had no doubt in his mind that he was cut for a very different destiny altogether. He was ready to do whatever it took to banish any possibility of ever sharing his father's lot. Fate has assigned each man his own track to follow—the old man his, and he, Ringa, his own. And he wouldn't look kindly to any disruption as he got set to start off the journey.

Ringa couldn't tell how long he'd waited when he eventually heard his father's unmistakable drunken voice, singing from a distance. But by some insidious instinct or sheer panic, he leapt out of bed and darted out as though the old man was standing right there by the doorway. The voice again trailed off into the quiet night. Ringa trained his ears for a while and again he picked its crescendo. It was sporadic. He recognized the drunken song his father reserved for his most joyous occasions.

The old man was still far away. But Ringa waited, becoming increasingly impatient and agitated.

Ringa's flashlight caught him, when he finally showed up, zagging and zigging the narrow pathway that led into the compound. The first thing Ringa noted was that his father had no bag with him. He charged at the old man and demanded where he'd left the bag.

The drunk was taken aback and for a moment he seemed to wonder what the young man was talking about.

"The bag..." he said, as though the subject was farfetched. "What bag are you talking about?"

Ringa shone the flashlight into the father's face as and the drunk swayed left and right, trying to shield his face from the piercing brightness. And Ringa, who was in no mood for haggling, grabbed the old man by hand and dragged him to his hut.

“Look at what you did to my things,” he said pointing at his belongings which were still lying all over the floor. “I want my bag, right now. And don’t let me ask for it twice or you won’t like the outcome.”

“Then that’s what they call dead...”

A ferocious blow to his jaws cut off the flow of words. And the old man, shaken, spat on the floor in two quick successions. And Ringa, his tone trembling with fury, made several quick demands which the drunk couldn’t, or wasn’t willing to, divulge. And out of frustration, he pounded him until the drunk couldn’t as much as groan. When his rage had finally abated, the drunk, sprawled on the floor, was merely gasping, with blood flowing out of both his mouth and nose.

He tried sitting him up but the battered man was as flaccid as a scarecrow understuffed with straw. When he tried dragging the unconscious man to his own room, the flailing arms and sagging neck and dripping blood made him panic.

There was only one person he could turn to; only one person who could understand his plight. And laying his father carefully on his side, he quietly shut the door behind him and headed off to Ali.

IV

Ali was lying on his back, still unable to fall asleep. The darkness in the room was so thick one could punch a hole through it. And Ali, like a fossil, was buried deep beneath its piles. Then there were two knocks on the door.

“It’s me, Ringa; open up!”

Ali leapt out of bed and pulled back the door, vaguely surprised that he could, that easily, tear through the thick darkness. Ringa stepped in—a dark, solid shape framed by the gaping door that opened into the dark-gray night. He shone his flashlight at his feet but instantly switched it off again.

“What’s the matter, man?” Ali said from his cushion of darkness, his low and wary voice betraying a deep anxiety.

“My old man,” Ringa breathlessly said, “he’s bleeding all over.”

“What happened?” Ali said, his wooden-bed creaking from his weight as he slumped into it.

“We got to do something, man—quick!” Ringa said.

“What the hell happened?” Ali said, stretching out the words.

“Man, everything is just so messed up! I just don’t know... But come on!” Ringa said, stepping outside. “We got to do something.”

Ali closed his door quietly behind him and, without any further question, followed Ringa out into the night. Two shapes trudging through the soggy pathway with only their squelching shoes disturbing the quiet night. They walked thus for a long time, each coiled into his own silence, until Ringa eventually spoke again.

“My old man,” he said, “he just messed up everything! My bag, my canvas—he traded them off for booze.”

Ali said nothing and Ringa carried on.

“He returned home drunk, dead drunk, just a few minutes ago. And I’m like ‘What the hell happened to my bag? My new canvas?’ and he’s like, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’ And I’m like, ‘Look here, Pa, don’t pretend you know nothing about my bag and my canvas.’ And I ask him over and over again and he swears he’s no clue as to what I’m ranting about.”

Still, Ali didn’t interrupt.

Ringa, getting more agitated, detailed his friend, not without embellishment, on how he recovered the manufacturer’s tag from his bag on his father’s table; how his father provocatively said it must have been some mouse that took it there; how he warned his father not to provoke him any further; and how his father, bursting into his drunken guffaw, said, “Then that’s what they call a deadlock.”

“What would you have done with such a freaking fellow?” Ringa said, his voice tinged with righteous indignation.

“Well,” Ali evasively said, “I feel you did the only thing there was to be done.”

“I just wanted him to be frank with me. That’s all.”

“My old man,” Ali flatly said after a while, “he bothers me too, you know—all the time.”

“Ever thought of shaking him up a little?”

“Nope!” Ali said emphatically. “In my case it’s a little different, you know.”

Ringa couldn’t tell whether Ali’s remark was an indictment or a confession of hopelessness.

And none of them said anything more.

Back in Ringa’s room, they found the drunk lying on his back, his clothes sticking to his body. He was breathing in labored gasps, his mouth hanging open as that of a dead fish. The two friends decided to carry him to his own bedroom, praying nothing serious should happen to him.

“They can snatch you for this, you know?” Ali said.

“Man,” Ringa said, “don’t say that! The last thing I want to think about is being locked up in some dingy cell.”

“It doesn’t matter. The question is: what are you going to *do*?”

“I really don’t know. That’s why we got to set off as quick as we can.”

“As we work things out, you must lie low. I’ll try to keep a close eye on things.”

“Oh, my old man,” Ringa said, “he messed things up pretty bad.”

“And *you*, you got to concentrate on how to wriggle your way out of it.”

Ringa still couldn’t help wondering whether things would have turned out any differently had his father been forthright about the bag. For in spite of everything, he had come to convince even himself that it was his father’s denials, and the sheer recklessness of it, that provoked him into responding the way he did. Everything just happened so fast and he couldn’t even say for sure that the bag had indeed been traded off for booze.

Anyway, none of that mattered anymore. When Ringa returned to his hut with Ali, they thoroughly cleaned up the mess, and Ringa packed his possession in his old bag and handed it to Ali with the understanding that he would, if it became necessary, board the bus at some point along the way. Ali would have to work out every detail of the journey, the day of their departure for Kampala...

It was not until Friday that Ali finally linked up with Amate. That in itself was only possible after he'd hinted to their contact—that man called Sendi—on Thursday that he actually wanted to strike some lucrative deal with Amate.

Ali was also to learn that the elementary negotiation skills he hatched up in the course of trying to link up with Amate was extremely vital when dealing with city folks. And that included Amate, too. The lesson was quick. When, as a village chap, he tactlessly told Amate in the course of their phone conversation that he wanted to join him in Kampala, Amate was taken aback in his reaction. “What do you mean you want to come to Kampala?” He said.

“I got a small problem to fix,” Ali said.

“What problem?” Amate said. “You mean you can't fix from there?”

“I broke a school microscope, man,” Ali said. He hadn't really thought of anything of the sort beforehand. But at school, students were always telling their parents about one expensive textbook they lost or another. And the parents would oblige, albeit with some harsh admonitions. The pattern wasn't hard to replicate, except that Amate wasn't a parent and not so long ago, he had been a student himself.

“Just pay them some money,” Amate said. “The teachers love the money. Just talk with money. And if you're smart about it, you'll even get away with some balance for yourself.”

“You don't understand, Amate,” Ali said. “It's the H.M. I'm dealing with”

“Who said the Headmaster hates money. The Headmaster, man, he's the best to do business with!”

“It's not that easy, man.”

“So what do you want? How much it cost?”

“About sixty K, I think,”

“Sixty K, Ali? As in *sixty thousand* shillings?”

“That's right, but I got the money.”

“You got the money,” Amate said, turning over the phrase in his mind. “You got *sixty thousand*, Ali? Did Zeei, The Boy give it to you?” Amate reserved Pa for Grandpa with whom he spent much of his childhood and called his own father, who was also Ali's father, Zeei, The Boy.

“No,” Ali warily said. “It wasn't Pa that gave it to me. I was working over the vac.”

“Well, I guess with sixty K you'll get a pretty good microscope. But you got to be careful in Kampala. Here we have folks who leave their homes in the morning, you think they're going to office? Well, unless you call streets offices. And once on the streets, all they do is look out for on the streets are people who aren't sure about themselves.”

“That's no problem. I'll know what to do.”

“You're saying you'll know what to do? Ever been to Kampala, Ali? Ever thought of a thief who can steal a belt from your waist, or a watch from your wrist, or

even the shoes from your feet—yes! Your shoes, Ali—without you suspecting a thing?”

“I’ll know what to do once I’m there.”

“God help you, Ali!” Amate said. “Saying you’ll know what to do once you’re here! You don’t start from here. You start from there! From the moment you step into a Kampala-bound bus. Those fellows you see in the bus are all city folks. They’re not your kin even though they may be speaking the same language with you. Wear tight shorts, you hear. Tight shorts with deep pockets. Inside your trousers. And keep all the money in the shorts, except what you’re going to need on the way. And don’t keep on patting the pockets either.”

Ali smiled to himself. It amused him to think that Amate still thought of him as the child he left behind eight years ago when he moved to Kampala. Not that the stories about Kampala thieves didn’t abound in the village and upcountry towns. But they were mostly stories told to while away time, stories told to the gullible. He, Ali could see through them.

Anyhow, that was Ali’s quick lesson just before he left for Kampala. Amate gave him the day on which to come, a Saturday, and instructing him to take a midday bus which would arrive in the capital between four and five o’clock.

Ringa had run into hard luck and had taken to hiding. Julio Obete, a friend to his father, who always brought his farm tools to have them fixed, had dropped by on the Thursday morning following Ringa’s incident with his father. When Julio didn’t get any response upon calling out to Ogal Curamac, that is, the battered man, his instinct told him that something was wrong. He was certain that Ringa was in his hut. But when he called out to him, Ringa, too, didn’t respond. He decided to let himself into the old man’s house. The door wasn’t locked.

Inside, Curamac was groaning as though he’d die the next minute. Julio approached warily, but could barely make out the groaning man in the dark. Loudly, he called out to him without moving any closer. No response. He stood around, aimlessly, for another minute or two. The groaning didn’t dissipate. And Julio as though on a cue, turned abruptly and headed out. Ringa’s hut, which a short while ago had its door open, was suddenly locked. Julio proceeded straight to the Chairman, Local Council I and made a report on what he saw.

When no one could locate Ringa so as to get an account of what had taken place, he became the prime suspect. The Council’s Security Secretary, a burly ex-soldier who lived alone not far away, took up the urgent task of locating Ringa.

Ali met Ringa at an old barn late in the evening of Friday after the phone conversation with Amate. Everything had turned out well and they finally had their departure date set.

“We’ll live by a midday bus,” Ali said to Amate who listened nervously. The presence of another around him, even Ali’s, left him exposed.

“Well,” he said, “So how do we link up?”

“It would be a good idea for you to board somewhere along the way; like from Loro. You got to be there by midday.”

“Fine, midday, at Loro. Catch you tomorrow, then.”

That was their last moment together in the village.

On the Saturday, Ali himself boarded Luxury Coach from Corner Aboke, expecting to that Ringa would join him at Loro, the next major trading center. The bus stopped at Loro. But only a couple and an elderly woman boarded. And all the way, Ali kept wondering what had become of Ringa.

When Ali arrived at Buganda Bus Park, he found Amate waiting for him. Ali was dressed in scruffy khakis with a white T-shirt inside, and a creamy cap, pulled low over his face, and gripping a rolling safari bag under his right armpit, and carrying two chickens in his left hand.

“You made it, man!” Amate said, patting Ali on the right shoulder, and helping him with the bag. Taxicab drivers swarmed around them, shoving car keys in their faces, each desperately trying to woo them to his car. Amate grabbed Ali’s hand, saying, “Just follow me.”

They slipped behind the park and immediately, the magnificent structures quickly fell behind them. All around them were decrepit food shacks with more tunnels than pathways running between them. The shacks were stuffed with green plantains and stoves and charcoal sacks and unwashed pans and plates. Ali imagined that the shacks could easily collapse once one tried to clean or tidy them up. As they skirt their way through the slimy bog on the ground, a swarm of fat, green flies buzzed around them and Ali wondered how one could prepare a meal there without tens of them ending up in it.

Soon, they came to a dirt street, lined with small one-storied shops, dealing in vehicle and motorcycle spare parts. “This is the Kisekka Market you hear so much about,” Amate said, slowing down to project his voice above the din. Ali had heard nothing about Kisekka Market and Amate, as though guessing that much, said “There’s no vehicle spare part you can’t get here—all reconditioned, of course.” To Ali, the market was more like one convoluted garage. What with all that burnt engine oil sticking underfoot and abandoned spare parts lying everywhere? “Here,” Amate continued, “you’ll run into Kenyans and Somalis and Tanzanians and Rwandese and Congolese and Sudanese, name it. They all flock here. You know why? Dealing off the spares they’ve stolen from their own countries. And looking for spare parts that cost fortunes back in their countries. All these fellows you see milling around you are nothing but consummate thieves. Allow any of them rub against you and you’re done for.”

Ali fidgeted, for right behind him some irritating fellow had for a while been nudging him with his sweaty palm as though impatient for an opportunity to overtake him. Ali had tried to shake off the fellow before admitting that that was part of the inconvenience one had to put up with in such a crowded place.

Along the street were vehicles with misaligned wheels and bodies, running obliquely and struggling to stay on the street; vehicles groaning and coughing plumes of dark smoke as they hobbled along, infecting the air with a piercing smell of burnt fuel; vehicles rooted to one spot and revving as the drivers-cum-mechanics tinkered with the engine, holding up the bonnet with their backs and standing on their toes; vehicles being pushed along by three or four drunken, muscular men, shouting profanities to marshal up enough strength.

Struggling with the vehicles for the right of way were bikes and motorbikes, some carrying three people, some carrying four; there were vehicles parked on the

pavement with their bumpers almost inside the shop doors. It was hard to make out the demarcation between what was the street and what was the pavement. But from the patches of asphalt sticking out from large potholes and the broken slabs half-buried in the mud, Ali could second-guess between the street and the pavement. The riders and drivers and even pedestrians, on their parts, seemed to have long ceased to care. The riders of bikes and motorbikes were honking at the pedestrians along what should have been the pavement; and the pedestrians negotiating their way in between speeding vehicles on what should have been the street.

Amate was leading the way. Ali was following right behind him. And Amate turned to him every once in a while to make sure that no one had squeezed in between them. And he'd say, "We'll be home shortly."

If Ali was surprised, he didn't betray it. He didn't ask Amate whether they were going to board at some point.

The last time Amate visited the village—Ali was nine then—he'd said folks in Kampala use taxis even for the shortest distance. He was at his father's home, and to illustrate his point, he said to one would have to board a taxi even for a distance as short as to Pa's—meaning Grandpa's—home, just two hundred yards away. Ali knew that they had walked well over a mile already, and in any case, he didn't see any taxi in that far-flung corner of the city. But he did not ask any question.

"Home isn't far at all," Amate said, "You only need to know your shortcuts."

Ali had never bothered to ask what Amate was doing in the city. No one cared really. In any case, for the eight years he had been in the city, Amate had visited home only twice. And each of those times, he came in a military Land Rover, with Eron, his distant cousin who was an army sergeant, with lots of money to splash around. He frequented drinking joints and always left everyone happy. During his last visit, for instance, he said it saddened him to see anyone miserable around him. To ask such a man what he was doing in the city amounted to sheer impudence.

Finally, they reached home. All Ali could remember, from the moment they left the park, was just one sprawling slum, riddled with filth and garbage. A pungent smell hung constantly in the air, if not from rank urine and excreta, then from a decaying animal; if not from a decaying animal, then from a broken, overflowing sewer. They left the city behind—structures towering against the skyline.

Amate said, "Well, here we are!" And Ali thought to himself, "*So, this is home!*" Amate set down the bag he was carrying, skeptically regarding Ali. The hovel he'd declared for a home had walls that were built in part from mud and wattle, in part with rusticated tins and in part—the side the rain seldom beat—with cardboard pieces. Its roof was a patchwork of little pieces of rusticated, galvanized iron sheets that had been mended with wax. Ali sighed, excusing it as fatigue. A favorite saying of his father's, that once you've made for yourself a bed, you must sleep in it, rang in his mind.

Amate bent down and shook the door left and right and the whole panel came off its hinges. He turned to Ali, a discomfited smile on his face, and said, "That's how it is. But it's okay."

Ali thought, "*How can that be okay?*" but aloud, he said, "That's no problem."

"Sure you don't mind it, Ali?"

“Why should I mind?” Ali said rather defensively. “I’m not some kind of snob, you know.”

“To survive here in Kampala,” Amate said, “you got to be tough. You’ll see for yourself.”

“*Of course, you got to be tough,*” Ali thought. He found it strange that Amate should belabor the point. He took a deep breath, releasing it haltingly. “I’m damn exhausted,” he said listlessly.

“The step you’ve taken,” Amate said, “is no small thing. A real rite of passage, if you will. Don’t ever forget that. There’s no other way to welcome you into the new life. You’re smart enough, of course. And I know you’ll pick up quite fast.” There was no question in his mind that, having had the curtains of the squalid slum life lifted up for him, Ali had already taken the first step of his initiation into the life; there was no turning back.

Ali, on his part, had that creepy feeling that he’d just been initiated into a bond of shame; that in following Amate into the heart of the slum, he’d elected to yoke his destiny to his brother’s. He tried to visualize the long-winded track from the park to the final bend leading up to the hovel Amate declared for a home, his heart pounding erratically as he dreaded the possibility that he might never again be able to retrace his steps. Doubts and worries raged through his mind as he contemplated the choices he was left with. Amate, meanwhile, took care of the money and by some tacit agreement nothing was ever again said about the microscope. It was an arrangement that, in spite of Ali’s confusion, suited both. And though the money was sweet, it was over in about a week. But for as long as the money lasted, the true city life, as Amate referred to it, remained a mirage to Ali.

VI

For much of his first day in the Kampala, Ali remained indoors having declined to return with Amate to the Old Taxi Park, downtown Kampala. With the decrepit shacks sprawling outside Buganda Bus Park and the tin-patched hovels that lined the way from the park still fresh in his mind, Ali felt he wasn’t ready for more of such sights.

“Well then,” Amate said unhurriedly, “catch you later in the evening. I’ll take you along so you can meet some cool guys out there.”

Ali grunted assent and Amate slipped out. Once he was alone, curiosity took the better of Ali even though there wasn’t much fodder for it. The hovel was largely bare. There was just one wooden bed, propped up with bricks on one end, with a thin mattress on top, its cover worn and in need of a thorough washing. A kerosene stove with small pans stacked on top of it occupied one corner, together with a couple of dust-coated cardboard boxes, piled one on top of another, and an empty tin for kerosene. Facing the bed was a couple of folding chairs encased in dust and cobwebs and a small table in front of them, with sachets of beans and *posho* on top of it. And there were about half a dozen unwashed plates, bowls and cups that must have become such ordinary features of the floor for crickets and roaches and spiders to find

in them safe heavens. Ali used the water he found in a ten-liter jerry-can to clean up the utensils and mop up the dust off the furniture. Then he began tearing down the cobwebs that, like shredded gossamers, hung from the roof and hidden corners of the hovel. A legion of agitated spiders scurried across the floor and the walls.

When Amate returned that evening, he immediately registered the stunning difference in the setup and the freshness inside his hovel. Looking around, there was that affected seriousness about his tone that betrayed his admiration of Ali's job when, grinning, he said, "Man, those cobwebs helped with the mosquitoes!"

In spite of themselves, they laughed it off and quite heartily, too. Amate instinctively felt for dust on the seat of one of the chairs before slumping down on it. Ali lay on the bed across from him. It was clear to each of them that the evening, after all, wasn't going to be as heavy as they had privately feared.

"Now, the first thing," Amate said, leaning forward and taking advantage of the cheerful mood while it lasted. "We got a cool joint somewhere around here where everybody hangs out at. Sendi—you know Sendi, of course—the one you've been calling. He'll be there with a bunch of other fellas. Very interesting, every one of them. There're some of the fellas there you can depend on. And, of course, those who won't blink to tell you, one way or another, not to bother them with your baggage. I'll show you every one of them. Good thing is Mama Mukyala, she's one remarkable woman. You'll see. She got no patience for any freaking mean guy. All we got to do is say, 'Now Mama Mukyala, so and so, he's began acting pretty mean.' And she'd give the guy marching orders, *right away*. She takes us seriously, you know."

"You mean she doesn't fear losing customers?" Ali asked.

"We're the customers!" Amate said, drawing back his head with a downward tilt of his forehead. "What else you think I mean *we*? Some of the fellas there have stuck with Mama Mukyala for well over ten years! Ten faithful years and counting. Mama Mukyala, she do just fine with us. If a fella don't show up, we stand in for him. It's not just drinking, drinking, you know. Keeping together is more like it. It's like what the *balokole* call fellowship. Here in the capital you learn how important that is. You don't want a wolf among you, you know. That's the point of it. Even during the toughest of months, we try to stand by one another so Mama Mukyala, she isn't tempted to add in more fellas. And to tell you the truth, she too knows how valuable we are. But we let her think it's all her show. She likes acting tough, you know."

"That's just because she has yet run into somebody equally tough. Say, what would she do if a guy simply turns a deaf ear to those marching orders of hers?"

"You just don't know who you're talking about. That's what. Once this burly guy, he visited the joint. So burly, he carried himself with the swagger of a champion. Elbows curving outwards. Neck puffed and striated with muscles and vessels. Biceps almost bursting and arms lined with vessels. So he sat there with us and he begins acting funny. Like, just two, three tots and he's a story of his own to match anything anyone says. 'What are you talking about?' he'd cut in. 'There was *this* guy...' or 'There was *in fact* this time when...' Now, anybody can stand, of course. But as the evening wore on, his tongue loosened some more and he got nastier still, trashing whatever anyone said. And he'd be like, 'Where the hell you get such garbage from?' or 'Why you let them fool you?' or '*I* for one...' Now, a real nice guy won't mind you boring him stiff. But, call me a liar if you will, he won't allow you piss on his

head as well.” So, this guy, he didn’t only begin calling everybody a fool. He said he just couldn’t stand the crap that kept reeling off of everyone’s mouth. Yeah! he said that. ‘Oh, come on!’ he’d say, ‘Just shut the hell up!’ What do you bet we did; ram a fist into the guy’s jaw? No! We alerted Mama Mukyala. We told her, ‘There’s some guy here. He allowed the *iguli* get into his head and he’s spewing out a lot of stupidities.’ Now one thing you must know about Mama Mukyala. She can’t stand a drunk. She can’t! Yeah! She’ll sell you *iguli* but she won’t allow you get drunk. Not on her premises. ‘If you feel you’re getting tipsy,’ she always says, ‘just get up quietly and leave everybody in peace and walk straight home.’

“But this guy, he said he wasn’t spending anybody’s money. And Mama Mukyala, she said she doesn’t sell her liquor to folks who get drunk and begin talking gibberish. And this guy, he said in so many words that Mama Mukyala, she’s just a stupid old woman paying too much attention to the dumb, foolish talk of petty drunks all day long. And Mama Mukyala, she told him pretty nicely to leave quietly and stop insulting fellas who’ve done him no wrong. And this guy, he just said, he’s going nowhere. And Mama Mukyala said if it’s the money he’s fussing about, he can have it back. She counted the money from her sash and slammed it on the table in front of the guy. Now this guy, putting the money in his pocket, he said he doesn’t mind taking it back but he minds leaving before he feels like.

“You should have been there to see it for yourself. Mama Mukyala, she reached behind the fella and grabbed him by his belt, lifting him up in one swift move. And the guy, he began yelling, ‘Let go, let go of me you damn bitch!’ But Mama Mukyala, she just carried on as though she was dumb, dragging the fellow like a stuffed suitcase, his hands and legs flailing and barely touching the ground and shouting all the while, ‘Let go of me, damn bitch!’ And Mama Mukyala, she held his nose against the rough wall and chafed it some. That did the trick. And now Mama Mukyala, she headed off with him towards the main road. After a while, she stomped back as though nothing had happened. Clearing the tables of the empty glasses, she simply said, ‘I’m sorry for that little inconvenience.’ And we all chorused to her not to mention it.

“She must be one remarkable woman then,” Ali said, for want of something to say, secretly wondering what was factual and what Amate might have cooked up.

“Actually, during the Amin’s regime,” Amate said conspiratorially, giving weight to each word: he was vaguely displeased by the casualness with which Ali had brushed aside Mama Mukyala’s marvels. “During the Amin’s regime, she was actually working for the State Research Bureau, you know. Everyone knows that. But nobody say anything about it. You, too, you must strictly keep it that way. People, they say she has a cache of weapons buried under her floor. Even the security guys know it. But they don’t bother her. She’s now a law abiding citizen, you know. As a matter of fact,” Amate said, leaning forward, his voice falling to a barely audible whisper, “she’s actually an *informer*. Never say I didn’t tell you.”

“That’s fine of you. But, a person like me—why should I give a damn about any goddamn informer?”

“You’re one lucky fella, then,” Amate said, rising up. “Actually, you know what? We must be on our way. We’re late already.”

Ali wasn't particularly keen on meeting Sendi or any other patron at Mama Mukyala's joint for that matter. From what Amate had said thus far, they struck him as nothing but a bunch of drunks who weren't up to any good. But as a new kid in town, there was much wisdom in suspending judgment. So he obligingly set off with Amate along the dirt road that glided through the sprawling slum.

The orange sun, glowing at a narrow incline over the western horizon, lit up the dust that hovered over the hovels. They hit an asphalt road shortly and made a right turn. The setting sun fell behind them. Ahead of them was the twenty-four hour lively town of Wandegeya, Amate told Ali. The town was sparkling and full of life. The evening shoppers and traffic jammed the roads and sidewalks and every open space. They turned left on Bombo Road and walked on for a while before eventually taking a right turn. Wandegeya gave way to yet another world of hovels that stretched ahead of them.

"This is Katanga," Amate told Ali.

Dusk was beginning to set in. Mama Mukyala's bar was a cracked mud and wattle structure hidden behind a small, semi-finished commercial building boasting two front rooms. The rooms would've been shops had they been fitted with proper door panels. There were two corresponding unframed doors at the back whose edges were beginning to disintegrate. A solid brick wall of an adjoining building flanked one side of Mama Mukyala's structures, with the other end opening into yet another building whose construction had stalled for as long as the most senior of the patrons could remember. But it was occupied, nonetheless. The four structures framed a narrow quadrangle from where the patrons preferred to take their late evening drinks, weather permitting.

Amate entered the packed quadrangle with Ali in tow. There were four benches and four tables and eleven patrons and the man they called Watmon, projecting his voice above the din, was swearing by his foot as he tried to calm down the rest. "What will y'all do the day Mama Mukyala bans talking about women, soccer and land as well, hey?"

"You're just freakin' dumb," said another, "if you think Mama Mukyala has stopped anybody from talking politics here."

"If I'm freakin' dumb, what that make you? A freakin' jackass or what?"

"Okay, okay," Amate said as he showed Ali to a bench that had only two patrons on it. "I got a guest," he added as he himself squeezed himself on another bench. "He's my *ka* bro, you know. You don't want to spoil his first night at the joint."

A tall stocky woman, with a thickset neck, wearing a yellow headscarf with red strips, pryingly materialized at the door of the mud and wattle structure. After training her eyes at the new arrivals, swinging her neck this way and that way as some birds of prey do, she again disappeared inside the house for a fleeting second before returning with a bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other.

"Who's that new fella you said you came along with?" she demanded of Amate as she poured him his drink, her voice deep and authoritative.

"Oh, that's my *ka* bro, Mama Mukyala. Just come from the village." And by way of general introduction, he added, "His name is Ali."

"Well, Ali, this is *the* Kampala." The man seated next to Ali said, patronizingly patting him on the back. "And you're most welcome!"

“That’s Sendi, Ali.” Amate said. Judging by his thighbones, that stretched by Ali’s, Sendi was anywhere from five-eight, athletic and medium-built, his head shaved low, and his eyes hawkish. “And these others,” continued Amate, indicating the others patrons by a wave of his hand, “are all buddies. You’ll see them better tomorrow by daylight.”

“Thanks, Sendi. It a pleasure meeting you and everybody.”

“And I’m the one they called Peddler. Why have to wait for the freakin’ daylight to see me by? I’ll be damned if you can’t you see me from there.”

The Peddler, he sat on the same bench with Amate, with an immensely built man between them.

“When dealing with Peddler,” Watmon said, “you’ll do well to remember one thing. Once he’s done saying, ‘What’s up?’ the rest will be goddamn lies. Don’t forget that!”

There was a hearty laughter. After it had subsided, Watmon added, “Just a short while ago, he was telling everyone here how he had a drink with Hon. Lubega, the MP himself. Now, if that doesn’t pull down the heavens, I’ll live forever on this world of God!”

“But Peddler, why didn’t you simply say Hon. Lubega, he bought you a drink?”

“Or that Hon. Lubega, he drove by as you fellas were drinking!”

Another hearty bout of laughter followed and Watmon, clapping his thighs said, “So if the Big Man himself, he fly over here just now, now in his presidential chopper tomorrow I go tell the next fella I run into that the Big Man, he had a drink with me? Ha! ha! ha! What a fella!”

“You Amate, you better tell your *ka* bro to watch his back. This Peddler here, he can take a man to the market and come back counting his bucks.”

“The problem with y’all,” said Peddler, rubbing his knees, “you got no good sense at all. A fella tells you what y’all need to know. And you go trampling it as a pack of brazen lies! Remember what y’all said when I told about those poor fellas in Katanga, how they’d surely be evicted? You said who’d waste his money building a mega hostel in a godforsaken place like Katanga? Now, two, three years, I want to hear any of you fellas here pretend that those giant structures right there in the heart of Katanga, they’re the good old hovels turned into hostels.

“Well, now, Peddler,” the massively built man seated next to Peddler said. “Eviction is eviction. Happens all the time. No one would argue with you about that. But this thing about Government grabbing everybody’s land! That, sure, is a strange one.”

“What’s so strange about it, hmm?” Peddler said. “It’s not as if Government, it’ll just come today and knock on your door and say, ‘Now, Mr. Wasswa, I’ve decided to take over your property. Can you fuck off or I stick my boots into your ass.’ No! Government, it does it as quietly as a mouse nibbling at the sole of your feet as you fart in your sleep. And before you know it, you can’t tell whether you’re the landlord or the tenant anymore. They use statutes and bills and laws.”

“Who cares?” the patron called Wasswa said. “If I’m a tenant and I can no longer tell whether I’m also the landlord, what’s so bad about that?”

“That the point!” Sendi said. “If entering my house or my land will make you a virtual owner, I’d be a goddamn fool to let you in to begin with. I go without money, yes! But you’ll have to bear with the elements.”

“That’s right,” Peddler said, ‘But even there, you’re stretching it a bit too far, Sendi. No freaking tenant is turn into any bloody landlord. Or even feel like he’s anything other than what he really is—a freaking tenant. This thing about failing to tell between the tenant and the landlord, it’s merely what they want to make you think so you be on their side. How you think a poor bugger like you, you’ll acquire property all of a sudden and become like a landlord?’”

“There, I agree with Peddler,” said Watmon. “With or without any freaking bill, I won’t wake up morning with a roof over my head.”

“Now, this is something!” said Wasswa. “Peddler, idly lying with his legs on the wall, he dreams up stuff. And y’all shout your voices hoarse over that. Tomorrow, Peddler will boldly tell you some weird radio channel, it’s just reported that the heavens, it’ll be crushing into the earth. And you’ll tear one another into shreds over that!”

“Goddammit, fellas!’ Amate said, “Can’t we just drink! Whether Peddler met Hon. Lubega in a dream or they simply crossed paths or...or he saw him and thought about booze, it isn’t something we should be shouting to the heavens at.”

A mobile food vendor entered the quadrangle and the patrons made their orders. Amate ordered plate of *katogo* for himself and another for Ali. “That’s something you got to try, Ali,” he said. “It isn’t like anything you’re used to, you know.”

The *katogo* was a cocktail of chopped plantains steamed in groundnut sauce, with tiny pieces of beef sprinkled in it. Not a bad taste at all, Ali felt, after hesitantly taking the first bite. The vendor headed off after she’d served everyone around.

“So Peddler,’ said the massively built man, “What did your friend, Hon. Lubega tell you about what Government’s up to with this land and property thing?”

“That’s a complicated one,” Peddler said, warming up at the question. “To tell you the truth, he said they’ve hired some smart legal fellas to write up a land bill, you know, like a small constitution. It’s all very secretive stuff, of course. But just keep your ears to the ground. Before long, strange things will start happening.”

“All you people are still young,” said Mama Mukyala from her door where she’d positioned herself. “That’s why you talk like that about land. I’ve been around these things for a while so you can take my word for it.” Here, her voice dropped to a whisper, yet, like a medium’s, unmistakably clear. “When you see them politicians begin messing up with land, you know that they’re just cloyed with power and aren’t thinking properly anymore. This entire thing about land, it’s just a design to dispossess and tame the Kabaka and his ministers and chiefs. No one really gives a damn about the poor tenant. They’ll have to face up to one landlord or another. But no one ever plays with the land and get away with it.”

She spoke with a kind of finale, pouted her lips affectedly and averted her head from the patrons as though daring any of them to challenge her. Hanging in the air was that feeling that she knew more than she was letting on. But no one took her on. Among the patrons there were those who insisted that Mama Mukyala was an informer. They’d back off from any sensitive conversation in which she showed an interest. But there were also those who equally insisted that she was, at heart, a

diehard monarchist, who'd flare up against anyone who tried to tinker with land and property.

For the rest of that evening, the patrons resorted to rather trivial topics, and their voices, lubricated by more tots, rose to a discordant din. The food vendor returned for her plates and dues. And vendors of grilled chicken and of steamed groundnuts and of some aphrodisiac also made their rounds. It was ten o'clock when they eventually began to disperse.

VII

Ali would have been content to carry on as an unfathomable god, riding on those mysteries that, in the eyes of his ghetto neighbors, hung around him as though he'd just landed from spirit land. All day long, he confined himself indoors and the prying neighbors, fearing he wasn't well, knocked on his door to find out how he was. There was nothing the matter with him, he told them. They came and smoked their Sportsman cigarettes and ganja right in front of his door; they brought their sluts and tickled them in tender places and had them giggle and moan and coo for hours on end, hoping that would stir him up. Still, Ali didn't respond. And they brought their *tonto*, their *kasese*, their *lira-lira* and literally pitched camp by his doorway, waxing excited at the potency of the drink. The abundance of it! They couldn't have chosen a worse bait. The reality of a sprawling ghetto right at the foot of magnificent towers was such a revolting smudge on Ali's long-held image of Kampala. And if his first night at Mama Mukyala's bar left any impression on his mind, it was that damning realization that nothing good could ever come from all that drinking and idling and all the attendant pleasures that the patrons indulged in.

That Amate intended to exorcise from Ali's memory any fond attachment to the village that he was trying to cling to was clear enough to Ali. Just the previous evening, Amate had reminded him for the second time in as many days that the village could have been a better place for him but that he was presently in the city. That Amate wished him well wasn't something he doubted. And that Amate wanted to see him fully assimilated into to the life he'd cast his lot with was something he knew well too. He knew, too, that Amate acted towards him in good faith. Only, Ali was beginning to realize that they differed markedly on what each wanted from the city. Not that he cared to put in precise words what it was that Amate came to the city for—that would be a Sisyphean task. True, he admired Amate, before he came to Kampala. He admired his generosity, his confidence, his charm, his freeness of spirit, his sense of purpose. He admired the steadiness with which he rowed his life.

Ali wanted nothing less for himself. He'd follow in Amate's own footsteps and even bypass him should it become necessary. Now, having made it to Kampala, he realized that Amate was helplessly stuck in muck. Overtake him, he must, but by a detour.

It came as a relief to Ali that he could finally put a finger on the culprit that held Amate back. That he could forge an explanation for the existence in the very heart of the city of such squalor as Amate had, without intending it, dragged him into. All that

drinking and the vulgar *fellowship* he had to maintain! Not that Amate himself felt that any of this was bad. But Ali, on his part, had already decided that he wouldn't let Amate drag along him any further. His only dilemma was that Amate had all the money. Whenever he accompanied Amate to Mama Mukyala's bar, he convinced himself that he was following, not Amate, but the money, his own money which he'd entrusted to Amate's care.

But within a week the money ran out. It had served its purpose, smoothed—or to put it more crudely, paid for—his initiation into the new life. With that Amate stopped bothering him to adjust to the city life. The mystery that had surrounded Ali began to melt. His neighbors began slackening in their attempt to woo him into their number. And a new, uneasy, but urgent, feeling began creeping upon him. He felt that soon he'd be the one in a desperate need of that gesture of friendship the neighbors had been trying to extend towards him. He was both tempted and repelled by the need to get closer to them, to explore the world around the hovel. After all, were they any different from Amate and his gang?

With the money having run out, Amate became increasingly scarce. He would only return home late at night. Sometimes, he would bring home some snacks for Ali. But when things were tight, as it mostly was, he came back empty-handed. On such nights, he returned home very late. And it surprised and vexed him to find Ali still awake, waiting for him. Ali waited even when he'd given up any hope of Amate bringing him anything. He'd learnt to recognize the pattern. Amate pounded the door and began addressing him from outside whenever he had something to offer. By when he returned empty-handed, besides the lateness he'd, weakly and hesitantly knocked on the door twice or thrice and waited. Inside, Ali himself waited, uncertain as to whom the knocker was. And Amate tried to let himself in without having to bother Ali any further. Just as the door was beginning to crack, Ali would pull it back and Amate taking a step back, in an affected excitement, saying something along, "Hey man, everybody was asking me what happened to you!"

"I just didn't feel like coming," Ali said, trying to ease Amate's uneasiness.

"You got to hang out with fellas, you know. That's how folks survive here."

Ali saw through the accusation, the maneuver to get him on the defensive. So he neutrally said, "You told me that already. Anyway, I made do with some beans and *posho* I found in here."

"But, it's not just the food, you know. Keeping together is more like it."

"Well, I know."

"How you think you'll carry on like that? We hang out. We eat out. We solve every problem out. That's life."

"I got no problem with that."

"Sometimes it's not easy to carry home food, you know."

That's the thing you should have said first, Ali thought. But aloud, he sardonically said, "Well, you shouldn't bother yourself if carrying it is such a burden."

"So will you get along tomorrow?"

"I'll see," Ali said with a sigh.

With that exchange they went to bed, each lost in his own silence.

Ali rarely prepared any meal unless he saw no other alternative. Amate never cooked, as he confessed it himself. And Ali wondered why he bought the stove and the sachets of beans and *posho* in the first place. When he'd pressed Amate about it a couple of days ago, Amate had laconically said he had a woman once. Ali had wondered how the hovel must have looked like with a woman around.

Life was hard but Ali didn't complain. He was a big boy. And, in any case, he had asked for it. Amate rarely said anything about the hardships either. Rather, he would comment about it in a roundabout way, bleating out the lines: *big boys don't cry*.

VIII

Kampala intrigued Ali in one particular aspect: it was a city constantly shedding off its old skin and acquiring a newer, more sparkling one, or at least patches of it. So there's the Old Kampala, the Kampala of the *Bayindi*, the South Asians; and the New Kampala, the Kampala of his dreams; the Old Mulago that stood side by side with the New Mulago, the National Referral Hospital; the Old Taxi Park, where Amate said he worked; and the New Taxi Park, which Amate had only pointed to him from afar, etc. But on a larger scale, there's a sense in which this constant process of renewal doesn't call attention to itself. There, for instance, is Muyenga, a suburb that has, in total disregard for any kind of urban planning, metamorphosed into that concrete jungle the Kampalans lightly call the rich-men's slum—the inaccessible bungalows, with one household's kitchen standing back to back with another's pit latrine (for a household has to have a pit latrine for water supply is erratic and sewers clog all the time); and the sheer haphazardness and disparateness of its structures. A variation of that in the posh suburbs of Bugolobi, Bwaise, Kawempe, Kitintale, Nakawa, Namuwongo, Nsambya, Wandegaya, name it, with magnificent bungalows and housing complexes adjoining, if not actually enclosing, at least one sprawling slum. And there's the infamous Arua Park—a cluster of one or two makeshift storied structures—relics of Kampala's days as a mere post along The Uganda Railways of yore—right in the heart of downtown Kampala and sandwiched by modern malls and magnificent towers.

Then there's Kivulu where Ali lived—a valley of that resilient slum which, like Kikoni, Kavule and Katanga, sprawling out at the foot of Makerere Hill on which Makerere University stood, is also beginning to renew itself, to acquire a newer skin. For besides the University to its north, it has to contend with the adjoining twenty-four hour busy town of Wandegaya to its northeast and the Law Development Center, the institution awarding the postgraduate diploma in legal practice, to its west; the Agha Khan University to its southwest and the aforementioned Kissekka Market to its south.

Kivulu, like the rest of the city, wearing a new skin while still dragging the old, tattered one behind it, tells the story of a painful journey towards modernization. A journey along which the past, howling, doggedly trails the traveler.

So the decrepit dust-caked and patched hovel Ali shares with Amate is just one among the many stretching across the valley of Kivulu. But just within a two-hundred yard radius are two imposing, newly constructed students' hostels, each enclosed by a high wall-fence, lined on top with razor wires. Further away, there are more rental brick houses dotted around, targeting mainly students. That way the residents of the old and the new Kivulu live side by side, each busy pretending the other doesn't exist.

Often, Ali thought about Ringa, wondering how differently things would have turned out had they been together. Ringa delighted in challenging such barriers and his first instinct would have been to wedge himself between the old and the new.

Back in the village, Ringa did it all the time. There was this man, Julio Obete, some kind of friend to Ogal Curamac, Ringa's father. Now this Julio Obete had a daughter in Kampala. She'd long died though. But before she died, everyone agreed she was incredibly rich, so rich in fact that she felt it below her to visit the village. So whenever she had a message for her parents, and a *message* meant money, she invited them to the capital. The hapless village folks would later weave tales upon tales about their most recent visit to the capital once the parents returned to the village.

Julio had no modesty about his plans for the village. He was tired of his constant trips to Kampala, he said. It was a high time to turn things around in the village so Aciro, that's the daughter, could feel safe enough to visit. He tried to rally the village behind this epic enterprise but the villagers simply ignored him. That didn't surprise him. To make up for their laziness, he embarked on several ventures, all at once. He planted pine trees on a vast piece of land which in twenty years, or so, he said, would turn around the fortune of the village. He brought coffee seedlings from his visits and planted them on a huge track of land. The coffee, he said, would open up the village to buyers from the Central; it would afford employment to whoever wanted to work. He cleared a wetland and planted sugarcane and pineapples and rice. He was even considering rearing poultry, layers especially. Only laziness, he said, would stop the villagers from reaping big from these projects.

Now, Julio needed hands to push through with all these ventures. He needed people who thought big, who were ready to take risks; people who were patient enough to appreciate that he'd pay them better wages only after he'd marketed the harvests. It was a win-win situation, he pointed out.

He addressed Curamac endearingly as *my friend*. As a tribute to the friendship, he talked Curamac into taking charge of whetting all his farm tools and fixing any broken equipment. "You're not like the others," Julio would tell his friend whenever he brought the tools which he, needless to say, referred to as *our tools*. To put Curamac in the right mood, he'd all the while say, "Our crops are doing really well," and often adding that at the end of the season, everyone would bid *kwaeri* to the biting poverty. He was a master of insinuation.

"This boy of yours—Orianga," Ringa overheard Julio magnanimously say, "he could do well for himself in the farm." And projecting his voice above the din of the hammer and the anvil, he added, "Tell him to come see me, anytime. This is our farm. I can't turn away my friend's son."

Your friend's son's not that daft, you cunning fox! Ringa, eavesdropping from his hut, thought. *And that's your farm!*

Curamac knew enough to bother his son with Julio's offers.

But Ringa, in his own perverse way, found it funny to play along.

There was an old orchard not far from Julio's courtyard around which he'd just recently erected barbwire and put up a warning: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. Now, everybody, young and old alike—but it was mainly the young—helped themselves to a fruit or two as they passed by along the foot track that adjoined the orchard. But they did so stealthily.

Ringa not only carried on as though the warning didn't exist; he made sure to draw Julio's attention to his trespass. Julio, knowing well that it was Ringa in the orchard pretended otherwise, rushing towards the intruder with threats of prosecution in the hope that he'd take off. But Ringa kept his cool. He'd long come to realize that Julio could never do anything rush and risk antagonizing his father. He knew how much his father meant to Julio.

"Orianga!" Julio bellowed, heaving like a provoked bull. "Didn't you see the sign over there on the wire? What you're doing amounts to trespass and you can be prosecuted for that!"

"But Julio," Ringa said innocently, "You've always said what's yours is also Pa's." Julio flinched, creasing his forehead. "You said it so many times that I've actually come to believe you!"

"What kind of silly nonsense is that, hmm? You folks have no respect for other people's property whatsoever. Get yourself out of here!"

"Well, it's only that I believed you! Next time, I'll know better; that things have changed."

That's Ringa; he didn't give a damn about the boundary between the old and the new.

The old Kivulu had its own facilities: its lavatories, canteens, eating outfits, name it. So did the new Kivulu. So on the dreary Friday morning of his fourth week in Kampala, Ali decided to pay a visit to Bright Daisies Students' Hostel—the closest and the biggest in and around Kivulu—under the pretext of going to the canteen. The gate was guarded; that much he knew. But time spent with Ringa had taught him that to get through a gate like that, all one needed to do was to exude some confidence.

At the gate, no one actually bothered him. The gateman, playing ludo with two other people, didn't even notice him. Once in the compound, he easily located the canteen: four students stood about waiting to be served. As he approached, hesitantly, trying to think up what he'd ask for, a chubby girl from one wing of the building hailed him, addressing him as Lobi. Ali knew Lobi; he was the burly Congolese boy with an oblong of a head who did laundry for the students. Ali found it strange that anyone would mistake him for Lobi. But he approached the lady all the same, lamely telling her that he wasn't Lobi.

"That's okay," the chubby girl said reassuringly. And it occurred to Ali that he's not supposed to fret over the mix up in their identity. "I've some few clothes here if you can do them for me pretty fast. I want them ready, like, by evening." There was that twisted smile on her face that betrayed her awareness of the magnanimity of the offer.

It had never crossed Ali's mind that he could actually earn some bucks at the hostel. And here was this chubby girl, who was certainly seeing Ali for the first time, assuming that in asking him to wash her clothes she was doing him a favor. Not even

asking him whether it was something he would do! She was just so confident that he couldn't turn down the offer.

"I'll do it," Ali bashfully said all the same.

"Oh, wonderful!" the chubby girl said, beaming.

That was just the beginning. What Ali didn't realize at the moment was that laundry would, by that simple acceptance of the offer, come to play a much bigger part in his life in Kampala. He didn't make much from the washings, of course. But it was enough to lift him out of the pit of desperation.

He found in Lobi a most easygoing friend. And, together, they wandered to hostels as far away as Kikoni, west of Makerere Hill, looking for more clothes to wash.

"I tell you what?" Lobi once told Ali, "I done this all my born days. Is the quickest way to make bucks in this here Kampala. You hop out in the morning damn broke, completely! And you just do a round through them hostels and *clap! clap! clap!* Somebody calling you. 'I got some little work here. Mind dropping by?' Is some lazy student. So lazy are these students a snail is ten times more livelier by them. And I say to myself, 'That's what I'm roaming around for.' I drop by and is a deal. See, with all the washing here, you can never, never run broke, Ali. All you need to do is hang around. And everyone, they come looking out for you."

Lobi carried on like that, in monologue. As long as there was somebody around, anyone. He'd carry on and on. It didn't bother him whether one was listening or not. All that mattered to him was simply that had to be an excuse to hear himself speak.

Ali, on his part didn't mind. He wasn't, in any case, required to chip in, which might have strained his patience some. It was enough that Lobi was good-natured and expected nothing than friendship from him. That in Kampala, as Ali had come to realize, was a rarity.

One year went by. Ali, together with Lobi, would have carried on washing clothes for students as he dreamed of making it big one day the way most folks do even when they aren't actually making any headway. But then a reprieve came through a most unlikely source.

Around that time, Amate was intending to move in with Sendi. Not that he ever told Ali about it directly; Ali simply realized it from the way everything was working out. It was a plan they'd actually hatched up over a year ago. But the only arrival of Ali kept them from acting on it. Now, Ali was beginning to show signs that he could stand on his own. Amate often commended Ali for being a quick learner. But despite the progress Ali was making, he was still far from standing on his own. Amate knew that much pretty well. And he'd been on a look out for any opportunity that would enable Ali to stand on his own feet.

He shared with Ali such a prospect of hitting it big one fine February evening, a full moon glowing in the sky. Amate returned home earlier than usual and in a voice jokingly intended for Ali, he asked even before he'd reached the door whether anyone was at home.

"Now, Ali," he said as he entered, barely managing to conceal his excitement. "Something really big is looming in the sky. All you got to do is be at the right place at the right time."

Ali by now knew Amate well enough to tell when he was coming up with something grand. True, Amate painted every situation in a profusion of details, but when he felt a subject was as weighty as that particular evening, he could be precise—relatively speaking, of course. Only his dilating pupils and the care with which he articulated every word betrayed his fervor.

“This laundry thing,” Amate said, “if you’re really serious about it, then you could start a real dry-cleaning business. That’s a respectable business, man,” he added, lifting his eyes to Ali’s as if trying to figure whether Ali doubted him. “Besides, you’ll have many clients, real clients, you know. Not these students who sometimes have to break off for holidays.”

“Well, that, sure, is really a bright idea,” Ali said. “But, as you know, it requires money; lots of it. And proper premises, too.”

“That’s correct.” Amate said thoughtfully. “But you got to want to do it first. Otherwise, the money, the premises, they don’t just turn things around, you know.”

“I’ve thought about all that. But I’ve always found myself in a fix on the vexing question of where to start from.”

“That’s all because you don’t bring it out. I’ve told you not less than ten times already: don’t hesitate to unburden yourself to the fellas. They’re out there for you. We’re there for one another, you know.”

“Maybe that could have, well, made all the difference,” Ali said skeptically, making sure at the same time not to antagonize Amate who was finally pointing him to the direction he had, for a long time, been looking forward to. “Only,” he continued, “with a plan like that, my worry has always been the likelihood of having the *fellas* ridicule the idea.” That word, *fellas*, especially the way Amate pronounced it with that stress on *f*, was always going to remain awkward on his tongue.

“Now, that, you know, is a baseless fear. Anyway, I got an idea. Just the kind of thing you need at the moment, right?”

“That would undoubtedly be a godsend—”

“Yeah, but it’s a godsend to a good many folks out there as well,” Amate said. There was a tinge of seriousness in his voice that wasn’t lost on Ali. But he couldn’t place where it was coming from. “What I’m talking about,” Amate continued, “is that stretch of land in Katanga. We’ve just got wind of a plot to reoccupy it very, very soon. Actually, as we talk, some folks have already been patrolling it, staking their claim on it.” Amate paused to light a cigarette, and between puffs added, “If you let this chance pass you by, you’ll never see another like it.”

Ali could recall four months ago when the residents of that land were last evicted. It was a fine Saturday morning; Amate had just left and it was Lobi who’d first broken the news to him. Lobi rapped onto Ali’s door and, without waiting to be welcomed, entered as though he had an emergency at hand. “They kick them out!” He said as if that was all that Ali had going on in his mind for him to be able to figure whom the double pronouns referred to. Sensing Ali’s confusion he clarified, “They kick them out, those folks in Katanga. I got my friend that living there, the one everybody, they call Kato. And he owe me one K,” he added as though it was something to be proud of. “You think he ever going to pay back, Ali?” There was such a grave concern in his voice as though his entire fortune was rolled into those one thousand shillings. Ali, who relished the role of a passive counterpart, especially

where Lobi was concerned, simply said, “But you just said it yourself that they’ve been evicted! What happened?”

“That’s right!” Lobi said. “Is a long complicated story. And there’s too many confusions in it the way it always been. Got to do with this here land everybody, they keep bickering about. They folks of Makerere, they say that’s their land. They folks of city council, they say that’s their land also. This rich Wamusi guy here, he say the land is his land as well. And the poor tenants, they say the land, it is no-mans land.” Lobi shook his head and chuckled uneasily, marveling at the extent of the confusion. “Got to be one of them lands that there so all they contenders, they can quarrel about it forever and ever. And so this here Kato, he’d even sworn, ‘Nobody can evict anybody here in Katanga.’ But see, Ali, they just evicted them this morning. Now somebody going to steal all that land for free. And this here Kato, he will never pay back my money for sure.”

Ali himself had no particular sentiment about the eviction. It was the first time an eviction was striking closest to him and for all he cared, he was learning about it secondhand. Lobi himself didn’t seem moved by the eviction itself but the risk of losing the one thousand shillings he’d lent his friend, Kato.

Ali had thus taken no more than a cursory interest in the plight of the evicted residents of Katanga. It was only after a week had passed that a scary rumor started churning around. In Ali’s neighborhood, everyone was saying Kivulu would be next, hoping that the other would trash the fear and affirm strongly that nothing of the sort would happen in Kivulu.

Nothing happened in Kivulu, to Ali’s relief. But he was shaken all the same. He resumed visiting Mama Mukyala’s bar in the hope of keeping track of the goings-on. Two of the patrons, Wasswa and another called Okupa, lived in Katanga. None of them was affected by the eviction. But they kept their ears to the ground. No one knew what the next day would bring. Nothing more happened even in Katanga. Once, at the bar, Wasswa quipped, “This City Council folks, they just enjoy kicking everybody’s ass around.” He was pissed off by what he thought of as the pointlessness of the eviction. For he, like everyone else, was quick to note that no developer was moving in to occupy the now-empty land as the evictors had claimed.

“I may be getting blind one of these days,” Wasswa said. “But every time I been walking by this land they evicted the folks from. And the only thing happening there are these red-eyes car-washing thugs, puffing their ganja and chewing their weed, and fucking the air as they whistle Joseph Chameleon’s *Dorotia*.”

“To me,” said the patron named Okupa, “City Council simply evicted these folks to hand over their land to the car-washers. Look, you evict folks so that the land can be redeveloped. But one month, nothing happening. Two months, and here come these car-washers. And nobody lifting a finger at them. You call that development?”

“I don’t blame them,” said Peddler, “I blame you and those like you for believing them.”

And on and on, they bickered into the night.

Ali had visited the eviction site himself. Not that he’d developed any particular sentiment for the evictees. He was simply curious. The patrons always said a lot about the changes that were taking place in Katanga. Four colossal structures had their foundation stones laid all at once. Everyone rumored they’d be hostels. The new

structures were eating into Katanga chunk by chunk from the fringes. But the new stretch of land from which the hapless tenants had just been evicted lay right in the heart of Katanga.

The car-washers had begun by digging ditches, first at the edge of the adjoining wetland and car-washing bays sprung up everywhere. For a whole month, all that the now homeless evictees could do was watch. When nothing happened to the car-washers, the evictees began to see their misfortune in a new light. The car-washers, they concluded, were nothing but thugs of the Movement, the ruling party. Others were saying they were actually the Kalangala Action Plan—or just KAP—chaps idling around, waiting for the time they'd be called upon to disperse rallies and demonstrations.

If nobody felt it necessary to take any action against the car-washers, the same rule would have to apply to the evictees, who in any case, saw themselves as the rightful occupants of the piece of land in question. It had been four months since the eviction. The land was ready to change hands yet again.

Ali, in some strange way, felt he was part of the land.

Amate assured Ali that he'd make use of every connection he had to help him secure a piece of it for himself—as long as he was interested in the idea.

“That would be a great!” Ali said. “All we got to do is act good on the words.”

“That's no problem, man.”

Two days later, Amate, Sendi, and Ali, headed to Katanga, a narrow valley between Wandegeya and Mulago. The sparkling face of Wandegeya fell behind them as they branched off Bombo Road. The dilapidation that gradually led up to Katanga started right from the backyards of the magnificent buildings that lined Bombo Road. The cheap low-roofed and crooked rental structures immediately gave way to the congested shacks with streams of water running between them. The lowermost point of the valley was virtual wetland into which much of the floodwater from the hills of Makerere and Mulago that had escaped the drainage channels flowed. They crossed the valley and started towards the Mulago hills. The stretch of land they were after lay in front of them, a wide open space with heaps of garbage and rubles strewn across it. Further along the edge adjoining Kyebando Road, were the contentious washing bays that had sprung up right after the eviction.

“If the folks want any peace here,” Amate said, “they got to get rid of all these thugs here.” Everyone looked uneasily towards the car-washing bay where half a dozen vehicles had parked, being washed or waiting to be washed.

“Those thugs will be taken care of,” Sendi said. “Just leave them alone for now.”

“You shouldn't pick a spot that's too far away from the road, you know,” Amate said.

“This spot around here doesn't look bad,” Ali said. “I like the view of Campus and Wandegeya. And even Mulago.”

“That should do it,” Sendi agreed. “Many folks would love a view like this.”

“What do you think, Amate?” Ali said.

“I kind of like it, too,” Amate said. “But don't forget that here it's first come, first served. Kind of like survival of the fittest.”

That did it. Ali got off to an early start. By the time the scramble for sites began a couple of days later, Ali had already erected a foundation for his hovel, dug directly into the earth.

Most of the new site seekers were former evictees. But there were also few new arrivals just like Ali. They erected shacks all over again, with only few daring in the course of that first week. But when nothing happened to these darers shacks once again sprawled all over that patch of Katanga land within another week. Ali got the full meaning of Amate's quip about survival of the fittest when he saw ditches being steadily filled up and the car-washers edged out. At first there were occasional brawls, of course. But the returning evictees and site seekers, who outnumbered the car-washers, always prevailed.

Ali, after Amate's hovel, erected his in part with bricks, in part with mud and wattle, with supporting reeds in between. Its roof was a patchwork of rusted tins and bits of corrugated iron sheets. These were mainly materials that had survived the previous demolition. It was through Sendi's help that he secured the additional materials and manpower. "Things are damn expensive here," Sendi took care to draw it to Ali's attention, "But the trick is to work with the right people."

Yeah, Ali thought, they all are self-conscious of their magnanimity.

Once it had finally been completed, the shack looked from outside as though all its patchwork of tins and the roughly assembled pieces of iron sheets had simply been hurriedly heaped on its roof. But all that didn't matter to Ali anymore. In the course of his fourteen months in Kampala, he'd eventually given up any illusion of a glorious life in the city. The new hovel wasn't much different from the one he'd hitherto shared with Amate. True, it had about it that striking resemblance to a commercial structure—which in reality wasn't anything than a raised front wall and a big front door and a small sideway door—but from inside, there was that trapped chilliness about it that betrayed the inferiority of its materials. The boundary between the old and the new, between dream and reality, couldn't have been more elusive.

The Damn Key

I had to tell Ali that Sendi had changed when we did not find him at home that evening. The door was locked and since Sendi was against leaving the key behind, we decided to track him down to Dubai where he ran a payphone stall. Ali hesitated by the door, squinting at the lock. I could imagine what he was up to and I told him that I too could easily crack the lock but not on a Sunday. I reckoned Sendi could show up at home anytime and that he'd get pretty furious if he found that we'd let ourselves in without the key. Sendi was that serious. Sometimes it made me wonder why a fine man like him should take to heart such trifle. But I mostly just ignored it. With him I tried to play everything safe and I wasn't going to risk goading him any further, if I could help it. Already, he was mad enough at me for declaring I'd vote the Mayor in the elections that was just a day away. I was always careful with Sendi because he paid the rent and thus set down the rules.

Lately, he decided he'd be the one to carry the key. That to me was no big deal. I played it cool the way I'd done in the past when he'd call me and, for the benefit of the girl he wanted to take home, ask me whether he could use *my* house. I'd give him the key without much ado. If I was in the mood, I'd go as far as offering one or two words of apology about the state the house was in. Sendi would later ruffle my hair, telling me I was a smart, quick-witted chap. At twenty-six, he was only five years older than me, but from the way he carried himself, you would think he was my father. Not that I cared; I allowed that any man was free to imagine whatever flattered him. So I didn't mind Sendi treating me as a numbskull.

Once, I poured *tonto* on one of the two leafs of newspaper that Sendi treasured more than anything else in the house, irredeemably smudging more than half of the piece, including Sendi's name. It was a leaf from the letter column of *The Monitor*, with a short letter Sendi had written to the editor published in the top left hand corner. I must admit that it was a most reckless mistake. Sendi kept the leaf all the same. Whenever he pulled it out, he would still get utterly cross. At such moments, curses would freely roll off his tongue. He said folks like us didn't know the value of intellectual treasures. I took very seriously the task of proving to whoever visited us that Sendi was a writer with *The Monitor*. It was the least I could do, to embellish the facts a little. Even so, I still didn't appease Sendi. But he only cursed. As long as I allowed that I was dumb and that he was a godsend, our friendship was solid.

There were times when it suited Sendi that I pass off as the owner of our hovel, especially if he wanted to bring a girl home. At such moments, Sendi would remember my quickness of mind. But things had cooled between us pretty bad and since the new Sendi seemed to have decided he did not want the girls anymore, he did not need *my* house either. Still, I could have continued carrying the key without worrying over the possibility of being kicked out anytime. I only needed to give up my stubborn faith that the forthcoming mayoral election was our best hope. But I simply couldn't; and that, to Sendi, was a sin verging on the unforgivable. Little by little, I learned that to continue living with him, I needed to warily skirt around his fiery temper on tiptoes.

Ali and I, we picked our way along the narrow, winding footpath that cut through the dense, squalid hovels. It was a shortcut to the dusty, pothole-ridden Muwanga Road along which Sendi's payphone stall stood. Clouds of rank urine heavily hanging in the air, and the mucky, waterlogged sections that we had to skirt around made the stretch doubly long. But we did not complain. Here in Kisenyi, such an unsheltered pathway, and its adjoining walls and tree trunks, made for free urinals for residents and passersby alike. And the backyards—those narrow tracks between adjoining hovels—doubled as dumping yards. At some sections, the garbage there stacked a whole foot high, spreading over a ten-yard space. As we trod over the heap, there was that nauseating sponginess about it from which some slimy, rancid filth oozed. We hurried along, watching out for poles that dangerously stuck out from low roofs as though intent on goring heads of over-hasty passersby. Once, as we passed by what seemed an overflowing pit latrine, unsettling a swarm of fat, green houseflies, Ali asked me, I guess, for the tenth time that evening, whether I had a stick of cigarette left. When I said that I didn't have any, he said the stench there could choke a whole man to death. I said the good Lord gave us sturdy lungs for he knew he was going to put us here; and that that's why I don't lose sleep over the din about smoking, cancer, death, and whatnot.

As we hit Muwanga Road, revelers were beginning to warm up for the night and the road was swarming with drunks and excited kids and skimpily dressed sluts and campaign agents riding around in heavily decorated vans, singing praises for their candidate. There were also many guys like us who were still trying to figure out how best to tap from the evening. All along the road, makeshift drinking joints had been set up and hordes of people were heatedly arguing over the prospects of this or that candidate. But the ones that interested me more were those speculating on the amount of booze that would sink down our gullets that evening. That's the one thing I really liked about election times. It's our only chance of squeezing out something from these politicians. It's the only time that they really take us seriously. But this is the one thing Sendi was yet to learn. Not that I was going to push him to it. Guys like him take their time and it'd be fool hardy to rush them.

Ali said we shouldn't take too long at Sendi's stall and I said all we needed was the key. I knew better than him how late we already were. The beer bottles in front of revelers were glinting from orange glow of the setting sun. Ali said it wasn't a good idea to start off with beer. He was new to these parts and I had to tell him that drinking from a beer bottle didn't necessarily mean drinking beer; it was all about creating the right impression, I said. Else, I'd offer you a tot, or *kasese* for that matter, if I found you drinking from a tot. Folks here in Kisenyi, I said, drank their *kasese* from beer bottles. So if you were to offer them anything, it had to be nothing less than beer. There were a couple of bottles that we ourselves would set out with after we'd grabbed the key.

As we approached Sendi's stall, we withdrew into our separate silences. Earlier, Ali had said I was unnecessarily afraid of Sendi. He could say anything really. He was a different sort of fellow and, in any case, he'd never interacted with Sendi. I guess he was trying to patch together the various, possibly conflicting, impressions of Sendi that had taken root in his mind. Or he was just thinking about beer. I, on my part, was figuring out how to get the key with minimum friction.

Sendi's payphone stall was a four-by-six, yellow-painted, wooden box standing at the height of a tall man. There were four customers hanging around, waiting to be served, and the fifth man—a common drunk—was hollering into the mouthpiece at the top of his voice with excited gesticulations to match. The person at the other end couldn't have been anything less than a drunk. The others waited patiently, with clipped smiles on their lips.

I stared at Sendi who was looking intently at the timer in his hand. He did not betray any appearance of having registered our arrival. We waited outside as he attentively served his customers, completely ignoring us. We took a bench no one was using and after the last caller had paid and left, I continued staring at Sendi. When he finally glanced back at me, there was that wild look in his eyes that made you feel he'd punch you in the face if you dared to ask him for the damn key. But I was no stranger to such moments. So I said to myself, well, well, Cadre, why not throw in shocker here? I could tell that Sendi knew we'd come for the key. So, I wasn't going to ask him for it, not right away.

Instead, I made it seem it was all about bringing Ali to meet him. When I introduced Ali, the furrows on Sendi's forehead evened out. He affably reprimanded Ali for not visiting frequently enough and Ali said he'd been coming when Sendi was way. It was a lie, of course; and Ali knew that Sendi knew he was lying. But nobody complained; enduring friendships are watered by such trivialities. Sendi said he was pleased to meet Ali at last. I'd told him a lot about Ali but they had never really met before. Ali was actually my younger half-brother—a year younger. Sendi knew this much already. For quite some time, he'd been wanting to meet Ali. It was Ali's line of business, dry-clearing, that intrigued him. Well, it wasn't really dry-cleaning—just washing and pressing and keeping petty thieves at bay—but that's what everybody call it.

Sendi wanted to know how Ali's business was doing. I felt that was a rather unkind question. Ali had been out of business for well over two months already. And that much Sendi should know. I was always telling him about the difficulties Ali was running into nearly every week. But again you can't tell whether a man is listening or not.

"The dry-cleaning?" Ali said. He was surprised that Sendi didn't know that he had been out of business for well over two months already. The dry-cleaning business, he said, had collapsed—the asset part of it anyway. All that remained of it were furious clients who were always stalking him everywhere to claim one lost item or another. He'd been telling them that he lost everything and that there was nothing he could do about it.

The evictions fell hard and fast on the residents of Katanga. Thugs, like impatient, famished vultures, descended on the dwellers just a day before, pillaging with impunity. They left behind tales of broken ribs and broken teeth and cracked skulls. It was utter chaos. Early the following morning, the eviction itself started. There were blue-uniformed, baton-wielding City Council guards everywhere you turned. But were all of them City Council guards? You couldn't tell. Not with all those unwashed, *ganja* eyes, and ill-fitting pants fastened with strips of cloth. Ali said he imagined that the City Council, desperate for man strength, had just rounded up idlers and thugs, intoxicated them, draped them in blue uniforms and handed out

batons to them before ferrying them to Katanga. They picked from where the thugs had left, hounding, pillaging, battering, ravaging. You couldn't linger around them, whatever it was that you wanted to retrieve. After they had cleared the place, four bulldozers came for the demolition itself, spending the rest of the day leveling whatever had remained of the hovels that the Katanga residents had hitherto called their home.

"I lost everything that day," Ali said. "But some of these clients won't have any of that. They say I'm just playing tricks on them. Every time I ran into any of them, I'm in for a big trouble."

"They're just desperate," Sendi said, coming out. "I guess for some of them, your shop was sort of a second home after the cab." As he took another bench across from us, he told Ali that he himself once lived in his cab but that he was fortunate his dry-cleaner wasn't evicted. "I entrusted my dry-cleaner with all my clothes," he said. "Imagine if I went to him to change only to find that his place had been flattened out and that he was nowhere to be seen. The next time I run into him, he must have pretty good excuse and I must be in a pretty good mood."

"I'd have to save myself with a lie then," Ali said, "if you won't believe that the shop was demolished and that I couldn't scare away City Council all by myself."

"You don't do it by yourself. *They* told you they were coming to evict you. And you chaps simply melted away." Sendi was steadily warming up to his old, firebrand temperament. "I heard they weren't even really guards," he continued. "Just goons hurriedly assembled and draped in blue uniforms and, to crown it, deployed with nothing but sticks! If you weren't going to put a fight, the least you could was to save few things. Think about those clients who entrusted you with all the clothing they had. If I were one of them, I would want to know what you did to ward off the demolition. Or, at least, why you didn't alert me so I could collect my clothes in good time. You knew all along that you'd simply walk away from the threat, right?"

"To tell you the truth, those ones aren't hard on me at all. They easily understand. The ones really pissing me off are those who lost one threadbare jean jacket, a paint-smudged, or a badly greased shirt. You'd expect them to be a lot more understanding. But *wapi!* They only see opportunity in my misfortune. I can only say 'I wish them well.'" And rather abruptly and absentmindedly—indeed almost stupidly—Ali, with his eyes fixed on a taxicab that was speeding by on Muwanga Road, asked Sendi what happened to his cab. I must say he tried to be smart enough not to draw attention to connection between his question and the image Sendi was projecting of himself. But Sendi wasn't fooled.

"My cab is a different story," he said. "They impounded it, yes! But I haven't lost it. I've only decided I'm not going to pay that damn tax. Bet against me if you will, but soon, very soon, you're gonna see me back on the road."

I winked at Ali lest Sendi's challenge provoke him to ask why he allowed the cab to be impounded in the first place. Sendi wasn't the type of person you push against the wall. He delighted in feeling in charge and if you allowed him that license, there was no limit to where you'd cruise with him.

Ali wished Sendi the best of luck and for a moment, an awkward silence loomed over us. I guess Ali was contemplating his own luck as Sendi raked his mind for what luck meant. *Luck...luck... Luck*, he pensively said after a while, was the one thing he

lacked and wasn't sure if he was ever going to call on it. Luck wasn't by his side when as a child his father lost his job and became a hopeless alcoholic. Luck wasn't by his side when his mother, struggling to fill the gap by ferrying petty merchandise to neighboring markets, died in a car crash. Luck wasn't by his side when, as one of the most brilliant students in his class, he had to drop out of school. Luck wasn't by his side when a local court, in a land dispute arising after the death of his parents, ruled against his family. Luck wasn't by his side when the car he bought for his taxi business was impounded before it could bring him the security he desperately needed. Luck wasn't by his side when he was diagnosed with HIV and TB. He simply couldn't bear to dream about luck.

"I go about my business coldly," he said, "with no illusion about luck you guys sing about all the time. You can dream but I simply can't. You can go ahead and elect your mayor and hope that he'll fix things and put food on your plate."

The depth of Sendi's aversion to my faith in the mayor struck me at that moment. Once again we relapsed into our separate silences. I was beginning to doubt whether it would be a good idea to ask Sendi about the key.

At that moment, a teen-aged girl wearing heavy make-up, and smoking a thick, roll of cigarette came to make a call and Sendi excused himself to go and serve her. Ali reminded me not to forget the key and I noncommittally said that wasn't a problem. Sendi returned to join us after a short while, and as he was taking his seat, a key fell from his pocket.

"I guess this is what you've come for," he said.

I said indeed I needed to go and pick something from the house. Sendi handed over the key to me and told Ali to ensure that the man who drove him out of business wins the race. Ali said it makes no difference to him whoever wins; all politicians are alike. All he wanted was to squeeze something from them when an opportunity presented itself.

After a short while, Ali and I went back home.