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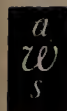


AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

Going Down River Road

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MEJA MWANGI
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*Fiction
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Dedicated to the guys who introduced me to Ben:

George Maina Adams

George Wamai Mumunya.

*Special thanks to Juanita and Bonsalles for sweet inspiration
and to a really nice friend Janice Bowen for her kind help
with the typing and tidying up of the MS.*

**All persons and events in this story are entirely fictitious
and bear absolutely no relationship past or present to
any particular person or event. M.M.**

PART ONE



*The horny-toed barefoot son
of the rusty concrete mixer.*

Baby should not have drunk coffee. He urinated all of it during the night and now the smell lay thick and throat-catching, overcoming even the perfume of his mother's bed across the room. In the bed Ben lay with the boy's mother curled in his large arms, warm and soft and fast asleep. But Ben was not asleep any more. The pungent baby urine stink had awakened him long before his usual waking up time. He released the woman, turned and reached on the bedside table for a cigarette to combat the musty smell from the baby's bed. There were no cigarettes in the packet. He lit a half-smoked one from the ash-tray and lay smoking in the early morning gloom. Wini breathed soft and low by his side. Her nude body lay stretched out against his, her hand resting on the inside of his hairy thigh. She would be waking up soon to make his breakfast. He did not stir her. She had her own clockwork system that first turned her over once or twice before she opened her eyes to complain about the shortness of the past night. In another half hour he would be on his way to work.

Max's radiogram roared to life next door. Ben cursed. The bastards never slept. In after midnight and up at six smoking *bhang* or drinking *changaa* or simply being a pain in the arse.

There were all sorts of people in the neighbourhood. There was a childless old woman who lived on hawking green vegetable matter. There were two refuse collectors, a Grogan Road mechanic who swore he was not a thief, and three retired whores who only did the occasional special duty with the landlord or somebody else. There were two office clerks and their messengers and families. There were the city council policeman and the unlicensed roadside cobbler, two neighbours who spent the days racing one another round town in the course of their duties, before coming home to be good neighbours for the night. Then there were Max and his bugs in the room next door. The lot could only be professionally described as trouble-makers. Ben hated them. But more than Max and his gang, Ben loathed their monstrous Grundig stereogram. It appeared someone had turned it full volume a long time ago, then lost the volume control dial.

He reached on the table and switched on his transistor radio. It was a conditioned reflex manoeuvre, a hopeless attempt to hit back at Max's peace piracy. The transistor radio, a revolver and a suitcase full of junk

were his absolute possessions, the only property he salvaged out of the flat on Grogan Road. The rest was confiscated by the landlord to balance two months of unpaid rent.

Ben thought back to those days with nausea; the days of hunger after he lost his job, the hopelessly drunken nights and the weeks of dodging the landlord whenever he was due for rent collection. The meetings with Wini were the lousiest moments of his existence. They would meet in a café in town, sip espresso coffee and try to act as though nothing was the matter with anything. They talked general talk to kill time. They never discussed his futile job hunting. Sometimes they drank beer. Sometimes she took him to a cinema, and at times she managed without difficulty to force him to accept some pocket money. Whenever that happened he went down to the Capricorn Bar and got himself dirty drunk on *Karara*.

Wini stirred and grunted something unintelligible. He gave her a moment's peace to reorganize her dreamy thoughts. She lifted herself on one elbow and rubbed at her sleepy eyes.

'Good morning,' he said. She cleared her throat.

'What time is it?' she asked.

'Time for Max and his buggers to burst everybody's ears.'

She sighed, scratched at her plaited head vigorously.

'It is almost time for my breakfast too,' Ben said.

Baby stirred in his cot by the corner. He exploded into fits of coughing, choking and whooping his little chest out. Ben grimaced. If it was not coughing the child was busy at, it was running a temperature, or diarrhoea, or something. Never an appreciable break from maladies. And as always, Baby did everything with enthusiasm, even being sick. His coughing grated on Ben's ears, the racket tickling his throat so that he felt like coughing too. He did not complain about the exaggerated gurgling and croaking or Wini's apparent indifference to it. He was learning hard not to criticize anything that was not his business.

Wini crawled over him out of bed and dressed only in slippers padded to the door and flicked on the light. Then she walked to the window and opened it. A gust of cold fresh air shoved the flimsy curtain aside and boldly stamped into the stale warmth of the room, reverberated and settled smugly on the dirty mottled walls and dim electric light. Wini stretched and yawned, her slim naked body drawn out curvaceous and beautiful. Ben's heart glowed. All that good morning beauty, all the sweetness in it belonged to him. His to keep.

Baby whimpered, coughed and began to cry. The young mother walked to his bed and so coolly bent over him. Her breasts hung neat and loose over the boy like two ripe pawpaws, her buttocks stretched tight in an athletic

way. She felt his forehead and whispered comfort. The boy screamed his heart out. The usual morning crust of hard bread aroused no interest. And as though enough was not enough, he kicked the offered cup of cold milk into the urine sodden bed.

'The boy is ill,' she said and picked up the empty cup.

Ben clenched his teeth and struggled to stay calm. The screams tore at his nerves, while Wini's relaxed pose frustrated him madly.

'What should I do with him?' she asked.

'First shut him up, he is worse than Max's records.'

'But how?'

'Put your foot in his mouth,' he shouted. She looked up at him and even more aggravatingly calm said in a matter-of-fact tone:

'Men are bastards.'

She dressed quietly, morose. Morning routine followed with her usual clockwork precision. She lit the rusty paraffin stove and proceeded to prepare coffee. Baby cried himself back to sleep. Wini was a tough woman, Ben conceded. How she could ignore the deafening yells was a trick he would have liked to learn. It had got so that any time the boy opened his mouth to yawn, Ben braced his ears for the worst. Wini maintained that a little crying never hurt a child. Ben agreed to that too. It never hurt a child, if one could resist the burning urge to bash the child's head against the nearest wall.

He climbed out of bed, grabbed a towel and wrapped it round his middle. He took the large cake of LUX and went out. Most of the neighbours were still asleep. The courtyard was cold and deserted, strewn with inanimate life and a cat. A child's twisted tricycle lay on its side without wheels. The dustbin lay on its side among its spilt contents while the grey cat foraged for food. A chair lay on its side, its only leg raised as though in protest. The whole place was filled with broken bits of things, hundreds of beer bottle tops and an old shoe.

The skies were heavily overcast, spreading a sickly grey light on everything below. On mornings such as this Ben always envied the jobless who knew of neither the freezing morning shower nor the many calamities of a July morning. The communal shower room was dark, cold and stale-smelling as usual. The floor was littered with broken bits of soap, scrubbing rags, stones, cigarette filters and general trash. Slimy green fungus grew on the outer edges of the floor and spread some way up the walls. A woman's blood-stained under pants hung on the nail behind the door. The dim twenty-five-watt electric bulb threw an anaemic light on the peeling walls. One of the strange-looking patches of peeled paint resembled the naked bottom of a bending woman. Like Wini bending over Baby's cot, Ben

could not remember when he first made the brilliant inference. By concentrating on it he got his mind off the cold shower. He showered quickly, dried himself and shivered out of the bathroom.

The courtyard was still deserted. The grey cat bounded out of the dustbin with a large rat in its mouth and clambered over the further wall of the yard. A white man emerged from Mac's room and was conducted by one of the boys from the yard to the drive at the front of the building.

Back in the room Ben searched desperately for the wooden hair comb, Wini watched his useless search, then said quite naturally: 'Under Baby's bed.' Just like that, as though that was the most obvious place to keep a hair comb.

'What the hell is it doing there?'

'I don't know. I just saw it there.'

He cursed under his breath, found the comb and stormed back out. Cement dust was quite sterilizing. It was a futile effort combing his hair. He would lose it sooner or later. Yussuf the foreman had lost most of his hair already, and the others were following.

A car started up on the drive. Max's boy came back whistling and caressing a bundle of money, smiling in the manner of a shrewd businessman after a satisfactory bargain.

'Hi, Ben.'

'Hello.'

That is what it amounts to, Ben reflected. Bang them on the head once and they begin to respect you. He gave up the hair game and went back into the house. Wini had the coffee and bread ready by the time he dressed. As he sat over breakfast she showered and prepared to go to work. When he got up to leave she sat at her breakfast. For her there was no hurry. She reported for her secretarial duty at eight-fifteen. The bastard Johnny, her office manager, drove by to pick her up every morning. Ben did once object to his wife being picked up by a strange white man, but the protest did not work out too well. Wini lost her temper, told him Johnny was not as strange as he thought and stopped just short of reminding Ben in whose house he was living. The implication was plain. Ben was an honoured guest; a privileged refugee. They made up after that, both of them apologized and Ben then knew what was expected of him.

It was one hell of a lousy day. Just the kind of day to take a bus to town. But bus rides cost money, and money was always scarce round about mid-month. Besides it was not such a long way to the city centre when one had no alternative.

After leaving the block of flats where he lived, Ben took a short cut that led him round to the large patch of grassy wasteland that lay between

Eastleigh and Kariakor. Most of the paths criss-crossing the dewy grass-land were scattered with human excrement. One of these mounds of shit was still steaming in the middle of the path. It could have been planted there by any of the early risers ahead of him afraid to wet his arse on the dewy grass. Ben stepped over it and followed the general exodus towards the city centre. The whole field was swarming with path-finders walking to their work stations. The cold wet wind that blew across it carried, in the same medium with the smell of shit and urine, the occasional murmur, the rare expression of misery, uncertainty, and resignation. They walked slowly, quietly, their slow tortured boots kneading the mud and shit on the path. Every now and then one of them stopped to add hot urine to the dough. Then they resumed their march, the endless routine trudge, the tramp of the damned at the Persian wheel.

In the city centre two miles away the giant Africa Hotel dominated the grey skyline. Smoke, thick and black rose from the chimney above the twentieth floor. From this far the little stub of the rising Development House looked rough and rugged in its early life. When it was completed, the building would dwarf even the majestic Africa Hotel.

A quiet drizzle started falling, light and soft and quite unwelcome. A violent sneeze rose from a pair of hollow lungs. A subdued voice in the endless file of forlorn workers cursed. Ben pulled his thin coat tighter round his chest and hurried on. The mud-shit dough already churned up by those ahead of him stuck to his rugged shoes. There were a lot of people before him. Too bloody many. All the way down Racecourse Road and across the bridge over the stinking Nairobi River into town was full of people. Workers in dark old greatcoats, others with hats and some with tattered umbrellas were everywhere heading into town.

The cheap roadside tea kiosks were all open. They were crowded with a lot of people too; workers who after balancing the price of sugar and milk and time had decided it was cheaper to drink tea by the roadside. Ben bought a packet of cigarettes with Wini's two shillings and headed up Racecourse Road. But for a few early buses, refuse trucks and a multitude of vegetable pushcarts, the city streets were bare of traffic. The drivers of the fast cars were still in bed nestling between the sweaty thighs of their big women.

A couple of seasoned old street sweepers stepped aside to let a sleepy bus lumber by. Then they continued their ever tardy, deliberate sweep up the road. It was hard to tell whether they had just come or had been at it all night. Like the hard black tarmac road they swept, they had something of a belonging about them, some sort of a permanency.

'Good morning, citizen,' the more elderly one called to Ben. Ben stopped by him, looked up at the ugly grey skies and shook his head.

'Not the best of them,' he declared. The old man agreed, leaned on his broom.

'Got a light?'

Ben nodded, fetched his matchbox and handed it over. The old man searched almost hopelessly in his rugged coat, slow and calm, almost as though he did not expect to find what he sought. Finally he found the cigarette stub behind his ear under the large brimmed hat.

'I have seen worse days,' he said, handing back the matchbox. 'The skies are only weeping. Thank you, brother. I have seen it shit rain.'

Ben lit himself a cigarette watching the sweeper's easy strokes advance the rubbish heap up the road. Behind the sweepers the trash had been collected into many small heaps to be shovelled into the pushcart by a third cleaner not yet here.

'It must be tough when it rains,' Ben said.

The man laughed a weathered dry laugh, a pleasant, careless guffaw that too like the rest of him (the greatcoat, tattered shoes and large hat) belonged to the rainy misty streets.

'We don't sweep when it rains,' he said, his wizened old eyes hopefully darting upwards into the drizzle. 'We stand under shelter and let the rain wash the shit into the sewers and plug them. Then we go home and leave it to the sewage brigade.' He blew smoke defiantly at the dark sky, daring it to rain. 'This is nothing,' he said. 'Want a smoke, mate?'

His mate had by this time swept his way a few metres ahead. He sauntered back, dragging the broom behind him by the long handle, accepted the offered few puffs of smoke then helped his mate make progress on the dirt front. He wore two sweat-smelling greatcoats. The black one which had no arms and was split down the sides and worn like a cape over the green one. And like his mate he had a large brimmed hat and rubber boots with torn cloth uppers.

Seeing them together like that Ben realized what was belonging about them. The two sweepers, their brooms and their street belonged to one another. The rainy, misty twilights and dawns were their lot. The days did not belong to them. And that was permanent.

Ben caught himself wasting time, shrugged and hustled off. The street cleaners had already dismissed him. It made easy going this time of morning. The big fast cars were still out of town. Duke Street was still almost empty. The cleaners were going to have a rough time at Tusker House. The bus stop and the surrounding area were littered with maize cobs and rubbish. It was usually this way in the mornings.

The little traffic on Haile Selassie Avenue was concentrated around the building site. Trucks and tippers tripped in and out of the fenced site, laden

with sand, gravel, building materials and rubble. Work was just getting underway. Dark cement dust rose from the giant concrete mixer accompanied by loud squeaking and rattling and the old truck's incessant whining. A ragged, dusty figure wrestled with the mixer's monstrous wheel. Another scarecrow dangled in a bucket on the fourth floor and nailed wooden planks to the concrete wall. The sound of the hammer carried pathetically weak through the din below.

Ben looked up at the craggy building and shook his head. They had raised the building by four floors in eight months. They still had another sixteen floors to build. And the damned things was already too high for comfort.

A Mercedes saloon car pulled up beside him. Mr Amarjit Singh, the inspector for Patel and Chakur Contractors, dragged his bulky body out of the car. He hitched the oversized trousers over his belly, regarded the developing Development House critically. He cocked his turbaned head, twirled his moustache and glared with obvious dissatisfaction. He looked around for someone to complain to and for the first time noticed Ben.

'Jambo,' he growled.

'Jambo, Singh.'

Ben wondered why the devil always came so early. In his place Ben would have slept for a week before coming to view the total seven days' labour.

'Good vork,' Amarjit Singh waved at the concrete mass, but his face remained unconvinced.

'Not bad,' Ben said.

'Vot you are called?'

'Ben Wachira.'

'Vachira?'

'Something like that.'

'Vachira, vot you are doing?'

'Casual labour.'

'Wery good,' Amarjit Singh nodded to himself. 'Wery good.'

Ben wondered what was so 'wery good' about being casual labourer, turned and took off. He figured he would never understand people. So miserably rich, yet the bugger had to rise so early to supervise a job that was already doing itself! You would expect one as wealthy as Amarjit Singh to know better.

He dodged through the chaos caused by men, materials and machines to the wooden construction office. He took off his wet coat, added it to the misery of the over-loaded coat rack. It was still drizzling lightly, still chilly. But it wouldn't be for long. True to the spiteful July malediction, the sun

would soon be up and hot as hell before giving in to rain in the late afternoon.

The sleepy register clerk peered at him through the tiny office window. When he spoke his breath stank of *Karara* and dirt. He was hung up and dishevelled.

'Name?' he croaked.

'Ben.'

'Ground duties today, Ben.'

'Ground, my arse. Check again.'

The roster clerk did so, his dirty eyes squinting at the duty roster that shook in his unsteady hands.

'Still reads ground to me,' he drawled. Ben craned his neck.

'Let's see.' He read, then cursed. 'Damn, this is last week's arrangements!'

'Sure,' the other nodded.

'Bullshit . . .'

Ground duties included manning the antique concrete mixer and eating half the dust on site. One's eyes and nose got plugged with the dust while the noisy looping machine slowly drove him uncomfortably close to insanity. Beside, one was always within sight of Yussuf, the drug-crazed foreman, and in this July smog the man could be bad tempered.

'I am not doing ground again,' Ben said.

'So?'

'So hell, where is Yussuf?'

'Yussuf does not make the roster.'

'Neither do you. You can't just put me back on the ground like that. Where is that bastard Yussuf?'

'Two cigarettes the fucker is hiding somewhere smoking bhang and dreaming how to take over the entire business from his uncles.'

Ben turned to look at the speaker. Ocholla stood behind him grinning carelessly, his fireman's cap tilted at the dangerous angle, the angle that declared he had gone drinking *Karara* last night.

'Want to bet two fags, Ben?'

'Not necessary. I will give you one.'

Ocholla accepted the proffered cigarette.

'You are a fine bastard, Ben,' he deposited the gift somewhere in his tattered person and turned to the clerk.

'Ocholla the Onyango is my name.'

'Ground duties,' the clerk told him.

Ocholla turned to Ben.

'You know what, Ben?' he said. 'This bugger is still drunk.' He turned to

the clerk. 'I know you are hung over and all that, buddy, but please be reasonable. I did ground last week. By sheer common sense I should be on the floors, right?'

'That's what I thought,' Ben said.

'So what the hell is this?' Ocholla swore at the clerk.

The man shook his hot head tiredly and wished he had seen to the roster. He sighed, then rubbed at his hung over eyes.

'Okay, I will tell you guys,' he rubbed at his face and spoke through his hands. 'Some bastard forgot to change the goddamned roster. The new one is still at the headquarters in town and it is not my bloody fault now fellows and . . .'

'Shit,' Ocholla told him. 'You buggers are trying to run us down, that's what.'

Ben agreed.

Ocholla whipped off his cap, scratched dandruff in his hair, then slammed the cap back on. This in the now too clear lingo meant he had recognized a hopeless situation. He spat into the dust, cursed and headed into the dust. Ben threw the clerk a dirty look and tagged after Ocholla.

There were few practical human guys left in the rotting world, Ben thought. Ocholla was one of them. He took as much as he could out of the circumstances and never gave a shit more than he was expected to. Ben hoped to live to see Ocholla minus his battered open-mouthed shoes and the trouser legs that were so tattered that he should have cut them off at the knees, instead of rolling them up so that his thin legs standing in them looked like a couple of old parking meters. Some day too, Ocholla might give up the depressed looking fireman's cap that he confiscated from a rare debtor, a porter at the railway station who could not pay back some *Kararas* Ocholla bought him.

The two made their way to the crane landing to do their first ground duty - loading wooden beams to be hauled up to the carpenters on the fourth floor. A truck load of wood backed up to them. They stepped aside to let it unload then pull out. The crane bucket whistled through the cold air to them. They started loading, carelessly chucking the wood into the steel container. To their right the mixer grunted, whined and mashed sand, cement and gravel, which the same crane would later hoist to the front line up on the fourth floor. The two chums worked at a controlled pace. No killing oneself over a bloody Indian's job. This was some kind of a rule.

There were different job classifications on the site. The highest-placed were masons and carpenters, a mixture of Asians and a few Africans who did the specialized jobs. There were the electricians who just hung around and made sure the sockets and switches were taken care of. The wiring

would come much later. There were the lorry drivers who spent most of the time riding in and out of the compound and raising as much cement dust as they could. The labourers class constituted the majority of the people on the site. Ben and Ocholla belonged to this group. They did nothing except stick around and do as they were told. There were in this class too three middle-aged women whose job it was to recover nails from used timber, straighten the nails with a hammer and anvil, and then send them back to the carpenters.

Soon after the drizzle died off one of the women, as ragged and dusty as all hands were, passed by where Ben and his buddy were loading wood.

'Wanjiru,' Ocholla called.

'Wanjiku,' she called back.

'Whatever you are called,' Ocholla said. 'Will you screw with me for lunch.'

The woman went on as though Ocholla had never spoken to her. She knew, everybody knew that Ocholla had no money to buy anyone lunch. He rarely had any for himself. Ocholla scratched his head.

'Bitch,' he said to Ben. 'Hell, I want a screw bad, Ben.'

'Keep trying,' Ben advised.

At ten o'clock the mist cleared. The sun glared down on the building. The crane peeked over the edge from the fourth floor and reached down for the last of the timber. The sun got hotter. Cement dust rose higher. The trucks crammed the air with their lunatic groans. A man dressed only in his ragged trousers shovelled gravel into the mixer and sang loudly. Another, lost from sight in the dust, shouted to him to shut up, claimed he could not hear himself think because of the singing. One did get used to the din of a construction site. It got so some could hear their heart beat at the peak of the boom-crash-bang.

Ben wiped the sweat off his face with a dusty shirt tail. His body was caked in dust and salty sweat. He took a cigarette and extended it to Ocholla who was busy rolling his trouser legs back up.

'Cigarette?'

'No,' Ocholla said without looking up.

'I am giving, not begging,' Ocholla looked up to accept the offer.

'Thank you, Ben.' They smoked and rested while waiting for Yussuf to find them and scream more orders. Being a manual labourer one was not expected to have any initiative. Just hang around, look absurd but do as you are commanded. And at the end of the month file to the wooden office near the site gate and beg for your pay. You did not earn it. Not on the site. Contractors had genius reasoning. If you had enough grey matter to earn

yourself a living you would not be there. Only crummy bastards ended up building hotels they would never afford a cup of tea in, and offices they would never be allowed into once completed. Only buggers did a job like that. Buggers like Ben and Ocholla.

Ocholla was a good guy, Ben concluded watching him torture the cigarette piece. He respected Ben too. Ben deserved respect. After all how many other sand and gravel rats had a girlfriend-wife who was a secretary? None on Development House. Well, maybe she was not quite his wife, but she was still a secretary and Ben's woman.

There had never been another like Wini in Ben's entangled life. She paid the rent, bought food and did not mind too much if he drank all his pay. Not that he liked to do so, but when one went out doing the rounds with such an enthusiastic comrade as Ocholla, it was impossible to know when to give up and go home. Besides, the kind of money they made on the construction site was the type that unhinged your nut when you tried to budget. If he had to pay the house rent from it, Ben figured he would then have to borrow the booze money from Wini. Wini was all he had, everything he wanted. Well, maybe she did come from the gutter, but then so did a lot of other good things. Just like they said, 'the greenest Sukuma Wiki grows around the rubbish dump.' Ben had met her on the day he was kicked out of the Panafrican Insurance Company. It must have been someone from the bloody Sixth Army who betrayed him, maybe the C.O. bastard.

Mr Wilkins, the company manager, called Ben to his office. Ben had no idea what it was all about until the manager tossed the military discharge letter across the desk. He looked through it, tossed it back on the desk. His goose was cooked. The good times were over.

'Such a long time ago,' he said lamely.

Mr Wilkins nodded indifferently and tossed another letter on the desk. This one was the Insurance Company's appointment letter.

'Clause thirteen,' the white man said. Ben read. Had he at any time been convicted in a court of law? His answer was No. His signature was at the bottom of the questionnaire.

'It was a military court,' he said.

'Court of law,' Mr Wilkins said.

'I wasn't convicted,' Ben argued. 'I was simply discharged. There was no evidence.'

Mr Wilkins relit his cigar. Ben sat on the desk.

'We have been instructed by . . . certain persons, to take action,' the manager said. 'They want results.'

He was sorry for Ben, he went on to say. But the matter was a serious one

and there was nothing he could do to avoid it. He wished Ben all the best in life and fired him.

Ben collected his month's pay and went straight to the nearest bar. He got drunk and thought. It would be impossible to get a job in the civil service. They would somehow find out about his military service and fire him, or maybe even imprison him. He was without a job and drinking his last pay. He was determined to do it in style, and probably with a woman.

That evening he went to his most favourite bar at the New Garden Hotel. It was the liveliest joint in town. One cold drink in the outer bar in the company of some of the prettiest women in town, or in the jostle-bustle of the slot-machines room. They had a packed house that night. The whole of the inner room where the jukebox and the slot-machines were was stifling with all sorts of perfumes and cigarette smoke. The girls looked particularly flashy. Everyone in sight was busy, guys trying to get a beer and a woman, and the girls trying for the precious shilling. The jukebox choked on silver coins. The waiters were harder to attract than ever. There were quite a few tourists, those business-wrecking monsters who never gave average income guys a chance to buy themselves a woman.

'Hello darling,' a large heavy duty wrapped her hand round Ben's.

'Hi,' he released himself.

'You have been lost,' she sang.

'Not me baby. Money.'

There was no place to sit. She followed him to the jukebox. He leaned on it.

'Where have you been?' she asked.

'Just around.'

There was not a familiar male face anywhere. The girls were all familiar. They had always been there. And there was no doubt they would still be there come Doomsday. Always wanting something from you that was not a free lay. The big one hung on his arm:

'Buy me a beer.'

'I have just come.'

'Buy me a soda then.'

'I have just come,' he repeated. Anything bought for this one was money wasted. He remembered her labouring in bottom gear when he was in overdrive, breaking his back, and pulling leg muscles. Suddenly he turned to her.

'Buy me a beer,' he told her. She made a rude noise with her tongue, withdrew her arm and drifted off. No time to waste on guys like him. There were so many fish around they were being practically washed ashore. He watched her waggle her bottom away into the people, shook his

head and dived for a waiter. The man pulled up with a start and cursed.

'One cold Pilsner,' Ben told him.

'Warm or cold?'

'Cold.' He looked around. Good Lord. The Garden was super-charged! Just to watch the girls shake their money-makers in response to the jukebox was enough to start you off.

'Give me a cigarette,' someone said. He looked her over. Not too bad. Not bad at all. Small compact figure, dark chocolate skin, nice clear eyes and a large afro-hair.

'What type of cigarette do you want?' he asked.

'What types do you have?'

'One type of cigarette,' he smiled mischievously. 'I also have a large cigar down here, but that is another story.'

She laughed.

'You are naughty.' He placed his beer bottle on the jukebox and gave her a cigarette. He lit it for her, admired her neat bosom.

'What are the books for?' he asked. She looked at the two large volumes under her arm and shrugged.

'For reading. I am a student.'

'Here?' he smiled.

'I was going home and decided to check on my friends. I study advanced course at Jones Secretarial College.'

'I see,' he nodded. He had heard the story before. Keeping the front door clean, it was called.

'You work some place?' he asked. She shook her beautiful head.

'That is why I am trying the advanced. I could not get a job with my intermediate.'

'Good luck,' he said. She smiled and asked:

'You are new here?' Ben shook his head.

'I just don't come too often.'

'I have not seen you.'

He took a mouthful of beer and studied her gift-package neatness. Her large silver ear-rings gave her the innocent appearance of a Negro goddess. A thin gold chain adorned her tender neck and disappeared into the deep V cut of her dress, between the budding breasts.

'Where do you work?' Her pouted mouth let out the words in a thin jet of cigarette smoke.

'I don't.'

'Oh!' A drunk harlot wedged herself in between them. He shoved her off and smiled at his friend. Another chucked a coin into the music machine and requested him to get his arse off the buttons. At a slot machine a man

struggled to fit a ten cents coin into the shilling slot. The coin rolled under the machine. He went on all fours to retrieve it and someone walked on his back. A scuffle erupted. Ben waved at the waiter.

'Another Pilsner.'

'Warm or cold?'

'Same as the last one . . . cold, and wait just a moment . . . ' He turned to the girl.

'Want a drink?' She nodded.

'A beer?' She shook her head.

'Sprite.'

'Sprite? What is the matter with you?' She shrugged. The waiter bustled off.

'Don't you ever drink beer?' he asked.

'Sometimes.'

'What times?'

'Not now.'

'You don't drink on duty is that it?' He laughed.

The drinks arrived presently. They drank in silence. New Garden life rushed on by. Some girls were already drunk. The noise level rose and kept rising. No-one minded.

'Where do you live?' Ben asked.

'Ngara. You?'

'In town.'

'Where in town?'

'River Road.' Grogan Road was no place to brag about.

'Good house.'

'Not too bad,' he said, having in mind the roach epidemic and the blocked toilet.

'I would love to live in town,' she dropped.

But of course, he thought, it is good for business.

'Do you live alone?' he asked. She nodded.

'I used to live with a friend and split the rent. She got married.'

'And how do you pay the rent now?'

'From men. Men like you.'

'Do they pay a lot?'

She smiled slyly.

'It depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether I like them or not.'

Ben put on a naughty expression.

'Do you like me?'

She cocked her head, regarded him critically, smiled and burst into laughter.

'You are funny.'

'Don't you like funny men?'

'Sometimes.'

'This time?'

'Maybe.' Good news! Last time he had asked a Garden woman if she liked him her reply had been 'I like you my dark handsome man, but I love money.' Today's was a good sign. He drained his bottle.

'Another drink?' he asked.

'I haven't finished.' Her Sprite was still three-quarters full. She was so convenient by comparison to her sisters, who drank beer like water. He waved at a waiter.

'Sure you don't want to try something different, like a beer or something?' he insisted. She shook her pretty head.

'Another cold Pilsner,' he told the waiter.

'Money please,' the waiter said.

'I am not running anywhere.'

'The rules are cash first,' the other informed him. 'I have done you a favour, given you two rounds.'

Ben extracted his neat pile of notes and paid a pound. He stuffed the rest of the money carelessly into his pocket.

'What do you do?' the girl asked.

'Nothing.'

'You are lying to me.'

'Why should I?' he shrugged. She sipped from the bottle, her lips hardly making contact. A little soda spilt on the front of her blouse. He hurried to her service with his handkerchief, slowly feeling the firm breasts under his curious fingers. If she had not stuffed her brassiere cups, this baby had dynamite. He looked up to find her watching him patiently. He stopped.

'Satisfied?' she smiled cunningly. He shrugged.

'Almost. One has to see to believe.'

'You are funny,' she laughed. A commotion started in the corner. It spread quickly through the room. From the mêlée the waiter emerged carrying the beer and the change.

'Cigarette?' the girl asked Ben.

'Sure.' He loved the way she pouted her lips. But then who went kissing New Garden women except drunken tourists! Like the three old white men in the corner. He lit her cigarette and admired wide-eyed the oversized, sea-green tanzanite ring on her finger. She was expensive. One hell of an expensive 'student'.

'Wini!' one of the two girls with the three tourists called. Ben's friend waved back, blew a kiss at her friend and laughed.

'So you are Wini?' he asked. She nodded.

'A pretty name!'

'What's yours?'

'Ben.'

'Ben. That is nice too.'

'Particularly when you say it.'

The girl with the tourists called for Wini again and beckoned. Wini shook her head.

'Who is she?' Ben asked.

'Just a friend.'

Ben studied Wini. It was heartbreaking to see all these pretty harlots while one could hardly lay one's hands on a pretty, decent woman. Wini could make a charming girlfriend.

At ten, an hour to closing time, the crowd thinned. Ben gulped down his beer and quickly ordered another. Wini took another Sprite. He regarded her quietly, entertaining the idea of sleeping with her. Then he gave up the idea of taking her home. She might just start quoting ridiculous amounts of money.

'Wini!' her friend called again. She shook her head.

'Why not find out what she wants?' Ben spoke up. 'She may have a client for you.' She struck him tenderly on the shoulder. Then she smiled.

'Okay. I will come back.' She left her handbag and books with him. He watched her sway away, with the easy rolling gait of a girl who knows she is being watched and likes it. Her legs oozed out of the skirt soft and sure. She was great to watch, to touch, to hug. But with the tourists around the prices must be bad. A hell of a lousy day to try and work out a deal.

He chucked the greedy jukebox a shilling and punched the keys at random. Across the room Wini protested, shaking her head violently. The three white men tried to understand. One girl held Wini back. She released her hand, came strutting back to Ben. It made him feel several inches taller.

'What do they want?' he asked.

'A third party.' She picked up her bottle. 'They want to go to the Starlight.' For a moment he was afraid she might leave. Instead she leaned on him, exerting hard, hot pressure, and seemed to settle down.

'Well, are you not going?'

She sneered.

'Me, with those?'

He smiled.

'They pay well, tourists, don't they?'

'But who wants to have that all through the night?'

He shrugged. 'Your friends do.'

'Those will lay with anything,' she lowered her voice. 'The fat one is the daughter of the Minister for Mines. She used to be at school in the States. After one year she came back, pregnant as can be, and she did not even know who was responsible. And she still shows off. Thick as mud and always talking about New York and her American boyfriends.'

Here we go, Ben sighed, professional jealousy?

'And the dark one?' he asked.

'She is hopeless. She has been aborting pregnancies ever since we were in school. That is why she looks so scrawny. Actually she is younger than me. Now she wants a baby and she cannot have one. She has this boyfriend who will only marry her if she conceives.'

The party left. The tourists threw Wini a last longing look and walked out. The bar was nearly empty. A waiter walked in, broom in hand, and started to stack up the plastic chairs so he could sweep.

'Time to leave,' Ben observed. He drained his bottle. She did the same with hers. They walked out. The nightwatchman shifted his club from left to right hand and opened the main door to let them through.

'Taxi?' a driver called. Ben shook his head. The street lay cold and deserted. There were only two taxis left at the usually crammed parking bays. The neon New Garden flashed incessantly above them. He turned to the girl.

'Which way are you going?'

'I don't know,' she shook her head. 'I would like to go to the Starlight. Maybe I should go home.'

It was too late for the Starlight, he thought. You don't take a girl there when you eventually have to pay for the goods. Most time you either stay there with her until five in the morning, or lose her to anyone else who is willing to stay.

'I would like to go to the Starlight too,' he stated, 'but not today. It is usually too crowded at this time of the month.' She said nothing. She breathed softly, clutching her handbag and books and staring into the distance expectantly. She was one hell of a pretty whore. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully. She did not seem to want to go anywhere either. He regarded her stiff-necked posture and wondered what she was thinking.

'Would you like to see my place?' he tested.

She looked up, her large eyes glassy with indecision.

'Is it far?'

'No, but we could take a taxi.'

'I would prefer to walk.' He took her books, put them under his arm. They turned down the street to Government Road. He slipped his hand into hers.

'It is cold,' she uttered. He got his arm round her waist. She felt warm, so good. He trimmed his strides to match hers. Her hip rubbed against his leg, soft and hard at the same time. His mind raced ahead of him and tried to figure out how it would be at home.

A late bus jammed with late-drinkers ground gears and shuddered up the road towards Kebete. Along River Road, watchmen stirred awake by their fires to watch them pass. Somewhere in the bowels of the twisted dark lanes between Grogan and River Roads someone screamed for help. No-one was likely to answer the call. Robbers were earning their bread today too.

The Karara Centre was still open. The barman could not close at the usual time. Never. The patrons would murder him, wreck the joint and set it on fire. The police did not harass him about keeping to the regulations. They got a tip to keep away and more than that they did not care. Even then as now, the whole town knew that the Centre and its crowd were lost to the Devil. A kind of emergency filling-station half-way between here and Hell.

The Hell crowd was gathered outside the Bar watching a man fight a woman. Nobody helped the woman. She had drunk his beer and would not go to bed with him. He was just paying himself for the trouble. She protested that she had not had anything from him. All he wanted was a free lay, which he definitely would not get. No one cared for the truth. This was fun just to watch.

Ben conducted Wini through them towards home. In the absence of the daytime scorching heat, the streets stank less. The overflow from the burst sewer looked less horrid in the street lamplight and there was less dust too. The unlit Grogan Road did however still carry the eerie atmosphere that made it a favourite for muggers and other criminals. Wini clung to him, almost afraid.

'I thought you said River Road.'

'I meant Grogan. It is just about the same.' Hand in hand they felt the way up the stuffy stairs. He opened the door and sighed with relief. Cockroaches scrambled for cover under chairs, beds, everywhere. He crushed two under his shoes, gave up and watched Wini for reaction.

'You have them here too,' she said simply. He shrugged.

'I have done everything I can.'

'You cannot kill them,' she threw her handbag onto the chair. 'I have

tried all I can in my house. You find them playing with the insecticide container, trying to eat the plastic lid.'

He laughed, placed her books on the table. She walked to his bed, took off her shoes and started plaiting her hair. Her easy, well-coordinated movements arrested his attention. He watched the sleek dark arms loop over her head and the fingers expertly twist, fasten and tame her long afro-hair. His heart smiled.

Except for the floor the room was clean and neat. No dirty dishes, not too much waste paper lying around. He hung his coat up behind the chair. With one hand she held up his photograph. She looked at it and sniggered, exposing the sparkling rows of white teeth.

'Yours?' He nodded.

'It is good.'

'Not too bad,' he agreed. She tossed it back onto the bed and continued with her hair. Finally she started to undress, blouse first, then skirt. She was left in the clinging flesh-coloured bra and panty. His temperature started rising. He sat on the bed, took off his shirt and unlaced his shoes. His breath came out sluggish, his mouth dry with the room dust.

'You play guitar?' she asked, lying back on the bed.

'Yes,' on an impulse.

'Play for me.'

'I am not really good,' he shook his head.

He kicked the shoes under the bed and took off his trousers. He walked to the door, shot the bolt and turned the key. He stopped near the bed to admire Wini. She was stretched full length, eyes closed, breathing softly. Her flat belly lay placid like the cool gentle waters of a quiet bay. Her right hand covered her navel, the chocolate body expanse exaggerating the large blue-green tanzanite. Her bust thrust up invitingly, tapered down to the smooth goddess neck and the smooth curved shoulders, interrupted only by the thin gold chain. Just below the bust her heart beat fast and hard. Her legs sprouted thick and soft at the base, then flowed gently down his bed to the small feet. Her under things went well with Wini's chocolate body. Ben held his breath, blood hammering in his head and chest.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

'Come to bed.'

He sat on it.

'Get in,' he told her. She rolled over to the wall. He pulled back the coverings. She slipped in. He tried to follow. She stopped him, unpinned the large ear-rings and handed them to him to put on the table. She took off the ring. It was heavy, smooth and expensive.

'It's big.' He put it on the table with the ear-rings. She sniggered,

'Did you buy it?' he asked.

'A gift.'

He did not ask who from. A girl like Wini was likely to attract hundreds of able admirers.

'It must have cost a fortune,' he thought out loud.

She took off the slim gold chain and cross round her neck and gave it to him. It was thin, soft, almost slippery in his hand.

'Another gift?'

She nodded. She thrust the warm bra into his hands. Her fragrant French perfume hit him a hard, stunning blow. Before he could place the two on the table, he had the flimsy panties in his hands. They burnt his fingers.

'You do really undress,' he gasped, breathing hard and swallowing noisily.

'Are you coming or not?' she smiled.

He got in with her, his senses so cooked up he could no longer smell the sweat of his dirty sheets. All he could smell was her sweet perfume and all he heard was her sighs. Her body burned scars on his. He turned to face her, felt her body with sweaty hands. She hugged him tight, clung to him. Her silky fingers caressed his neck and chest. She ran them over his face, eyes, lips, and tugged at his nose. She kissed him lightly on the mouth, her lips soft and moist, her breath smelling faintly of garlic. Suddenly she went berserk, her hands going wildly for his under-pants, yanking them off. He raised his legs to free them. The vintage bed groaned and moaned. Ben held his breath hard. His chest felt like bursting. His hands ran over the charged body to the taut behind, tugged, lifted. She moaned. His mind whirled like an electric fan, fanning hot air into the small bed. The head throbbed with the heartbeat, with the rhythm of everything else. Then he realized it. Wini was no dynamite. She was a neatly bound bomb. She exploded.

Ben surfaced slowly, lightly. The next door neighbour's radio was turned on full blast and Breakfast Club reached through the walls strong, but very soothing. The frying pans were already in their perpetual futile battle with the stink from the toilet. The smell of coffee too was faintly perceptible. Morning light streamed through the flimsy curtains.

He looked down on the sleeping Wini. She lay coiled snug in his arms like a young child, very much like the innocent little angel she once was. Her quiet soft breathing caressed the hair on his chest. It was almost a dream lying there with a girl so pretty, so professional and yet so tender.

He switched on the little radio to combat the noise from outside. The radio coughed, cleared phlegm, but did not say anything intelligible. He switched it off; he should have bought new batteries. He stretched and

yawned. Someone whistled in the ice-cold shower. Why the hell would anyone want to take a cold shower so early in the morning? To go to church or to the cheap morning film shows? Down the block a baby's voice rose in crying, feeble and pathetic in the din of the falling shower water and the smell of frying eggs.

Ben felt his chest and shoulder muscles sour and exhausted. He turned over slowly not to awaken the girl. She woke up anyway, opened her eyes and sighed. He smiled:

'Good morning.' She yawned.

'Slept well?' he asked.

'Huh?'

'Had a good night?'

'I don't know,' she sighed. 'I was asleep.' He laughed flatly, then crawled out of bed.

'Where are you off to?' Wini called after him.

'To urinate.'

He wrapped a towel round his loins and went out into the misty morning. One hell of a Sunday morning. His nextdoor neighbour, a man he heard whistle every morning but rarely woke up early enough to see, shivered out of the shower room and called Good Morning. Ben grunted a reply and walked into the toilet. He stood by the door and sent a jet of urine into the bowl. The stagnant mess splashed too much. He shifted the hose onto the wall and managed to keep his feet dry. Someone would have to do something about the toilet, either keep the shit flowing or demolish the goddam thing and dig a pit latrine. And then, he mused, what would the honourable roaches eat without their frothing broth?

'What time is it?' Wini asked as he got back into bed.

He consulted his temperamental watch.

'Eight fifteen.'

'Are you not going to work?' she looked up.

'Today is Sunday, baby,' he hugged her. She sighed. 'Besides,' he added, 'I don't work.' She looked up:

'What do you do?'

'I told you, -- nothing.'

The ragged living doll started squirming by his side. He felt her smooth legs up and down. She snuggled closer. He pinched her soft, tough behind. She yelped, bit his shoulder. They wrestled. The blanket slipped to the dusty floor. The sweaty pillow disappeared under the bed. Ben hoped the little bed would take it. Now he had her and she had him. He gasped for breath. He felt himself drift off, carried in waves of warm air. He did not struggle. He let himself go.

He next stirred awake to find Wini tugging at his ears and nose.

'Wake up. Are you going to sleep all day?' He rubbed his eyes.

'What time is it?' he asked her.

'The radio next door just said ten-thirty.'

'So early?'

'Early! I am sick of sleeping.'

He held her tight, whispered in her ear:

'So!'

'So I want to go home.'

'What's the hurry?'

'I have got things to do,' she stroked his chest.

'Business does not start until seven, eight o'clock tonight.'

He reached onto the table for a cigarette. One of her giant silver ear-rings clanged to the floor and rolled under the bed.

'You want a cigarette?'

'I don't smoke in bed,' she said.

'I do.' He lit it.

'It is so stuffy in here,' she said.

Here we go, Ben thought. They start noticing such details in the morning and never forget them. What will it be next – the bed sheets, or himself?

'Would you like to open the window?' he asked her.

'Yes.'

'Go right ahead.' He sent a jet of smoke to the ceiling. Without any hesitation she threw off the coverings and climbed over him out of bed. She got his slippers and pattered nude to the door. She stopped and remembered it was the window, not the door.

Ben regarded her lithe form and concluded she was beautiful. Just the type of a woman a guy would like to get tied to, marry. Marry? Damn! A professional from New Garden? But hell, what did it matter what she was? She was more intelligent than a lot of others in the bloody town. She got back into bed.

'You are beautiful,' he said faintly. She smiled at him.

'You are blind.' She tapped his nose with the slim forefinger. 'But I like your eyes. And nose. I like your big elephant ears too. You are beautiful, Ben.'

They lay silent for a while. He thought about her and wanted her all the more. Her hot breath caressed his shoulder. Suddenly she stirred.

'Ben.'

'Yes.'

'You look like Baby.'

He smiled. 'I am not his brother. Who the hell is he?'

'My boy,' she smiled, exposing lovely teeth.

'He wouldn't like to hear that, I am sure. Lucky bastard. What does he do?'

'He loves me, that is all,' her eyes twinkled with fun. 'And he is a nice boy.' Ben's heart sank. He envied the guy and tried to believe he did not. He twisted his lips in forced laughter.

'You love him?' he asked.

'Very much,' she smiled mischievously, 'he is my son.' Ben began to laugh with relief, then stopped abruptly. She looked at him seriously, her face plastered with the dying grin of a professional smiler.

'You have a child?' he asked soberly.

'Four years old.'

'But you are hardly . . . it is unbelievable.'

'I was fourteen, still in school,' she said and shrugged. 'I was so scared of having a baby.'

Ben blew smoke at the ceiling-walking roaches. Well, here we go again, the same old, sad story. And he wasn't sure why he was already jealous.

'My boyfriend was not even interested,' she added, 'men are such brutes. He just ran off and never came back to see the fruit of his beautiful labour. He was so scared too. It is surprising how men are afraid of nothing until a baby threatens. You should have seen his face when I told him.'

'You can't reason with a baby,' Ben joked.

'The boy is terrific,' her voice was firm and serious. 'And he has eyes like yours.' She caressed his shoulder, blew hot breath on it. 'Things I have had to do for him . . .' Suddenly she looked up again. 'You are not interested, Ben, are you?'

He shook his head slowly. 'No.'

'All right,' weakly.

He turned to strangle his cigarette and drop the corpse on the dusty floor.

'Ben,' she called.

'Yes?'

'I like you, Ben,' she gripped his arm. 'You are not like the others. Maybe I am stupid thinking so, but I like you all the same.'

'Whatever led you to think I am different?' he smiled hard.

'You are not . . .' she started.

'Be sensible, Wini,' he said. 'All I did last night, and all I have done this far is pick you up and sleep with you. I guess that is what they all do. And if it had not been me it would have been another.'

'That is why I say you are nice . . .'

'All right, all right,' he interrupted. 'So I am nice and all that. Do you have to tell me the confidential stuff?'

She grabbed his arm.

'But don't you think . . .'

'What I think is of no consequence,' he surged, almost angry. 'You remain what you are, and I what I am. After all, everyone has a sad story.'

'You think I am lying?'

'I think nothing.'

She bit his arm hard. He lay still on his back looking up at the ceiling. They stayed like that for a little while. Then she sighed and stirred.

'I must go now,' she told him. He said nothing. Slowly she climbed out of the bed and started to dress. He watched from the corner of his eye, admiring her natural beauty. Something within told him he had known this girl for a long time. Simple, frank and nice. The kind of girl he thought about when his mind went off the New Garden train. It was hard to imagine this girl was a professional.

'One ear-ring is under the bed,' he told her. She bent to get it. Wini had grace.

'You cannot take a bath here,' he said. 'The shower has very cold water and stinks.'

'Where don't they?' she smiled.

'That is not half the trouble,' he continued. 'You cannot even wash your face. I have only a chip of soap which can easily get lost in your hand. And I have only one towel which I also use to clean my shoes.' She shrugged.

'I will wash up at home.'

'You will stink in the bus,' he laughed. She slapped him lightly.

'Comb?'

'I have one naturally,' he answered. 'It has uneven, split teeth and it is an ordeal to use. If you still want to try, it is on the table.' She picked up the comb, examined it and weighed it thoughtfully in her hand. She shook her head, walked to the kitchen table.

'Do you ever take breakfast?' she wondered out loud.

'When there is tea, sugar, milk, paraffin for the stove and someone willing to light it. I have nothing this morning.'

She walked back to the table, threw the hair comb back on it.

'I think I will just get out and go,' she observed. 'I don't look too awful, do I? Have you got a mirror?'

'On the same table,' he informed her.

She rummaged in the mess on the table, empty cigarette packets, Snakes and Ladders, hundreds of bottle-tops for playing draughts.

'I cannot find the mirror,' she reported.

'I just saw it there.'

'Where?'

He rose on one arm to look. 'That red tablet under your fingers is the mirror, face down. The whole looking glass I have.' She picked it up, screwed her face in amazement. She tried to look into it and gave up. No visitor had managed the manoeuvre yet. Ben himself had barely learned the trick.

'It is big enough,' he directed. 'You rotate the glass by sixty degrees and screw your face to one-twenty degrees. You will certainly see your face, if you do not break your neck first.'

'Men are animals.' She said it without emotion. 'They talk like angels, behave like monkeys and live like beasts.' She took her heavy handbag and tried to fit her books into it.

'My comb!' she exclaimed, pouring the contents of the bag on the bed next to him. A flimsy pair of knickers, same type as she was wearing but red in colour, coins, can of face powder, tubes of creams, a leopardskin purse and a packet of aspirins. She had enough junk to start a pharmacy. She put the books into the bag and stuffed the rest after them. Ben could not tear his eyes away from her as she combed her hair.

'When do I see you again?' he asked.

'What for?' She said it simply but he had no doubt she meant it. He grimaced, nodded then smiled.

'Yes, indeed, what for?' He reached for his coat. He took out the sheaf of notes. 'How much do I owe you?'

She shrugged.

'One pound? Two? How much?'

'As much as you like,' she said.

He regarded her quizzically, then handed her a pound.

'Thank you.'

He shrugged, gave her another. The rest he dropped carelessly back onto the table. He lay back as she walked to the door.

'Bye.'

'Bye.' He struck a match, lit a cigarette, and felt sadism creeping over him again. 'Wini.'

She stopped, looked back.

'Don't go telling everybody what you just told me. You might just lose yourself a lot of customers.' He dragged on the cigarette. 'Most of them are glad you are what you are. They would appreciate it even more if you told them you joined up because you love getting laid.'

She paused and watched him blow careless smoke rings.

'Thank you, Ben,' she said seriously, walked out and banged the door shut. He went on looking up at the greying ceiling. His ears followed the tap-tap movements of her hard-soled shoes across the verandah until they were swallowed up by the general noise outside, and the crying child.

2

'Ben,' Ocholla calls urgently.

Ben looks up from memory rating and shakes himself fully awake. Yussuf the foreman lumbers over to them, caressing his greying moustache. Like the rest of them he is covered in dust. His arm pits and back are flowing with sweat, his sweater clinging tight over the large belly. He stops, looks from Ben to Ocholla expressing his disapproval in Gujarati. When they are together they are trouble. He reaches down for his wide trousers and hitches them over the jelly stomach before speaking.

'Finished?' he demands.

'Bet your arse,' Ocholla says under his breath.

'We should be on the floors,' Ben reminds him.

'I am sorry,' Yussuf says.

'Everybody is sorry,' Ben tells him. 'That is all they are.'

Yussuf regards him with the dark drug addict's eyes, eyes crammed with emotions that are neither love nor hate, eyes full of nothing.

'You see, Ben . . .'

'Don't lie to us,' Ocholla warns. 'What is next?' Yussuf turns to him.

'It is not my fault.'

'It is never your fault. What next?' The foreman shrugs shabby, fat shoulders.

'The iron bars.'

'Just the two of us?' Ben asks, staring at the pile of steel in awe.

'I will get you a helper, Ben.'

'Only one?'

Yussuf shrugs, his face screwed up helplessly.

'Okay, two,' he compromises. 'But only two. We are short of hands, Ben.'

I would say it's brains you are short of, Ben thinks, and spits into the dust. Hands! That is what they are here. That is all they are good for. If the contractor could make hands he would never need labourers. To Yussuf and his uncles, Ben and Ocholla and their lot are simply hands. Not workers, and never people.

A giant truck pulls up. The driver leans out of the cab and screams:

'Yussuf!'

'Wait!' Yussuf shouts back. The driver curses loudly. 'These damned new drivers,' Yussuf says to Ben. 'They think they own the site.'

'Where are they from?'

'Nakuru.'

'Yussuf!' the driver calls again. The Indian runs to him.

'Don't forget the two hands,' Ocholla shouts after him, and follows Ben towards the pile of reinforcing bars.

Ben bends and tries to lift one end of a steel bar. They are all six feet long and weigh heaven and hell. He lets out a surprised whistle. Ocholla tried to help and fails to make any impression on the weight. He sits down on the pile.

'Bastards,' he utters. Ben sits by his side.

'Who is that?'

'I don't know,' Ocholla answers. 'Nobody in particular. I am feeling quite mad today, Ben.'

Ben looks up at the serious face.

'Reduce your *Karara* consumption,' he advises.

'Never,' Ocholla shakes his head.

He would probably starve, Ben thinks. The way food prices are going it is just about all one can afford to take. Makes one think there is some bastard up there in the Ministry who does not love his arse. And why should they? Ben thinks. They never heard of Ocholla or any of the other hands for that matter. It has got to be a brother or an uncle, a rich one like Yussuf's.

'Yussup is vere?' They look up into the sunken face of Kanji Bhai, the self-declared first-class mason in East Africa.

'How much curry you bring for lunch, Bhai?' Ocholla demands.

'Yussup I vont, not talk chicken curry.'

'He has just left,' Ben tells him,

'Vere he go?'

'I don't know.'

Kanji Bhai curses in Hindu or whatever. He is just the opposite of Yussuf, lean and hungry and proud to be a professional. His sunken hawk-eyes stare at Ben, the toothless mouth chewing on the gum.

'What is the matter?' Ben asks.

'Pourty years I vork like mason,' he says seriously. 'Pourty years I vork. Mombasa, Kampala, Kisumu, whole East Aprica. First-class mason, first-class carpenter. Pourty years. Then, I come meet Yussup!'

The story unfolds itself at great length. Kanji Bhai asked for two hands to help him on the fourth floor and all he got from Yussuf was a couple of bastards who don't know the plumbline from their pricks nor a metre from

a foot. Kanji Bhai would like to kill Yussuf, but like everybody else on the site, he wants to keep his job.

'Pucking Grogan Road shit he send me, Ben.'

'Too bad, Bhai.'

'Vot you say about the chicken curry, Bhai?' Ocholla asks.

Bhai turns on him.

'Your madder curry,' he swears at him, then gathers his emaciated frame and carries his forty years of masonry bandy-legged back into the dust, into oblivion.

'Say, Ben,' Ocholla asks. 'Do you believe that "porty years" crap?'

'What difference does it make?'

'I just keep thinking' about Yussuf. What the Indian knows about building is not worth a shit. Construction foreman, hell! Say, Ben, how much do you think his uncles pay him?' Ben shakes his head. Nobody, not even the petty cashier knows what the Indians earn. They are paid by cheque directly from head office.

'Maybe three or four times what we earn,' he tells Ocholla. Ocholla fetches a bit of twig and starts scratching figures on his dark arms. He is a poor mathematician and the computations take a long while. Meanwhile the sun shines hot and grilling.

A tipper backs up to the mixer. The door crashes open. The lorry deposits two tons of sand, then roars off the site. The crane lowers its steel bucket to the metal bars barely two yards from the two men. Ben looks up at the controller and waves negative. The container whirls uncertainly and settles down to wait. Ben shouts Yussuf's name twice and gives up. Ocholla looks up at Ben, shakes his head and goes on calculating the foreman's salary. The crane controller whistles down at them. Ben waves negative again, calls for the Indian.

'One reason I hate ground duties,' he states looking around. 'Nothing is where it is wanted. These bars should be up there and Yussuf should be down here making sure they go up. Damn it!'

Ocholla looks up suddenly to announce the results of his research.

'Know what, Ben? The son of the devil earns one thousand three hundred shillings.'

'Must be much more,' Ben says. 'House allowance, insurance, and inconvenience allowance for soiling his beautiful white skin. It must be more!'

Ocholla nods thoughtfully. Then he whips off his cap, tortures his dirty kinky hair and slams the cap back on.

'All that for running around breathing curry into everybody's face and being an Indian like his uncles . . . sometimes it doesn't pay to be black, Ben.'

'Most times it doesn't,' Ben says, rolling his trouser legs up to look like Ocholla's. His shoes are so dusty they could have been whitewashed.

The crane driver whistles again. Ben cups his hands over his mouth and shouts up at him: 'Swine!' Ocholla grimaces, his bad-times smile, dusty and bitter.

'Say, how did you get into this bloody business, Ben?'

'Same as you,' Ben shrugs. 'I was not conscripted.'

'I had to bribe a labour officer,' Ocholla says gravely. Ben guffaws. 'Had to,' Ocholla shrugs. 'The labour exchange man said there were at least three million manual labourers in the city!'

Ben squints into the dust. His case is different. He had a chance, a well paying job, but he boshed it. What enrages him is to think that he will never make it up again, just because his ever-zealous Commanding Officer has made it his business to hound him and keep on frustrating him for a crime he has already paid for. It must have been the C.O. who got him fired from the Panafrican Insurance Office. And most probably too, the colonel's brother or nephew or something took up Ben's job in the insurance business. And what would the colonel do if he learned where Ben was now working? Perhaps tickle his fat belly with mirth and dispatch another of his brothers with a letter to the contractors.

'Better get the bloody Indian, Ben,' Ocholla nudges him. He rises to his clicking knees and wanders off into the compound shouting for the foreman. Trucks roar through the place in a sort of determined dust stirring competition. The storm clears for a moment and the cement mixture ghostly reappears. A weary hand wrestles with the cement eating monster. It can be hard to tame.

'Seen Yussuf?' Ben calls. The man shakes his head.

'Is he the fat Indian?' one of the new drivers calls.

'They are all fat around here.' The driver distorts a dispassionate rough face with a grin. 'There are two over by the entrance,' he says.

Ben takes his time getting to the gate. Yussuf is busy conversing with Mr Singh, his boss, everybody's boss. The way the two talk, gesticulating towards the building every now and then, they could have been conspiring to sabotage Development House. Ben carries himself slowly over and hangs around waiting for a suitable break in the heated dialogue so he may break in. Yussuf glances at him and goes on explaining to the boss. This takes too long. Ben shuffles the dust impatiently with his feet. He tries to break in: 'Yussuf ...'

'Wait!' the foreman interrupts, and goes on explaining to the other Indian. Ben leans on the bonnet of Mr Singh's Mercedes and wonders why the hell he ever joined up with the builders. A truck passes by and buries

them in dust. Out of the gate, the avenue is busy as usual with its reckless traffic. Across the avenue at the railway station a train whistles and lets out spurts of thick black smoke. Ben swirls his sour tongue through his teeth collecting the dust on them, rolls the mess into a gob of spit and hurls it into the dust at his feet. Damn!

'Yussuf!' he burst in, 'your bloody props are still on the ground because you have not sent me the men you promised!'

'Just wait for me,' the foreman waves him away impatiently. 'I am coming!'

Ben looks from one boss the the other and spits more grit at their feet. They don't even take notice of this. He curses under his breath and heads back to his work station. He steps aside to let a truck pass, leaving thick dust powder in its wake. Fuck all the new drivers! They drive as though this were Uhuru Highway. He hugs the side of the road next to the tall corrugated iron sheet wall. Another tipper approaches from the direction of the site. It stops fifty yards ahead of him. Ben drifts closer. Then all of a sudden the truck snorts into gear and charges him. He dodges to the left. It steers for him. He dives back to the right, holds his breath for the impact. The lorry skids in the thick dust and burrows into the site wall tearing off wood and metal.

Ben stands frozen in the dust, his legs rocking, his heart racing wildly. The dust slowly settles. He opens his eyes, as the truck reverses from the wrecked wall. But for the smashed left light the machine is undamaged. The driver leans out of the cab, his fat face smiling itself ugly.

'Hi, lieutenant.'

Ben's heart takes a throw. His mind goes completely blank with shock.

'These things can be tough driving, don't you think?' Ben's brain crawls into forward. The fat face drawls into focus and holds. His mouth feels sticky and sour. The tongue seems frozen, kind of choking him. The dust-covered tipper driver smiles, exposing an ugly cavern where the upper front teeth ought to be. The remaining teeth are stained deep brown from chewing curd tobacco. His fat checks, the rough bearded face and dust-covered pate do not figure in Ben's mind.

'You have a short memory, lieutenant,' the man laughs. Ben clears his throat. 'Who the devil are you?'

The ugly cavern on the pudgy face opens again, emitting a low, crisp whizz which Ben takes for laughter.

'The name is Onesmus,' he spits tobacco refuse into the dust at Ben's feet. Ben looks deliberately from the offending mess at his feet to the driver. A hard, bitter smile twitches at the corners of his mouth. Memories streak through his head and instead of the rugged truck driver he sees a

trim sergeant major Onesmus of the B company Support Platoon. He pauses, lost between awe at the thought of the circumstances under which they parted and the joy of the unexpected reunion.

'Sergeant One-Arse-Mess,' he speaks uncertainly. 'I will be darned!' The ex-sergeant laughs out loud. 'It's good to see a lieutenant all dust and grit,' he says. 'A real officer-mess!' Ben smiles, shrugs.

'I see some second rate dentist has been trying to improve your looks, One-Arse. He should have knocked all the teeth out.' The ex-sergeant's face turns suddenly dark and twisted in rage.

'I haven't forgotten, lieutenant,' he snarls, 'I will get you yet.'

'I warned you bastards,' Ben protests crossly, 'I warned you and everybody else.'

'It was your bloody idea.'

'I did explain the risks . . .'

Yussuf hobbles up to them, looking spent from the long conference with Mr Singh. 'What's up Onesmus?' he demands. 'Drunk again?'

'Keep out of this, Yussuf,' the driver barks.

'Out of what? You drive over everybody and everything and I keep out of it. Who do you think you are? You will pay for this,' he points at the ruined wall.

'Whose fault is it if the truck does not steer properly?' Onesmus counters.

'I told you to change the damned truck,' Yussuf reminds.

'Change to what?'

Yussuf steps round to examine the damage on the wall and the truck. He shakes his head sadly. 'This is bad,' he regards the driver. 'One could get fired for this. It is bad. Well, I will find you a better truck tomorrow. Now get going and get the hell out of here.'

'That's better,' Onesmus restarts the motor and eases the tipper forward. Ben steps far back, squinting at the driver.

'As for you, son-of-an-uncircumcised bitch,' Onesmus calls to him, 'I hope you break your neck!'

The tipper roars out of the site to pick up more sand. The dust settles. Yussuf shakes his head at the receding truck, scratches his fat belly. 'Always drunk,' he observes to Ben. His red eyes seem to notice him for the first time for a long while.

'What the hell did you want me so bad for?' he demands.

Ben stirs.

'Your bloody steel is waiting on the ground,' he informs.

'So what?'

'The extra hands you went to fetch, where are they?'

'Haven't they come?' Ben shakes his head. 'I will fire the bastards.' Yussuf rushes off in his now familiar rush that normally takes place only in his mind. After two fast steps he reverts to the regular slouch-waddle that gets him to the scene of the emergency when it is already stale. Ben tags thoughtfully behind.

'That Onesmus,' he calls at Yussuf. 'Has he been here long?'

'Crazy as the devil,' Yussuf answers, then: 'He came two days ago. We need every hand we can get. He came with the lot from Nakuru. Always drunk and . . .' he stops to stare at Ben. Ben stops too.

'Promise you won't tell, Ben,' Yussuf whispers, though it is not really necessary in the construction racket.

'Tell what?'

Yussuf stares at him a moment, shrugs and waddles on, apparently already decided that Ben cannot keep a secret. He stops again, shrugs.

'Onesmus is a killer,' he confides in Ben. 'Killed three people last year. He does it for money, too. He drinks, smokes bhang and kills.'

Ben's body crawls uncomfortably. He tries to shrug off the fear and follows Yussuf. His feet shuffle reflectively into the thick soft dust, his hand thrust deep into his pockets feeling the holes at the bottom. Why the hell had Onesmus come to Development House of all the damned sites scattered round the country?

'Bastard!' he curses loudly.

Yussuf whirls on him.

'Not you, flat feet,' Ben leises, 'your driver.'

'He is crazy that Onesmus,' Yussuf goes on. 'Crazy, but a bloody good driver. Damned good driver!'

Ocholla gets up to welcome the foreman. 'You didn't have to find him that soon,' he growls at Ben.

'What?' Yussuf turns to him.

'I'm not talking to you.' Yussuf tries to lift one steel bar and fails. He goes hunting for the extra hands. Ocholla turns to Ben.

'That was Onesmus, wasn't it?' Ben nods and tries to look unconcerned.

'What has he got against you?' Ocholla follows. Ben shrugs.

'Yussuf says he is cracked.'

'Watch out, Ben,' Ocholla warns. 'He is dangerous. He killed three guys on the National Bank site. Just like that. An argument, an accident. He is dangerous. You don't want to cross him.'

Ben reflects back to something the driver said to the foreman.

'Steering difficulty,' he mutters, his face marred by deep furrows. Ocholla turns his clothes inside out in a thoroughly resolved search that yields one cigarette.

'Last one,' he explains, lighting it.

Ben lights one for himself. His buddy is not mean. As a principle he just does not offer cigarettes to anybody. He always only has the last one. They smoke in the hot sun of the late morning. Presently Yussuf returns with a couple of rugged, weathered hands.

'Off your arse,' he calls. The tiresome loading begins soon after the foreman has left and Ocholla finished smoking the last cigarette. There follows a period of inactive confusion while they vote on the best way to load the heavy problem on the bucket. Eventually the bucket gets loaded. Then someone has to turn up to the fourth floor to rouse the sleeping crane driver. That is another snag on the development site. Almost everybody who can afford it is a confirmed and sealed drunkard. They spend the nights in the bars and the days sleeping on the job. Besides, there is no hurry in building a twenty-five storey Development House when you are only on the fourth floor. You will only throw yourself back into the masses of the hopeless jobless if you hurry.

Ocholla volunteers to trudge up the rough stairs to stir the cranesman. Ben sits down to wait. One of the other two hands starts to roll himself a cigar. It will not take the envoy less than fifteen minutes to get the fourth floor, another five to get the crane driver to start hauling and another ten minutes bumming a cigarette each from everybody in sight. Then he will probably smoke one of them, 'the last one', and descend.

Presently the crane bucket stirs to life, totters uncertainly and floats upwards. They move back to give it room. Ocholla ambles carelessly back, half an hour sooner than expected. His frown warns Ben that something is wrong.

'What happened?' Ben asks.

'The bums up there,' Ocholla thumbs upwards, shaking his dusty head. 'Three of them smoke bhang, two chew tobacco and four of them are too mean to do anything.'

'What time is it?' one of the spare hands ask.

'Far from lunchtime,' Ocholla answers. 'You bums better do some work before I get Yussuf after your arses!'

Ben rolls his shirt sleeves back up. What he needs is a short-sleeved shirt.

Towards lunchtime the sun gets to a hot peak. Sweat rivulets cascade down faces sweeping dust into tired eyes. The crane makes repeated hauls. Hands get rough and sore from handling steel. Lorries convoy into the site bringing more work for the already full hands. Ben makes sure to keep as far away from the lorries as possible; one of them has faulty steering and a mad one-arse-mess in it. There is no telling what faults the others carry.

At long last the gong signals lunchtime. Time for grub. Everybody drops

whatever they have in their hands. A driver leaves the engine on his truck running, the body raised in the process of off-loading some sand. Yussuf curses, climbs on board and switches it off. The mixer driver bangs the stone gurling machine dead and follows the stream of workers. The crane bucket sways uncertainly, hesitant, abandoned in mid-air by the bhang-smoking controller.

Ben recovers from day-dreaming and joins the procession. It is hard to imagine how large a labour force there is on Development House until you see them scramble for lunch. Big ones, small ones, fat ones, and starved ones, all raggedly dusty with cement powder from head to toe and as ravenous as the Grogan Road roaches.

Grubland lies across Haile Selassie Avenue. The food kiosks are spread haphazardly under the tall blue gums in a large grassy area between the Kenya Polytechnic, the Government Printers and the railway station. There are at least six scraggy paper and wood shanty hotels: Quick Service (so quick they serve the food before it is quite ready); Sukuma Wiki (Labourers Specialists); Tree Bottoms (they could not get it up the trees), and the ground-scraping Hilotoni. The newest ones have not earned themselves names yet.

The builders eat their lunch in phases. Phase One is getting safely across Haile Selassie Avenue. The motorists using the narrow road have proved that they will stop at nothing to get to their lunch. They have made it a ritual to butcher one or two pedestrians every week as a sacrifice to the Highway Gods. Phase Two of the labourers' lunch is getting the manager to give you lunch on credit. This involves convincing him that you will not suddenly get killed while crossing the avenue or be fired from your job before you have paid all your debts. This is not an easy phase. Phases Three and Four include the actual eating and the inevitable diarrhoea.

Ben streaks through a gap in the speeding machines and makes straight for the Hilotoni. Their food is terrible, they have a fat one-eyed cook who can never put anything in the right proportions, but the manager is Ben's business friend and allows him credit. There are a lot of manual toilers at the Hilotoni today. Cement buggers are not the only ones who never have enough money to pay cash for their lunch. Workers from the railway station and the Government Printers have recently taken to lunching under the trees, due to the sudden closures of their canteens. Trouble is they get to the shanty hotels earlier and take all the crates forcing the Development House builders to sit on the hard, bare ground.

Ben follows the queue near the corrugated iron and paper kitchen. The clerk, the fifteen year old son of the manager, keeps the accounts while the men collect their food. The manager, Mr Hilotoni, old, grey-haired

myopic, wears a dirty great coat in spite of the gruelling sun and supervises the service. The one-eyed mother serves the food, the son keeps tab and cheats at it, and the father audits. They are a fine organized family. So business-like, they will make broth out of dishwater and serve it to the hungry gang.

'What will it be today?' the business manager asks Ben.

'Same as always.'

'*Posho* is finished,' the mother's one eye glints sadly businesslike.

'There are too many people for lunch these days,' the old man wags his head, the face down, to show it is the lunchers' fault there is never enough food for all. The woman regards Ben apprehensively.

'What is there?'

'Maize and beans,' she says. That is one dish she can rarely get well done.

'And porridge,' the manager adds. It is too hot for that.

'And tea and bread,' the young accountant utters, thumbing through the cash book to Ben's chapter. Ben will have to take tea and bread.

'Tea and bread,' he orders.

'Tea and bread,' the manager repeats, taking out a snuff box.

'Two slices,' Ben tells them. The clerk scribbles in large deformed semi-illiterate letters. He writes the total, twenty cents less than the real bill, winks at Ben and flips the pages to confuse the old man. He makes a fortune at the end of the month when he pockets the difference. Not a bad beginning for one following his crooked father's footsteps in business.

Ben receives his lunch; the tea in a tin mug labelled Esso Motor Oil, the dry slices of a dryer loaf of bread wrapped in a piece of old newspaper. He clears the way for the woman to dip another dirty tin (this one labelled Robbialic Paint) into a bucket of milky dirty water, slosh it around and refill it with porridge for another hungry customer.

'Over here, Ben,' Ocholla calls from under a tree, his mouth full of food. The grass under the tree is worn thin from the many bony arses that have sat on it. Ben drops by his workmate, arranges the meagre lunch in front of him. He picks one slice of bread, cracks it into two and chews. Ocholla is already halfway through a plateful of maize and beans, chewing so violently his jaws could break.

'Doesn't your stomach ever hurt from eating that stuff? Ben asks him,

'So what,' he nods, chewing fast and efficiently. 'It also hurts when I am hungry.'

'Genius,' Ben flushes a giant green fly off the edge of his mug.

'There was this restaurant we had at a site,' Ocholla says between mouthfuls. 'It was called The Foreman's Special. They served foreman shit - and we loved it.'

The workers are as enthusiastic about food as the foreman, Yussuf, would love to make them overwork and never will. A low rumbling hum rises above the roar of the traffic on the avenue a few yards away. It could be conversation. It could be the battle cries from the armies of teeth and food.

'The Hilotoni manager complains there are too many patrons,' Ben says. Ocholla grunts and swallows loudly.

'Time they expanded,' he says seriously. 'I have seen a few fellows from the Treasury buildings too. They used to have a canteen out there.'

'The messengers and cleaners always came here,' Ben tells him.

'Those were clerks I saw. You know, the bastards flaunting their government ballpoint pens and twisted neckties. And frowning at food even while they are shovelling tons of it into their big mouths. Those buggers are queer, Ben.'

Ben breaks another piece of bread.

The Treasury indeed. Things are looking up for Hilotoni Kiosks Limited. It always starts like that. First the messengers, then the clerks, then . . . the whole bloody lot. Old man Hilotoni will have to expand his shed. Maybe he will also raise the food prices to counter the increased demand. This is the kind of economics even he ought to understand. If someone wants leftovers for pig-swill, charge them for it.

Ocholla breaks off a bit of dry grass and fishes a green fly out of his hot porridge. Ben smiles.

'There must be hundreds of them in the teapot,' Ocholla tells him. 'I saw them strain your tea.'

'Pity they can't strain the porridge,' Ben grins.

'Germs don't kill Africans,' that is Ocholla's long time philosophy. Ben tilts his head thoughtfully. Ocholla has a point there. If germs did kill Africans, Development House would never have got off the ground. What with all those green latrine flies swimming in the pot, shitting in the porridge and dying all over, even drowning in the tea. Ocholla has a point. Germs cannot kill Africans, never will. He looks round at the eating workers. Only hunger will kill an African – tough beast. A car screeches on the avenue narrowly missing a student from the Kenya Polytechnic. Everybody looks that way. Cars too, Ben ponders. Those do kill Africans. Starvation and cars. Those two are the workers' number-one public enemy.

'Lucky bastard,' Ocholla says of the student. 'Imagine dying before lunch.' Ben imagines. It is bad to die at any time. It is very bad to do anything on an empty stomach.

Workers eat seriously and fast. Hunger is their number-one enemy. Their instinctive fear of starvation emerges in a kind of suppressed rage which they

let loose on whatever food comes their way. It is as though the cement dust they inhale is digested in the mouth to create a fire-proof lining round the mouth.

Ben drains his mug and stands up. Ocholla does the same. The Hilotoni is a convenient grub station. After the picnic you desert the utensils wherever you are for them to collect. A few hungry street urchins hang around and collect the plates so they may take care of the leftovers before cleaning. And when it comes to hunting for mugs and plates, there is no cook, clerk or manager. Business is business.

The two buddies join the large crowd assembled at the zebra crossing waiting to cross. Cars sweep by at rally speeds oblivious to the nervously-waiting mass of humanity. Drivers never give way. They fear losing forever their right of way. Once a pedestrian mob reclaims a zebra crossing there is no telling when they will let you have it back. The driving society knows this. They also know they have the trump card in the survival game – the death machine in their hands.

A reckless foot-slogger desperately dashes across. Tyres shriek. Drivers curse the idiotic pedestrians. The rest of the barefoot squad drag themselves across the rubber smelling road. They have their rights too; whenever the haughty inconsiderate car owners stop trampling on them. Meanwhile the motorists honk, bite their nails at the slow slob and curse whoever invented the Highway Code and the pedestrian crossings. A few try to edge through the people. No-one is letting them. Insults are exchanged gratis.

‘You think you are gods in your cars?’

‘Fuck off the goddam road!’

‘Fuck your stolen car!’

‘Bloody Indian!’

‘This is not your fuck house. Or your goddam office.’

Ben edges round the front of a new Peugeot watching the sleepy driver warily. Ocholla does not utter a word until they get safely across and his respiration reverts to normal.

‘Guys with cars think they are the only ones with cars,’ he says looking balefully down the lines of stationary machines. Ben cannot make head nor tail of the giant statement. In the heat of the struggle for air ideas as well as accompanying utterances do tend to expand.

‘We will get ours,’ Ocholla threatens angrily.

‘When?’ Ben wonders.

‘Hell, Ben.’

Hell indeed, Ben reflects. He trudges along with his partner and kicks his shoes into the soft powder dust. Ocholla tries to imitate him and scoops

tons of dust in his open-mouthed shoes. What he needs real bad, Ben thinks, is a pair of shoes, not a car.

Lunchtime is an amazing time on the site. Tools and machines lie dead wherever they were dropped by blistered hands. Their operators lie sprawled in all sorts of shapes wherever there is shade. Kanji Bhai 'first-class mason in East Africa' lies asleep like a twisted rag doll under a truck. Only his grey moustache quivers. He only brings half a litre of milk with him for lunch, and the chicken curry Ocholla is always teasing him about does not exist. He probably has not tasted curry for a long time.

The four Banianis sit together away from everybody else and play cards. They rarely mix with anybody else. They bring their own lunch, eat together, then play cards in Gujarati. They hate Yussuf for being a stupid foreman and distrust Bhai. And they don't understand the Africans.

The Africans gather in knots, smoke bhang or whatever they happen to have and discuss mud diggers' politics. Most of the time is passed in arguments that develop into personal feuds stopping just short of physical confrontation. Few have enough energy to fight.

Ben passes by the Development House workers' assembly and sits on a gravel heap a few metres away. He never joins the anti-government rumour-mongers. A lot of hated talk on a not-really-full stomach leaves you worn, and there is still an afternoon of building ahead. Besides, he is not exactly one of them. He had his chance in the system they hate but screwed it. He lies back on the gravel within earshot of the workers' congress. He can just hear the self-styled speaker, chairman and lecturer, Machore, addressing the assembly:

'I keep telling you buggers,' he is saying, 'unless we help ourselves the government is not going to shove progress up our arses. We have got to come out, help ourselves with a spirit. We should form cooperative societies and do our own thing. Help one another.'

'Give me a fag, man,' a member of the assembly tells Machore.

'Shut up you creep,' another barks.

Ben digs his bare back into the gravel. There is nothing like the feel of hot gravel pebbles on a tired back. He closes his eyes, lets the sun beat down on him, hot, sharp and pleasant. It soaks into his body, relaxing the nerves and tired muscles, leaving the mind free to ride up and down the undulating waves of dreams, plans and more dreams. The liberated mind traverses the past, the present and the future. The past is dead and rotten, butchered by his own ambition. The present is slowly spurring itself to an inevitably violent end. The future lies dark and mysterious in the uncertainty of the void beyond. In the uncertainty springs hope.

Ocholla flops noisily on to the gravel. Ben stirs awake. For some

reason Ocholla too is dispassionate and never joins the disconsolate workers.

'That Wanjiru is the meanest bitch around,' he says to Ben. 'I managed to get her into a dark corner on the second floor. She still wouldn't play.'

'Hard luck,' Ben tells him.

A few metres away from them a couple of dejected workers lie forlornly asleep, sprawled under a truck to keep away from the sun. Ben hopes the truck is not the one driven by Onesmus.

'That Onesmus,' he says turning to confront Ocholla. 'What do you know about him?' Ocholla shrugs.

'He is a lousy driver,' he says carelessly, and tosses pebbles at an upset bucket to the left.

'Is that all?'

'He smokes bhang and runs over people he does not like!' Then he adds after a pause, 'And he does not like you.' Ben sighs, tosses a large stone at the upset bucket and misses.

'He doesn't,' he confirms.

Ocholla's face frowns with the gratitude of knowing the dismal truth.

'You ought to watch out,' he says, 'he runs over people for five pounds. That was what he charged to do away with a foreman some time back. We had to contribute to have it done.'

'You what?' Ben's mouth sags.

'We did not like the bastard a lousy bit. He ran the site like it was his house and we were all his wives. And that bloody Onesmus would not do it for nothing.'

Ben's heart takes on a strange rhythm as though it is being strangled. He swallows hard. The only way to survive would be to resign, but he cannot give up his job, he must not.

There are Wini and Baby to think of. Without them he would be mere refuse.

'You ought to watch out, Ben,' Ocholla advises. Ben misses the upset bucket again.

'I will.'

Ocholla bangs two consecutive stones on the bucket, thinks a bit and turns to Ben.

'What has he got against you, Ben?'

'A great deal.'

Ocholla tries to understand the statement. He whips off his all-weather cap and agitates his tough hair. Then he rubs dust from his hands and fetches a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

'Last one,' he excuses himself. He inhales deeply, thoughtfully for a

moment. Then he relaxes and wiggles his horny nailed toes freely out of the tips of the battered shoes into the warm gravel.

'Did you take his woman, Ben?'

'Never. We could never have anything like a woman in common, me and him.' He lights one of his own cigarettes, and lies back smoking. 'I had him kicked out of the army.'

'What army?'

'Soldiers.'

Ocholla's face clouds with respect and awe.

'You were a soldier?'

'An officer. A first lieutenant.'

Ocholla screws his head incredulously. Then he seems to recklessly swallow the awesome truth and grimace.

'Was he a bad soldier?'

'As bad as they come. But I didn't get him sacked. We were all cashiered. The whole goddamn platoon. They all blamed me for it, nevertheless.'

Ocholla bangs the bucket again, retaining the careless pose while his pricked ears remain tuned to his buddy.

Ben frowns in thought, shrugs and drags violently on the cigarette.

3

It was late in the afternoon. The weekend boogie was in progress at the Small World Club. The youthful crowd danced itself into a sea of sweating, ecstatically-rocking bodies. There were a lot of schoolgirls; a few of them quite ready to dance any tune you chose in exchange for a pound. The boys were ready to part with their dates too, for a fee. And the chicks, they were nice and innocent until you got them into bed. Then there was pure talent. So smooth so confident. It made one wonder what they learned in school. Only trouble was they were harder to dispose of than regular hookers. Their suckers ran too deep. Once they loved the way you played it or the colour of your money, you couldn't just dump them. And they still passed their paper exams at school; they went to the kind of schools where examination questions leaked so bad they dripped all year.

Ben was not out for innocence. He was out for a lay, a good lay. He was in a bad mood and strictly business. He sat shopping with his eyes while the dancers shook themselves sick. His eyes picked a girl, weighed her, discarded her and picked another. He was healthy and going for a healthy bargain. It was not easy getting a perfect specimen. Snag with women, what they gained in the legs they lost on the face, and vice versa. Most of them lost on all fronts.

The air was heavy and stuffy. Sweat, smoke and beer smell formed a thick, dragging atmosphere. The band rolled out a thunderous soul beat that electrified the stale air. The singer shook, rolled and skated. His voice came out strained and croaking in an effort to impress the girls, a few of whom stole furtive glances at him as though they already believed he was a god. Soul Brother. Shit!

Ben took a mouthful of beer straight from the bottle; the management rarely had enough glasses to go round. His efforts to make a class girl across the room were taking too long. He dragged on his cigarette and ground it under the heel of his shoe, frustrated. Again the woman looked his way. He winked, she winked back. He beckoned. She smiled and looked away. He took another furious swig from the bottle. Hell!

The vocalist tortured his bad voice over 'Super Bad'. And that was just what the whole damned backstreet orchestra was, bad! Then Ben noticed him. The gorilla.

He stood near the door with a couple of good-looking dishes. They looked fresh and dry. He was in his business suit and the birds in bright aggressive plumage. Ben wondered what such a couple were doing with the gorilla. Besides, the Small World was no place for a gorilla, even one that smoked cigarettes and drank beer.

'Super Bad' came to a crashing end. The crowd applauded. The gorilla spotted Ben and waved. He took the girls by the waists and propelled them over. Ben glared at the gorilla, then tried a smile at the girls and failed. The gorilla's radar detected the hostility. He smiled, waved weakly and led the girls away. Ben took another swig from the bottle and drained it. He shook his head and watched the two girls follow their man away. Why was it that the lousiest guys got the chickiest women?

Presently the gorilla waded back through the people and sat opposite him.

'Well, well, it's a small world, isn't it?' he barked. Ben looked across at him.

'Yeah, that's what they call the dump,' he said carelessly. 'The girls are good but the joint stinks. Too many sugar-daddies.' The gorilla's face fell. He shrugged.

'We have met before, I believe,' he tried again. Ben shook his head.

'Not a chance.'

'Don't you remember me?'

'I don't.' Ben lit a cigarette.

'At Tina's, remember?'

'No.'

'But . . . ?'

'Alright, alright, so we have met, and I know you. Now tell me, just who the devil are you?'

The other smiled, nervously but satisfied.

'I knew you would remember me.'

'Who are you?'

'Have a drink,' he ordered, 'on me.'

Some sort of fishy business was afoot. But nobody ever turned down a drink. If the bugger had the money to waste, why not? The gorilla waved over a waiter. He ordered drinks for both, then despatched the waiter to his two girls. The beers were brought. Ben drank a large mouthful.

'Who are you?' he repeated.

'The name is Mbugua,' the gorilla told him. Ben studied him for a moment.

'What do you want from me, Mbugua?'

The other took out a packet of cigarettes and offered him. Ben accepted.

'I want talk to you,' Mbugua said,

'Go ahead.'

'This will take quite some time.'

'What do you want to talk to me about?'

'Business.'

'Business? Me, a stranger?'

The man smiled ruefully, exposing ugly teeth. 'You are not a stranger to me,' he said. 'For a time I have been watching you. I know you very well.'

Ben shrugged, tried to look careless.

'So?'

He went on: 'I followed you into Tina's last time. The . . .'

'Followed?'

Mbugua nodded. 'It was not hard. As I said, I know you well, have been watching you for quite some time now.'

Ben's mind went into concentrated thought. The band got back on to the stage and roared into a Congolese number. The young men wolf-called. The girls shrieked. The gorilla looked round the rowdy room in stark disgust. He turned to Ben for support. Ben smiled at him. He drained his beer.

'Talk . . . outside!' Mbugua shouted at Ben.

Ben's curiosity aroused, he too drained his bottle and stood up.

'What about the girls?' he screamed to be heard over the music. The other understood. He laughed.

'Later,' he patted Ben's arm knowingly.

Ben glanced at the girls. They smiled at him. He winked, waved and followed Mbugua through the jungle of rocking swaying dancing youths. At the back of his mind curiosity gnawed at his brain. He blamed his poor mathematics for the fact that he could not figure out what Mbugua was up to. The noise of the music escorted them down the rough worn stairs. Boogie lovers jostled them, some going down, others not sure which way they were going.

Ben burst out of the building first. He stopped, straightened his clothes. The evening air was cool but stuffy. Exhaust fumes from the bus stop yards up the street filled the atmosphere. The place was milling with people catching buses to one place or the other. There was no doubt there were quite a number of pick-pockets too. Ben took a deep breath of dusty air. Quite a relief from the sweaty foul air in the dance hall.

The gorilla pulled up by his side.

'A wonderful evening,' his voice sounded lonely and plaintive. Ben could see nothing special about the dusk or the busy city crowd.

'You wanted to talk business,' he remarked.

Mbugua looked back up in the direction of the music. He shook his head, smiling.

'Let us find some place quiet,' he said, nudging Ben. He led the way up the street. Ben hesitated, then followed. They picked their way through the waiting throng at 'Glad-To-Meet-You'. He followed patiently into the Ambassador Hotel. As they passed through the dimly-lit lounge, he made one determined resolution — he was not going to buy anybody anything in the place. They ascended the red-carpeted stairs slowly, quietly, took a secluded table in a corner and sat down. There were few people in the bar room. At a table nearby a couple of sugar-daddies and their sugar-babies talked and laughed excitedly round a table crammed with beer bottles, glasses, ashtrays and two stuffed ladies' handbags. Ben ran critical eyes over the party. One white man, the other black. The women were commonplace perennial-smile type, the kind that is only good as secretaries the boss can date. One of the girls looked directly up at him. He stared blankly back, then turned to Mbugua.

'Nice quiet place,' the other observed.

Small talk, Ben thought, then said:

'Well, business.'

Mbugua nodded vigorously, and waved at the waiter simultaneously.

'Oh yes, business,' he said thoughtfully. He took out a thick black pipe. From another pocket, he fetched a tin of Sweet Nut. The enormous waiter loomed over them.

'Double gin and soda,' Mbugua said, pointing with the stem of his pipe, 'What will you take?'

'Pilsner cold,' Ben said to the waiter.

While waiting for the drinks the gorilla went through the ritual of cleaning and refilling his pipe. At last he lit it and leaned back sucking slowly, thoughtfully. Ben watching him perceived the characteristics of a professional politician or an over-excelled professor of human studies. But what business would any one of them have with him?

The drinks arrived. The bill was placed face-down on the small table too uncomfortably close to Ben. To avoid any misunderstanding as to who was paying, Ben pushed the bill across the table with his index finger. Mbugua smiled wise-guy and sipped his drink. Then he took the piece of paper and read. He shook his head, showing concern.

'This government budgeting . . .' he said matter-of-factly, 'everything going up, up, up . . . everything that is except salaries.' He laughed quietly, cleverly. The sly reserved laughter got Ben guessing his professional bias.

'One can always try to get a rise,' he said carelessly. Mbugua laughed again, .

'Quite, quite,' he dragged at the pipe. 'But then whether you get it or not depends entirely on your boss. For example, you, can you possibly demand a rise?'

Ben shrugged. 'I am content – I was thinking of you.'

Mbugua laughed. 'Thanks for that,' he did not sound grateful. 'I have been thinking of that myself. That is why I came to you. I need, eh . . . a little help.'

Ben guffawed. 'With your boss?'

'Not exactly.'

'You are sure I can help?'

'Positively.'

Ben regarded him thoughtfully. Mbugua watched him critically.

'The kind of help I want from you is a little . . . demanding,' he went on. 'A little self-sacrifice is called for.'

'I can't lend you any money,' Ben told him simply. 'I haven't got enough either.'

'I know.'

'I wish there was something I could tell you that you didn't know.'

'Sorry.' Pause. 'I am convinced you can help me acquire the . . .'

'I can?' Ben's eyebrows went up. 'What kind of business are you in?'

'Will it suffice to say it makes money?'

'All worthwhile businesses make money.'

'Not our sum.'

'Yours?'

Mbugua stroked his dirty teeth with the stem of his pipe.

'All professionals have associates,' he dropped.

'And the profession, what is it?'

Mbugua dragged on his pipe with the patience of an expert called upon to explain some minor technicality of a giant project.

'It is not as you might conceive it, this profession,' he said slowly. 'We don't work regular hours, have no fixed salary, no pension, no . . . well, the point is, it pays well when it does pay.' He seemed lost in concentration for a moment. Then he shrugged resignedly.

'Well?' Ben pushed cautiously.

He laughed suddenly, mirthlessly.

'Well, you see, lieutenant,' he examined the pipe closely avoiding the other's eyes. 'When we want money, me and the boys, we just go out and get it.' He added after a pause: 'We just fetch it in. From where it is, wherever it is.'

Ben's face clouded. The other noticed his uneasiness.

'That's it,' he shrugged. 'We just . . . eh, just go collect.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that!'

'Banks?'

Mbugua's mind wrestled with inhibitions. He shrugged. 'Wherever.' Ben took a long drink, his cool calculating eyes watching, figuring, wondering. When he spoke it was with a sure, hard voice.

'In other words you are robbers.'

Mbugua blew out thick black tobacco smoke, spoke without looking at him.

'That is a matter of difference in terminology.'

'And you want my help?'

'That is the main point,' he nodded.

Ben shook his head. 'I am sorry, but I am not that way out yet.' Mbugua fidgeted. He struggled to relight his pipe, his face distorted by deep thought.

'We shall pay well,' he said quietly.

'I get enough money from my present job,' Ben told him. Mbugua smiled again, a wicked superior smile and shrugged.

'We pay very well.'

'Forget it.' Ben rose.

Mbugua did not look up. He spoke to Ben's half-full glass.

'Good money.'

'No.'

'Very good money.'

'Good night.'

'The kind of money you will never see in your life.'

'I don't want to.' He made to go.

'Wait!' a command.

He stopped and looked down. The crook looked him straight in the face.

'You are behaving like a hysterical woman, lieutenant,' Mbugua's controlled voice burned into his ears. 'You have not heard me out yet.'

Ben hesitated and stared the other man hard in the face. His eyes were aflame with slowly-building-up impatient anger. He took out his packet and lit a cigarette. Meanwhile his mind raged.

'Sit down, lieutenant.'

He hesitated, then did as he was bid.

'You refuse too fast,' Mbugua went on. 'You have no clue as to what I want of you. It is nothing dangerous; we are not asking you to join us or anything like that. We pay, you do your piece and get out. As easy as that, see?'

Ben sighed. 'What do you want?' he demanded gruffly.

Mbugua looked round before answering. 'Waiter,' he called, 'Another round of the same.' Then he started to relight his pipe. He did it slowly, So frustratingly slowly.

'What do you want?' Ben repeated,

'Some equipment.'

'Guns?'

'You are a clever man Mister Benjamin,' Mbugua nodded and smiled wisely. Ben smiled back bitterly, shook his head like an infinitely patient teacher to an incredibly ignorant student.

'You have come to the wrong guy,' he blew smoke across the table. 'I can't help you. You should have spoken to the armourer.'

'Actually we thought of that,' the man nodded, 'but we want an up-to-date man, an understanding person. Somebody we could reach. You fit the glove exactly.' Maybe, maybe not, Ben thought. But then . . .

'How much are you offering for a revolver?'

Mbugua laughed and dismissed the poor joke. 'We have enough of those things,' he shrugged. 'What can you do with a revolver except shoot at policemen? We don't want to do that. No my friend, we need something heavier, bigger. More strike power.'

Ben's interest slid into gear and surged forward.

'Machine-gun?'

Mbugua weighed that in his mind, took a lot of time over it. Finally he took a drink from his glass, then shook his head.

'Something bigger,' he said. 'Supposing, lieutenant . . . just supposing we aimed at doing some blasting . . . a little blasting. What in your opinion would we need?'

Ben reached for his drink, drained it, refilled it and emptied it again. Then he refilled it and looked up.

'Mortar?' His voice low, almost fearful.

'That might do,' Mbugua said to his pipe.

After a long pregnant pause: 'You deal in mortars, don't you?'

'You are well informed,' Ben nodded reluctantly. 'Too damned well informed.'

'Business,' Mbugua dismissed the intelligence.

'Say, what business are you involved in anyway?' his voice strained with doubt.

'I told you.'

'And you need a mortar to hold up a bank? Ridiculous!'

'I did not mention hold-ups.'

'What did you mention?'

'Blasting.'

'Banks?'

'We have already been through that. Another drink?' Ben nodded queerly.

'Did I come to the right person then?' he asked when the drinks were brought and the waiter safely out of earshot.

'No,' Ben said simply.

'Well?'

'I may be in charge of a mortar platoon, but you still need to talk to the armourer. He may lend you guns if you explain what you want them for. That's how I get them. From him.'

'We only want one gun . . . and some shells,' Mbugua said. Ben poured himself a drink.

'I am not sure I would help you if I could,' he said.

'Why? We pay well.'

'That's not the point.' He shook his head. 'I hate to side with criminals; they always lose in the end. I believe in working a respectable job for my pay and besides, I don't need your bloody money.'

'You don't need money, lieutenant . . . don't need it?' Ben studied the other man. Mbugua stared back with the careless expression of a crook who finds another crook playing good.

'Maybe I do,' Ben nodded distantly. 'Depends on how much it is.'

Mbugua stroked his bad teeth with his pipe. He spoke quietly, careful not to over-commit himself.

'Shall we say five thousand?' he said to himself.

'Five thousand, my arse . . . I earn . . .'

'Pounds, lieutenant, five thousand pounds . . . pounds!'

Ben caught his breath. He let it out slowly, images forming, dissolving and reforming in his mind. Five thousand pounds was a hell of a lot of cash in any currency.

'For just one mortar barrel and shells?' he asked. Mbugua nodded. Ben's mind whirled, played with numbers and figures. Not too bad. Not bad at all.

'And . . . when do I get the money, that is assuming I could pull the job?'

'Cash on delivery.'

His face dropped. 'I see the picture,' his voice full of acid. 'I deliver the goods, you get rid of me gangster-fashion like they do in the movies, and that's that.'

'We are not that primitive, lieutenant,' Mbugua appeared like he meant it. 'We are businessmen. Professional businessmen. We have a code of conduct. One of the most important rules is professional honesty. That is how

we have survived. You get paid and no harm will come to you. I give you my word for it.'

Cool, wise and serious. And five thousand pounds! 'Maybe I can help you,' Ben nodded. 'But there are my superiors. The risk must be worth the price, if not more. Make it six thousand pounds and I will think it over.'

'No risk at all. You could make the transfer accidental.'

'How?'

'You simply lose the equipment; lose it so we can find it. That way you keep your job.'

Ben shook his head sadly. 'It is all so easy to say it. But the damned thing is in the armoury.' He shook his head almost regretfully. 'The place is guarded day and night.'

Mbugua sipped his drink and fiddled carelessly with the trump card. 'You go on tactical exercises,' he dropped, his mouth still. The devil had thought up everything. Except a few serious points.

'Your ignorance is excusable; you have never been in the army. Even a lieutenant does not check out a mortar gun and go target practising on rabbits all alone. Everybody comes along, the whole goddamned party. The Minister for Defence, Chief of Staff, the whole jazz band. You can't just sneak a mortar gun under the Minister's nose. It's impossible.'

Mbugua thought, nodded agreement and sighed.

'You may still manage,' he went on relentlessly. 'With a little help from friends, of course.'

'Your comrades?'

'No, your boys.'

Bloody madness, Ben shook his head. As easy as impossible. Even for five thousand pounds. He lit another cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. Mbugua gave him time to think it over, then asked:

'Is it a deal?'

'Maybe,' and after a pause, 'I don't know.'

'Well?'

'I will think it over.' Ben drained his glass and stood up.

'Another beer,' Mbugua said.

'No thanks.'

At the table across the room the two women watched him with sexy drooping eyes while their men argued and battled to pay the bill. Ben winked at the girls. They winked back, smiling boldly. Professional crams, he thought.

'Let me know your plan soon,' Mbugua stood up too.

Ben looked across at him, smiled cynically.

'You know, I might just turn you over to the police. Just might.'

'You cannot. You are not that base.'

'Don't be so sure,' Ben left him settling the bills.

The night outside was cold and dusty. He stopped on the hôtel steps to watch a couple of taxi-drivers fight over a tourist, a verbal fight so heated their eyes shone in the street light. Ben shook his head. Money, money! Mbugua walked over.

'My car is round to the left,' Ben said. 'Goodbye.'

'But . . .' Mbugua shrugged helplessly, 'the girls. We cannot leave them in the Small World all night can we?'

Ben shook his head: 'No, we can't.'

Kanji Bhai stirs awake, scrambles from under the lorry, and makes his way through the lunchtime inertness to the latrine at the further corner of the site. He never eats anything for lunch, but he is always shitting.

'I was involved in a car accident soon after the meeting with Mbugua,' Ben says to Ocholla.

'Bad?'

'Pretty bad. The car was written off. I lay in hospital for two months. It was real bad. I needed a car bad. And lying there idle on a hospital bed I made up my mind to resign from the army. With five thousand pounds I could buy a new car and probably a house to resign to. It was as good a time as any to do something for myself.'

Ocholla tosses pebbles at the upset bucket and registers a hit with each one.

'I talked to Onesmus and the boys,' Ben goes on. 'The mention of five thousand pounds got them interested. I warned them about the risk. Five thousand pounds was still worth it. I got a message out to the gangster boss. Next time we went out on exercise my platoon "lost" a gun and some shells. We also left them instructions on how to use the weapon. Either the bastards couldn't read, or they did not bother. They did not score even one direct hit on the twelve by twenty bank door. And as if that was not enough, they went and completely loused it up by blowing their arses to hell.'

'They died,' Ocholla says.

'Seven of them. They were manoeuvring to fire on a police patrol car. One creep dropped a shell. The whole fireworks went off. It took the ambulance brigade a lifetime to sort out the jigsaw of twisted bodies and arses. Some mutilated bodies had to be reclaimed from a butchery across the road. The crater on Government Road took ages to fix. But the mess in our camp took much longer to sort out. The Defense Staff was raving mad. They wanted somebody's blood. But the material witnesses had blown themselves to kingdom come and my platoon was not speaking the official language. The court martial changed the charge to gross misconduct and fired the whole lot.'

'But you should have known better than to trust gangsters,' Ocholla states.

'Nothing was impossible in those days,' Ben tells him. 'Everybody was scrambling for big money, and no-one cared how you made it. You could have sold the whole goddam country to eager buyers; a lot of those guys in the big cars on the avenue did just that. I was a poor salesman.'

He takes the last drag from his diminishing cigarette and hurls it away. 'Sergeant Onesmus never forgave me,' Ben lies back, his eyes closed tight against the hot sun.

Ocholla tosses missiles at the upset bucket. After a long silence he observes gravely:

'That is bad. That is very bad.'

From the labourers, congress Machore goes on delivering his endless speeches:

'And that assistant minister for shit, he was a whites collaborator during the fight for freedom. He is supposed to be M.P. for Bondeni constituency, but he never gets to say anything for the poor bastards. Whenever he is in parliament he is always drunk and fast asleep.'

A haggard hand from Bondeni stands up on a point of order and wonders how Machore got his story. Someone else asks him to shut up and sit down. The truth of the labourers conference is that no-one believes in it. Nobody takes Machore seriously. They only listen to him because it is the lunch break and there is nothing better to do.

Ben lies still, thinking. There is no question of giving up his job to get away from the vengeful drunk driver. He need money real bad now that Wini has agreed to marry him if they can raise enough money for some sort of wedding. Besides, she says she wants him to be like other men. She is going to help him get back on his feet. She will try and get Johnny, her boss, to give him a clerical job at the Messrs. Smith and Jones Company. It will be good to get out of the mire at the bottom of the social scale, but he must stick his construction site job until this plan materializes. He will miss his buddy Ocholla when he leaves. Maybe Wini can get them both jobs in the offices. He will ask her about this.

'He will kill you, Ben,' Ocholla laments.

Ben starts back to the present, opens his eyes and squints at the hot blue sky. He sits up, his face darkened by a concentrated mixture of rage and loathing. He flings a handful of dirt at Ocholla's target and again misses with the whole damn lot. He lies back without a word and closes his eyes.

From the assembled workers' parliament a few yards away snatches of the anguished, disenchanted discussion rises and falls with the weight of the motion on the dusty floor. The barefoot ragged speaker calls for order

and sums up today's motion: they own all the businesses in town, that is why they are raising the price of everything. What is there to do about it, friends. Starve to death. That is what we will do. Each and every one of us.

Ben vaguely wonders who 'they' are. The busy afternoon wears out fast. After lunch there is usually little left. Just putting finishing touches to whatever was started in the morning. Ben's gang pushes their war front forward by sending all the pillions up the creaking crane. At Yussuf's suggestion and coaxing, a few tons of concrete ride up the same lift too, supervised by the same crew. True to a July afternoon, the rain falls punctually at five and halts work for the last half hour. At five-thirty the hands line up at the wooden office to check out for the day.

Ben grabs his coat, shakes the dust off it and slips into it. He pauses at the pigeon hole.

'Get your damned roster right tomorrow,' he growls at the clerk. Ocholla nods agreement. 'Otherwise we plug your black arse with concrete,' he adds menacingly, then follows Ben.

The tired workers mill off the site having made no impression on the twenty-five storey project. You can't build much in a day. You toil, sweat bitter salt, curse the foreman, then leave just as you came, a little fed up and frustrated. But close your eyes for a month, and then open them, and there is progress. That is the way to build skyscrapers. Without thinking. Instead of thinking about the building, think of a beautiful woman you laid or would like to. Think of the day you will be rich and won't have to burrow in the mess of the low-income underprivileged. Think of heaven, think of a bottle of *Karara*, or of a full stomach and a woman. Discouraging thoughts, if you don't then have them, but by the time you get over the disappointment you will be on the next floor and going up.

There is little going on in town. The office workers have gone home. The empty roads lie wet and cold. The neon lights blink weakly through the streets. The lights on a passing car throw a soft mirage on the wet tarmac. The hands turn up Government Road. Movie posters outside Kenya Cinema advertise a film to keep you awake through the night. The men hurry on by, hardly noticing the colourful boards. They don't have to try to keep awake through the night. Besides, the price of a cinema ticket could be more realistically squandered on the more effective *Karara*.

Ocholla pauses to admire a life-sized picture of a nude white woman. He cocks his head appreciatively, then clacks his mouth. Next he whips off his cap and scratches his dusty, rugged hair.

'What do you think, Ben?'

'Not for you, buddy,' Ben shoves him on. They cross Government Road.

A bus roars down Duke Street ignoring the red traffic light and scaring hell out of them. Ocholla curses the driver.

'Pushing his bloody weight,' Ben complains. Duke Street is busy as usual. The bus-stop at Tusker House is crammed with impatient commuters. They jostle, tread on each other's toes restlessly and pick pockets. In the middle of it all a few shaggy boys try to make a living selling roast maize to the crowd. The maize could have been stolen anywhere along Nairobi River Valley. But what do such small details matter these days!

Ocholla stops to haggle over a maize cob with the seller. Ben hangs around and waits for the deal to be finally settled.

'Fifty cents for this!' Ocholla cries. 'Just look at it, would you take this for fifty yourself?'

'Pick another one,' the boy advises coolly. Ocholla curses. Ben smiles and looks away from the hurt expression.

A bus pulls up. The crowd goes to the attack. Men, women, children and pickpockets clamber over one another. The rush is not far for the seats, most of them are already occupied. It is just some sort of an exercise, a habit bus-commuters have developed. The way they dig at them, they will tear a bus to shreds one of these lousy days.

'There is no need to be nasty about your bloody maize,' Ocholla says to the ragged merchant. 'After all, you didn't pay a damn for it.'

'What do you mean?' The boy hands over the maize cob.

'You know what I'm talking about,' Ocholla gives him the fifty cents. He splits the precious maize with Ben.

'Everybody trying to screw you,' he goes on leading Ben through the throng.

'Sales tax,' Ben points out.

'Tax my balls, the bloody maize is not imported.'

'The brazier may be. Or the charcoal. Something has to be.'

Ocholla speaks through a mouth full of maize. 'You know, Ben, if I did not know you I would think you were one of those bastards.'

Some bastard running for the bus bumps into Ben. The bus crawls away with a few men hanging one-toe one-finger by the doors. The breakneck hustle-bustle falls behind them. Ocholla jingles coins in this pocket as they head toward River Road.

'Want *Karara*, Ben?'

Ben looks up, dismisses the thought as idle fantasy, and kicks a clean maize cob into the road. A bus rolls it flat immediately.

'Want a drink, Ben?'

'Can you afford to buy me one?'

'Maybe.'

He leads Ben into an alleyway, past a heap of excrement, Ben wonders who squats here and when. They emerge in a dark back street that smells of dust though it is wet. This leads into another lane that in turn vomits them into River Road. The place is crowded with its usual mass of haunted, hungry faces, poverty-hypnotised faces, hateful faces, and the fragrant stink of unwashed bodies and burst sewers. Though most shops are closed down, the ghostly wanderers are still here. This is one place where there will still be people left after doomsday. They have survived repeated police clean ups. They can take anything.

Up River Road Karara Centre's doors are wide open. Distorted music, rowdy talk and the smell of beer, cigarettes and vomit spill out into the dimly lit street. The two men have never by-passed the centre on their way from doing the rounds. They burst in through the grease-smearred swing doors and stop just inside them for a breath of polluted air to acclimatize. A haze of foul smoke hovers ghost-like under the low ceiling. As usual there are a lot more people in Karara Centre than there will ever be anywhere. A crowd of ragged, emaciated low-income drinkers, pathetic and not giving a shit about it. They are nice people, the patrons.

Karara Centre is one of the type you don't find two of in the same town. Near the dirty old western-type swing doors, an old spaceship-type juke-box roars, grunts and screeches. Its defiant noise produces such a racket that the whole bar, tables, glasses and bottles dance in resonance. To prevent it dancing over the customers, and from being stolen by the adoring patrons, the monster is chained to a ring on the wall.

Ben bulldozes through the throng to the bar, Ocholla at his heels. Ocholla screams the order and turns to watch the women. The women here are emergency ration, nothing like one would normally take as a balanced diet.

'I still want a woman bad, Ben.' Ocholla says. 'How do you like the one in the corner?'

'Too big.'

'A woman can never be too big.'

'That one is.'

Ocholla shrugs. 'Whatever you find in small ones.'

'Compactness.'

'Trash.'

He waves at the fat one. She smiles, waves back. Ocholla takes his *Karara*, and drifts over to her. A drunk who had just bought her a beer glances at Ocholla's confident swagger, then across the bar at Ben, and vacates his seat for Ocholla.

The barman, overworked, underpaid and frustrated, sits gloomily at his place, his bloodshot eyes hardly moving as he keeps track of his slippery

debtors. The shattered bar mirror behind him nestles under a thick layer of dust and reflects gaunt, dusty figures. The shelves are stacked with empty whisky and brandy bottles that can never have been emptied here. The dark grey walls are plastered with dust-covered advertisements: Drink Johnny Walker, born in 1820, still going strong; Man-sized beer, Man-sized Pilsner; drink City Lager; Make a date with a teacher, drink Teachers Whisky; Black and White, best Scotch Whisky in the world; drink . . .

Ben lets his eyes rove over the dimly-lit stuffy place. Everyone in sight drinks *Karara*, a home-made brew that looks like muddy water, tastes like sisal juice and is as powerful as gasoline. The 'Beer Menu' on the wall announces the price as eighty cents, which is one third of the price of a Pilsner and a quarter the price of any of the best Scotch whiskys. Next to the beer price list on the wall is a cosmetics ad: Join the New Africans – Newafric Skin Lightning Creams. Next to this is another ad: Keep your City Clean!

Few patrons can read and they don't give a shit about it. They are simply a lot of happy, drunk people. In the bar few can afford ties or suits, and no-one pretends to be decently drunk. They shout, froth at the mouth and fight, before crawling home to bed. Few manage to walk out of here. They just slide out into the rubbish strewn street and somehow get home safely to return the following day for more.

The jukebox crashes with song. A few ragged couples lean on one another for support and try to move their leaden feet in dance. One couple is at a complete standstill, waiting for the slightest excuse to topple over. The reason they cannot move is that his right foot is hard on her left foot, and her right on his left. They do not know though.

A big woman sidles over and leans on Ben's shoulder. This one has been in the place since it was first discovered. And she has been trying to get Ben to lay her for just as long. She never will really excite him. He has this something about very big women. Maybe it is the way they just lie back and let him do all the sweaty work. This one looks particularly incapable.

'What do you want?' he demands.

'A cigarette,' and her mouth stinks like the blocked toilet back home. He gives her one in a hurry to keep her mouth shut tight. Then he loses interest in her. She gets the message, silently drifts off. Ocholla has his hand round the large woman's neck shouting into her ear, trying to make some deal.

Ben makes a dash to the stifling, leaking toilet at the back. Normally the lights are out and you have to stand way back in the better-lit corridor and direct your stuff in a fireman's jacket. Today the urinal is lit up; something

must be wrong somewhere. It is. Someone has vomited into the wash-basin, red slimy shit that smells of curry and beer. The bugger left the plug on, and the puke just sits there and stinks.

Back in the bar Ben drains his glass and orders another *Karara*. He drinks slowly, watching the writhing life around. A few of the elderly patrons have fallen asleep at their tables, a bottle of *Karara* standing watch over their spent forms. The stronger ones dance tortuously near the juke-box, directly under the board that reads 'No Dancing in this Bar, by order.' Every so often one accumulates the necessary potential and expends the remaining energy in storming through the swing doors and trying to reach home. The female members of the club slink away unnoticed or with an equally sloshed escort.

Ocholla's big woman deserts him at a second's notice and goes home. He joins Ben at the bar and calls for more drinks. He spies around for another prospective-looking woman. He fails to find one. He shakes his head.

'I don't like this joint, do you Ben?'

Ben looks up, shrugs.

'Let's go, Ben.'

Ben looks startled. 'You are not drunk already!' he says.

Ocholla shakes his head.

'That is why we are leaving. We shall go where the brew is healthier.' He pays and conducts Ben out of the greasy, black swing doors. They take a path between two dilapidated buildings. It leads them into darker lanes towards Grogan Road. The air is thick with the rotting smell from overflowing rubbish bins. A mongrel vaults from one of them and bolts into the thicker gloom of the back alleys. They turn into a narrower lane, this one heavy with the suffocating stink of burst sewers. Ben starts wondering why the healthier, more potent drinks have to be only in such unhealthy quarters. It is hard walking in the strange dark. Eventually they emerge into the more populated Grogan Road. A dusty, dim neon sign announces the Capricorn. Where would *Karara* be more powerful but home! They take high stools at the bar.

'Two,' Ocholla orders immediately.

The barman hands them over. They only sell two things here, that and *chang'aa*. The joint is not too much different from *Karara* Centre. Same old plastic chairs, beer-smearred tables and mottled walls. The twenty-five-watt bulbs are so dim that one cannot tell the colour of one's drink. But it is *Karara* all right; same tartness, same choking smell and same consuming fire in the belly. No-one can simulate *Karara*. They can make it right or wrong – never false.

'*Chang'aa*,' Ocholla calls half-way through his second *Karara*.

'How many?'

'Two.'

Ben turns down the offer. *Chang'aa* and *Karara* do not exactly mix, not in his stomach. Last time he tried to blend them his tummy exploded into a fire so hot he was flat out for a whole day. That time too it was his buddy's good idea. He watches Ocholla consume a whole one-shilling measure. In knockout power it is equivalent to a few tots of licit gin. Ocholla rolls his eyes up like he is being strangled, shudders and coughs. Then he whips off his cap, punishes his hair and replaces the cap. He goes on:

'Ha! That is good.'

The stuff should not be sold in regular bars in the first place. But anything goes these days. The Capricorn is not anywhere near *Karara* Centre in popularity. There is no coughing defiant jukebox and one can think, One could almost say there is some measure of respectability around the place – some kind of decency.

At one corner a grey-haired old man wrestles quietly with a fat mama. He tries to kiss her and she tries to protect her modesty, and both are too drunk to make a row of it. At another table a quartet of great-coated businessmen discuss their affairs in low tones to safeguard company secrets. An emaciated drunkard near them talks to himself, tries to provoke the businessman and fails in both. The place is so damned decent the drunk lying sprawled in his vomit with his thick black tongue licking the floor does not even snore. *Chang'aa* has knockout power.

'Another drink?'

Ben nods. The drinks arrive immediately. They drink quietly for some time. In the calm quiet of the bar one can smell the toilet. Stale beer urine as pungent as though the urinal were under the bar counter.

'Guys like you and me, Ben,' Ocholla says suddenly turning to face his comrade, 'we have got to drink, Ben. Drink and drink. That is the only way to stay sober in this bloody hell.'

The boy is not as thin in brains as he appears. Ben nods.

'We have got to forget things, Ben,' he nods in his drink-inspired wisdom, 'problems we must forget.'

'And keep out of.' Ben takes a swig.

His nerves slowly slip, lose contact with one another. His head revolves in airless orbit ready to take a throw. After a long meditation Ocholla whisks off his eternal cap and makes furrows in his dusty hair with thick, dirty fingers.

'You know, Ben?'

'What?' He swallows half a glass at a drop.

'I have been thinking, Ben,' he nods thoughtfully.

‘What?’

‘I have been thinking, Ben,’ he repeats to his glass. Suddenly he turns to the barman. ‘Two more!’ he shouts. He reaches into his tattered coat and from somewhere in the disorder drags out a reluctant cigarette. The embarrassed cigarette looks twisted and exhausted from the knocks of the day, but it is a full one, not like any of Ben’s left-over butts.

‘Last one,’ Ocholla explains, lighting it.

Ben understands. One cannot afford to offer cigarettes to guys just like that. They don’t grow on trees. He takes a butt out of his three-quarters full pack and lights it.

‘Are you married, Ben?’ Ocholla asks him out of the cloggy mind, the mouth hardly working. *His head rolls lazily from side to side.*

‘You are a lucky man, Ben,’ Ocholla slurs his furious eyes fixed on him.

‘I tried,’ Ben protests. Ocholla refuses to acknowledge the attempt.

‘Lucky bastard, Ben,’ he takes a swig, drains his glass, licks his thick lips and belches. ‘I have two wives, Ben. Two bloody wives!’

Ben shakes his hot head with no particular emotions outlined. Ocholla’s thick fingers clutch the glass and wring it violently.

‘Two beastly wives back home and the devil knows how many little brats,’ his large eyes red and desperate bore into Ben, radiating a special blend of drunken fury and remorse. ‘They just crop up, Ben. One after another. Bastards!’ He drags on his cigarette hard, murderously angry at everybody.

‘I am going to get married too,’ Ben drones exhaustedly trying to comfort his buddy.

Ocholla stares into space and says nothing.

‘Me and Wini will get married soon,’ Ben goes on. Ocholla’s big head turns slowly on him. ‘That harlot of yours?’

‘She is not a harlot.’

‘You said she was.’

‘She used to be,’ Ben tells him emphatically, ‘But she isn’t any more. She is a secretary, you know. Good woman. She says she will get me a respectable job. You too.’

‘She said that?’

Ben nods affectionately. ‘She works in a big office,’ he explains. ‘The boss is her friend. In a nice way, you see. Just friends like me and you. He will do anything she says. She will get us jobs.’

Ocholla smiles and for a moment looks genuinely happy. Then his face clouds: ‘But Ben.’

‘Yes?’

‘Your harlot wife does not know me,’ he sounds sad.

'I told you, she is not a harlot any more. She is changed.'

'That is all right, Ben, but she does not know me.'

'She knows you,' Ben tells him. 'I told her about you. The buddy who buys me *Karara* all those nights I get home plastered. She knows you all right. She is a clever woman. We will get married, and I will get a good job and I will . . .'

'You know what, Ben?' Ocholla interrupts.

'What?'

Ocholla reaches for the empty glass to refill it from the empty bottle. The glass falls off the table and breaks. The barman grunts. Ocholla spits contempt. He tries to drink straight from the bottle, finds it empty and bangs it back on the table.

'You know what, Ben?'

'What?'

'I won't send it, Ben.'

'Send what?'

'The money.'

'What money are you talking about?'

Ocholla shakes his head, unable to keep track of his own elusive thoughts.

'You are a bastard, Ben,' he concludes.

'Who isn't?' Ben shrugs.

Ocholla pauses, as though he has just discovered a new philosophy. 'You are right, Ben,' he snorts, 'we are all bastards. Two more *Kararas*!'

The sleepy barman hands them over, climbs back on his stool to resume his meditative limbo. Not for long. Ocholla erupts into violent rage, bangs his hammer fist on the table and stirs the whole bar to attention.

'Bastards,' he preaches. 'All women are bastards. Children are sick, school fees are up, and they want new dresses! Wives are animals, Ben. Children and dresses, that is all they know. They are not getting a thing from me any more. Where do they think I am digging the money? Bitches!'

Ben reaches for one of his growing number of glasses and catches nothing. The second one proves the real one. He drinks and snorts sleepily. His excited mind flits from subject to subject never stopping long enough to distinguish Wini from *Karara* and vice versa.

'Women are bitches, Ben,' Ocholla rants on. 'All of them. Even your harlot.'

'I told you, she is not a harlot any more.'

'No matter,' Ocholla shakes his head.

'She will get us a job . . .'

'I will drink it all, Ben,' Ocholla tells him. 'They are not getting any

money from me. Never. We will drink it all, Ben. You and me, Ben.' To prove the point he orders another round. Ben is too drunk to decline the offer.

The four old businessmen conclude their conference, and after another round of *Karara* to toast each other, peacefully crawl out home. It is respectable, this Capricorn. One does not call the barman a drunken thief before leaving. Just haul your arse off the seat, pick up your carcass and go.

Ben lends a drunken sleepy ear to his buddy. His hand works mechanically shuttling drinks to his mouth. His body sits transfixed in that state of intoxication where logic and reality play hide and seek in the brain. The game reverts too fast for the drugged neurons to control, so that instead of beer going from the bottle to the glass, to the mouth, the action appears illogically reversed.

'You!' the barman shouts. Ben starts.

The drunk who was on the floor has risen and is on his way out, relaying his spent form from table to table for support.

'You have not paid!'

The man totters, points a condemning finger at the bar.

'You . . . hic . . . you will get it from my grandmother, not me.' He turns, makes for the door, shakes his head and stops.

'You think we are foolish when we pay for the beer,' he screams, and staggers back towards the bar. 'I will not pay today. You castrate me. I won't pay for your shit. It is not even like it used to be! Cheating bastards!' He flounders a full circle and attempts to reach the door. The barman bounds over the counter and apprehends him. The drunk leans on him for support. 'You will get it from your pregnant mother, not me.'

The barman frisks him quickly, expertly. He has been doing this all his life. He extracts a fading, crumpled five shilling note and returns to the counter.

'Wait for your change,' he says to the sod.

Ben appreciates as much as a drunk can.

This is a decent corner. There are places they kick you out minus your change, patron or not.

The barman takes the change back and stuffs it somewhere on the owner's person.

'You will get it from my pregnant mother,' the drunk raves on.

The barman conducts him out of the bar, still protesting that although he is drunk he is a citizen and has rights too and should not be man-handled. Citizen! In lots of other places you are either drunk or a drunk, never a citizen. This is one hell of an advanced joint. Too modern. In the barman's shoes, Ben would have kicked the man out minus change.

Ocholla stirs awake and shakes his head faintly, indecisively.
'Bastards,' he utters. That could be anybody, everybody.
'Another beer Ben?' he asks his comrade.
'No!'

Ocholla hops off the high stool, loses balance and sits on the floor.
'Bitches!' Those have to be his wives. He struggles back to his uncertain feet upsetting the bar stool in the process.

Ben feels his way down the stool.

'Money?' the barman reminds them.

Ocholla storms round.

'You have not paid yet,' the man smiles.

Ocholla's vacant eyes scrutinize him unseeingly, then turn on Ben, 'Have we paid, Ben?'

Ben shakes his head slowly, tiredly. 'I don't know.'

Ocholla rifles himself and comes up with a five-shilling note. He slaps it on the table. 'Changel!' he demands.

'Changel!' the barman laughs, 'You owe me three shillings more!'

Ocholla whirls on Ben. 'Is that true Ben?'

'I don't know,' Ben shakes his tired head.

'Bastard,' Ocholla calls him. 'The bugger is trying to screw us and all you can say is I don't know.' He tries to find more money.

'I have no more!' he starts for the door. 'Give him the balance, Ben, if you have it.'

Ben finds some coins, deposits them all on the counter.

'Enough?'

The barman counts. 'Ten cents less,' he says.

'I don't have it,' Ben staggers after Ocholla.

The barman follows them, bangs the door shut behind them. Not offended. Not disgusted. Drunks are his business. He makes them, he gets rid of them. He knows how to.

The street lies cold and bare. They stand by the door, swaying and leaning on each other. Ocholla snorts, his thick tongue caught up in the system.

'I want a woman,' he leans on Ben. 'I must have one tonight. Want one Ben? Come with me, I will buy you one harlot at Eden.'

Ben wags his head. 'You have no money, mate,' he says.

'I have friends. All harlots in Eden are mine. Those women will do anything for me. Let's go, Ben. You must have a whore tonight.'

Ben shakes his head, his breath thick and hard.

'I have one waiting for me at home, a respectable whore. Go home too, buddy. You are drunk and penniless.'

Ocholla shakes his head slowly. 'Not me. When I want a woman I want one. I will get her.' He falls to searching furiously in his battered clothes. He finally finds one broken, twisted cigarette. 'Last one,' he grunts,

'Swine,' Ben tells him.

'Fire,' he orders.

Ben manages to find the matchbox. After breaking one and losing more on the pavement, they get the cigarette stub glowing.

'Harlots know how to do it,' Ocholla says. 'Not like those bitches of mine. Let's go, Ben.'

'You go alone.'

'You are a bastard, Ben.'

'You are too drunk to do anything,' Ben tells him. 'Go home buddy.'

'I am not drunk, Ben.' Ocholla sways against the wall.

'Go home anyway.'

Ocholla sulks and looks really sad.

'Those vultures from the City Council, Ben, they burned my shack down this morning. Said it was a health hazard.'

'Health what?' Ben rumbles.

'They are stupid illiterates, Ben. They don't know a thing. I know whores give you clap . . . but a shanty hut! I have been in that one since they razed it last and never caught a cold from it, Ben.'

Ben totters. 'Better go home, buddy,' he slurs.

'But I just told you, it was demolished this morning,' Ocholla cries.

Ben reels. 'Go to your harlots.'

Ocholla about turns without another word, staggers and leans on the wall. Slowly he slides away. He might just find his way to Eden and his whore. These things have homers.

Ben staggers in the opposite direction. He too might just find his way to the bus stop and catch himself a late bus. But where the hell is he, which way is where? He turns into a dark alley that fails to eventually get him back to River Road. He picks another. After a lifetime that one conducts him to a close. He leans on the wall to urinate before restarting the ordeal of finding the way. Damn Ocholla and his *Karara*. Did he have to buy so much? Bastard! But Ocholla is a nice kind of bastard. He may be too ragged, wears open-mouthed shoes that frustrate Ben, and dons a ridiculous fireman's cap, gets violent and calls his wives bitches when they are not there, but Ocholla is a fine buddy. Even though he never offers a cigarette.

Ben finishes urinating, finds out he is too drunk to fix his fly buttons and gives up. He drags his sleepy legs back the way he came. At the entrance to the close he stops to make resolutions. He resolves never to drink this much

Karara again even if his buddy Ocholla pays for it. He resolves to like Ocholla, to treat him kindly and buy him a beer some time. He is a sensible and big-hearted man, Ocholla. It takes a man to really hate a women – it takes a man like him, a buddy of Ben's to loathe his parasitic wives.

Ben belches loudly and makes one more resolution, the most ambitious of all – to find the elusive bus stop before dawn, damn it!

5

Ben starts to wakefulness. A racket of noise from Max's room next door shakes the whole plot. Their voices are raised so high he can hear them above their champion noise monster. He curses the paper-thin walls. One hears his neighbours shout, hears them whisper, cry, laugh, snore, fart, everything. One can almost hear the neighbours think. And if one does not lie awake all night listening to them make love, one has to listen to them fight. In the thick of a night like this.

Wini stirs and tosses restlessly. Only a dead man could sleep through the din. A corpse – and Baby. He is not raising hell.

A series of bangs and crashes silences the radiogram. Ben sighs. Now there is only the screaming and sobbing. The girl must be another victim of Max's motorcycle charm.

'Let me kill her!' the unmistakable voice of Hombre, beseeching but firm.

'No, Hombre,' Sancho begs.

'Let her go,' Max speaks up. 'Kick her out of here. I can't stand the sight of her.'

The unfortunate woman whimpers.

'Why did you bring the bitch here?' A drunk, probably drugged, groans. 'She always does that.'

'Please let her go,' a female voice pleads. 'Don't beat her more.'

'Shut up you too,' Hombre barks.

'Let her go, please.'

'Shut up.'

'You should not have . . .'

'Quiet!'

Hombre's blow thuds home. The girl screams.

'Kill her, Hombre,' another gangster advises, his voice so thick with drink and bhang that Ben cannot quite recognize it.

The girl screams again.

'Great!' the drugged one says. 'Right on, brother.'

'I said stop it, Hombre. Stop it, goddamn you.'

'Don't stop me,' Hombre warns.

'Get out of my house!' Max commands furiously.

'Don't hold me.'

A long drawn out scuffle follows. Someone cheers. Another yelps.

'Want to fight me, Max?' Hombre hollers.

'No more beating.' Max sounds still cool.

'Want to mix with me?' Hombre follows. 'Okay man, I am ready.'

'Cool it, man!'

Ben can just visualize Hombre taking a Karate stance, the creep. If Max had any more guts he would tear the fighter to bits and hurl him out of the door – him and his karate chops. The woman snuffles. She should have known better. Bastards like Max's do not like to pay for anything, let alone a lay. Ben wishes they would, buggers. With all those pretty delicious motorcycle addicts they get home, they ought to be prepared to pay the goods. It is not fair to only lay (or rape) them and kick them back into the gutter. The girls too, to be just to Max, should at least pay for the ride to Max's and the drinks and bhang.

'Screw her up, Hombre.'

'Shut your arse, Slim.'

She screeches again.

'Kill her, Maxee.'

Another blow, another scream. Max tries vainly to retain his dignity.

'Out of my house, you two,' he commands.

'Don't touch me, Max,' Hombre shouts. 'She is my bitch, don't touch me. She will never do this to me again.'

'Kill her, man.'

'She has done this before, always does.'

'Get her out of here.'

'Take my knife, man,' the drunk hardly realizes what side of the movie screen they are on.

'Get the beast out!'

The struggle resumes. Someone resets the radiogram. It is knocked quiet almost instantly. He curses. The battle spreads out into the outer corridor. The woman goes on sniffing as they lead her away.

'Bloody women,' Slim complains alone nextdoor.

Ben sighs deep relief. His watch shows the time is 4.00 a.m. He turns on his side, tries to go back to sleep. The noise returns.

'Have you seen her underwear?' Max inquires.

'What, get the whore out of here!'

'She is a schoolgirl. Where are her knickers?'

'Get her out of here!'

A search starts for the precious garment.

'Where are her bloody undies?'

'I don't know, man, I just don't know.'

'Can't she leave without them?' the fairy wonders.

'You last had them, Slim, where are they?' Max sounds urgently impatient.

'Can't she leave without . . .'

'Give the bloody woman her bloomers.'

'I don't have them,' Slim protests.

'They are not under the bed,' someone else reports.

There is a bit of peace while they search. A narrow search. There is only one piece of furniture in Max's room, his bed. The floor is covered from wall to wall by a luxurious Afghan carpet they must have stolen. They use it as floor, dining table, garage for their motorcycle, and bed.

'Must she have her panties?' Slim asks.

'Shut up, Slim.'

'Tell her to come back tomorrow,' someone suggests.

For lack of an alternative they take the advice. The delegation goes out to the outer compound where she must be waiting. That pair of panties will find an easy market among Max's admirers. It may fetch a handsome price – a price that is very unlikely to be in any legal tender. Bastardly drunkards! Ben tosses restlessly. The gang escorts the victim out; Hombre to make sure she leaves, Max to prevent a murder, and the others to deliver sincere condolences on the sad, untimely and unfortunate demise of the ladys almost-new underpants. There is no doubt some will offer to escort her home safely, while trying to fix a date for tomorrow themselves,

Only Slim and his drunken pal are left.

'Must she have her underwear?' Slim drones,

'I don't know, man, I just don't know.'

'Bloody whore . . .'

'She is a schoolgirl, man.'

'Does she have to wear . . .'

'I don't know, man, just don't know. Pass me the joint, man.'

An uncertain lull follows. Then suddenly Slim explodes,

'Shit! Is she a baby to urinate in bed?'

'I don't know, man, I just don't know.'

Ben sighs, smiles in the dark. That is a good enough reason to slay a whore who is a schoolgirl. He bursts out laughing, wishes he could shout encouragement to Slim.

'What is the matter with you now?' Wini demands, her voice exhausted but otherwise wide awake. Ben realizes she has not been sleeping and laughs louder.

'I just wondered,' he says, hugging Wini, 'When does the woman wet the bed, during or after a shove?'

Wini grunts. 'Go out and ask them,' her voice hard and annoyed. 'They are as dirty-minded as you are.'

Ben turns over and covers his head. Wini used to have a sense of humour. Not any more. Maybe because she is pregnant. They must get married soon. And what will the baby be? A villain like its brother Baby? That boy was always meant to be a pain in the arse. From the first time Ben met him.

6

The block was big and dark. As the taxi pulled away he slipped his hand round her slim waist. She conducted him into the old building, along a dim rubbish-strewn corridor. A stray cat shot out from one of the upset trash-cans and fled past them. Wini screeched, Ben laughed. During those earlier days of their relationship the next best thing to taking Wini to nightclubs was taking her home afterward. She was a good dancer on the disco floor, better on the bed. On this first day ever he went to her place, they had been to the 1900 Club. She would not go home to his place because her boy was sick at Eastleigh. So, he went to her house.

She led him through the building to the courtyard round the back. The place stank of dust and stale rubbish. He was glad to note the absence of lavatory stink, unique to flats along Grogan Road. Wini's room was on the ground floor opening on to the courtyard. It was a small room just big enough to hold her bed, and a larger-than-average cot. Even then like now, there was only one secondhand piece of a sofa set, a small round table with legs of different lengths and three creaking old chairs. Her kitchen like his was situated in the corner nearest the window. The light-bulb was no brighter than he was used to back home in Grogan Road. The walls were a mottled deathly grey, a factor that contributed greatly to the absence of enough light in the room. For one woman the house was big enough, well-furnished and clean. It also carried the strangely intoxicating warm perfume prostitutes so often wear.

'Here we are,' she locked the door behind him. Ben crossed to the large baby cot and peered in. Even then as now, Baby wet his bed every night. His bed smelled of the irritating ammonia of urine.

'This is the house,' Wini said behind him.

'And this, I presume, is the boy who looks like me,' Ben said. She stood by him, her hand on his shoulder.

'He is pretty like you,' she looked up at him.

'Nonsense.'

The little boy lay coiled up in the urine-sodden bed, covered to the neck in a couple of old blankets. He had tender handsome features, a wide smooth forehead, bushy eyebrows like Ben's, yes, and nose and lips that were certainly his mother's. His left thumb was stuck to the

base in his mouth while the right hand supported the left in the project.

'How old is he?' Ben asked.

'Four,' she rearranged the covers round his neck.

Ben looked round the room again. It was comfortable all right. A roach proved it by walking leisurely, freely across the floor. He put his foot on the beast, walked to Wini's bed and sat on it. He hung his coat on a chair that she pushed over.

She went out. From nextdoor, in the room he later came to know as Max's a record player played a little too loud for the time of night. How the hell the neighbours could sleep through it was questionable. But as he learned when he later came to live with Wini, freedom of expression is a great thing. You could blow up your own room if there was no landlord to answer to.

Ben undressed and got between the warm clean sheets. The woman smell was overwhelming. The mattress and pillow were thick and soft as he had never known. Wini's photograph hung on the opposite wall, as beautiful as ever and naked from the waist up. She was wearing the giant gold rings and chain. Next to the picture was that of her son. Below them a large poster advertised Ambi skin-toning creams.

Wini came back to the room humming. She locked the door, took a couple of soft white towels from a box and hung them on the bedstead. Then she undressed. Ben held his breath, savoured the moment. First came the large ear-rings and tanzanite finger ring. She took off her blouse and skirt, sat on the bed to undo the black bra. Ben lent a trembling anxious hand for this little operation. Then quite spontaneously his hand slipped up and down her back feeling the silk skin, caressing up and round her majestic back. She sat still, held her breath while faint excited tremors passed through her frame. His body was on fire. Breathing heavily, she lay back, lifted her feet into the bed. He embraced her.

Baby started coughing. Ben cursed loudly. Wini got back to her feet. She glided to the cot and felt the boy's forehead. He stopped coughing and went back to instant sleep.

'It was worse last week,' she said getting back into bed.

He reached for her. She slipped her hands round his back. Their bodies locked into a heat-generating union that seared his stomach. His breath caught in his throat, threatening to choke him. His hands touched, slipped, grabbed again, running wild, faster over her body, in and out of the nooks and crannies that he now knew so well. She panted, nibbled at his ears, whispered incomprehensibles. He could stand it no longer. His large hands gripped the flimsy panties and yanked. The whimpered warning came too late. The slip broke free and disappeared into the sheets, among the thrash-

ing limbs in the scorching hot bed. She moaned, he grunted. Waves upon waves of red hot pleasure washed over them turning them, rocking them and finally swallowing the locked bodies into the cool dark sea of pleasure.

Ben woke up first. The room was dark, the grey like of dawn, and stifling hot. His head felt heavy with a slight hangover. The time was 8.15 a.m. So late in the morning. He looked at Wini lying peacefully asleep, her head resting on his left arm. She blew soft hot breath on his chest, her nostril emitting a low whizz.

The record from nextdoor played a bit too loud for this time on a Sunday morning. Another neighbour whistled loudly in the shower room. Another of Wini's lovely neighbours started a motorcycle, revved the engine a few murderously loud rounds then killed it.

Wini stirred. She opened her eyes.

'Monkeys,' she said calmly. Ben laughed.

'Lovely neighbours you have,' he said.

'Devils,' she said quietly, turned and added: 'You just cannot sleep after six. Every son of a harlot wants to burst your ears.'

The baby stirred in his cot and moaned.

'Mamma.'

'What, Baby?'

'I am hungry,' the boy said, just like that.

She glanced at Ben, made her face look disgusted but licked. She got out of bed after a long reluctant pause. She took a loaf of bread from the cupboard, cut a huge chunk and handed it over. Ben watched her breasts hanging sexily over the cot. A wave of unreasonable desire passed through him. Her naked skin tone went well with the gloom. She got back into bed.

'He is my husband,' she told Ben. 'He says what he wants and I just better have it in advance. I wish he would inform me before urinating in his bed. It smells so awful. I am so ashamed to bring anybody home.'

'It's nothing,' he said, his nose working nervously on the urine stink. 'It makes the place smell like home.'

'You would live here?'

'Why not? Long as you pay the rent of course,' he laughed. 'Does he go to school?' he asked after a moment.

'He is too young,' she said. 'Maybe next year if I can afford it. Nursery schools are so expensive these days.'

'Mamma,' the boy called.

She looked across the room: 'What now my husband?'

'I want milk.'

'There is no milk today,' she told him. 'Eat your bread. I will make you tea and eggs soon.'

The boy crunched on the bread.

'Who minds him when you are out?' Ben asked the mother.

'I am in most of the day,' Wini answered. 'Sometimes I leave him with neighbours, sometimes I lock him in 'til I get back. There is the woman next door. She is childless and simply adores him. Sometimes . . .' She laughed . . . 'sometimes I think she might steal him. Run off with him.'

Ben hugged her and smiled. 'Hand me a cigarette,' he said.

She took a packet of cigarettes and box of matches from her handbag on the bedside table. He lit one. She rifled through a shorthand book from the table.

'I will sit the exams next week,' she said. 'And then the ordeal of hunting for a job. It is murder; everybody wants to lay you before they fail you on the interview.'

Ben laughed.

'And when they do it to you first time,' she went on, 'they will always want to lay you. First the messenger and his brother, the director, personnel manager, every bastard. It gets to be blackmail. You either comply or forfeit your job.'

Ben blew smoke rings at the grey ceiling above him. He never had anything against the system where one paid for what one got. He was used to it. And he was very sure if he ever had anything to peddle to a woman, it definitely would not be for money.

Wini slipped out of bed, drew the curtains and opened the window. Light, morning light, filtered by the buildings, entered the room. She dressed and went out.

Ben smoked quietly and wondered what to do with the Sunday. He would probably take Wini out to the park or the museum. He loved days spent out boating with Wini. Wini would be a young girl all over again, excited and full of life. She laughed at the slightest ridiculous thing that popped up, and when they eventually wound up the day with a film show and a dinner out in town, Ben always got home exhausted and very happy.

Wini came back. She went to the kitchen corner to prepare breakfast.

'Mamma,' Baby called, standing up in his bed.

Wini turned to him.

'I want to get out.' She lifted him down. She dressed him in faded old khaki shorts and a white cotton shirt. He went out to urinate, came back almost immediately. Ben watched the brawny youth. For a young man with a mother like he had and a non-existent father, he was pretty healthy. He looked more like six than four. Ben finished smoking. He dropped the end on to the floor. He searched for his underwear in the blankets. He was about to give up and ask for Wini's assistance when he found it. He pulled

them on and started the stupid task of getting into trousers while still under the blankets. Baby watched him. He tried not to look uneasy. Wini did not even once turn. But her son watched him fixedly, not embarrassed and not curious. Just the subdued attention of a young man used to seeing strangers creep naked out of his mother's bed. Did the boy really know what the men were, that they represented his mother's keep, his daily bread?

Wini abandoned the frying pan and fetched him a clean towel from a drawer. She handed him a sponge and a too strongly perfumed soap. Only then did she announce:

'The shower stinks.'

'I am used to that,' He shrugged.

'I remember now,' she went back to her cooking. 'Third door on the left.'

Baby watched Ben indifferently as he walked out.

'It is cold as hell,' Wini called after him.

He walked gingerly out of the room. There is something creepy about walking out of a harlot's room into the morning. The skin tremors, crawling with millions of little consciences that were not there last night. Every face that sees accuses silently, every passing word is like a condemning statement.

Fortunately there were not many people around. He did not look at anybody directly but he could feel they were all watching him, bastards. He made his way to the shower room. The shower room stank, but not as bad as back home in Grogan Road. It was only stale by comparison. The lower walls and the rubbishstrewn sodden floor were coloured a deep green with slimy fungus. The room was dark when he closed the door, and the water as cold as she had said. He showered fast, dressed and got out.

A harlot watched him from the balcony of the first floor. He could tell she was a professional hooker from the way she stood, legs apart so he could see clear up her legs to hell. She had nothing under the mini-skirt. A child cried from the room behind her. She shouted to the baby to shut up. A big brawny rough walked out of the room nextdoor to Wini's. Ben stopped to watch the giant swagger along towards the front of the plot. Another pushed a motorcycle out of the same room.

Ben entered Wini's. 'Who is the big guy next door?' he asked.

'Max,' Wini said, broke an egg into the pan.

'He looks mean.'

'He is,' she said. 'Tea or coffee?'

'That is no reason to make so much noise around.'

'It isn't. Tea or coffee?'

Ben smiled at the gaping Baby. The boy did not smile back. He threw the towel on a chair and went on his haunches.

'What is your name young man?'

The boy stared back, stuck his finger in his mouth.

'Does he speak apart from asking for bread?'

'Speak to uncle, Baby,' Wini told her son.

Ben looked from the mother to the wide-eyed son.

'What is your name?' he asked again.

'Baby,' the boy said, quietly serious.

'Not that,' Ben smiled. 'The other one.'

'Baby,' he repeated.

Ben laughed. Baby now smiled.

'Whose baby?' Ben asked.

'Mamma's baby.'

He patted the little head.

'Tea or coffee?' Wini asked again.

'Anything, No, coffee.'

Ben hoists the enormous steel mallet to his shoulder. He curses the damned cement dust, loudly wishes the bloody drivers would off-load their bloody lorries without raising so much dirt. Everyone seems determined to raise as much hell as they can today. Another worn truck rattles up to the ever-rising sand hill and prepares to do its worst too. Its rheumatic engine exudes a cloud of dark foul smoke, which blends badly with the clean dust. Dust can be clean too, particularly from so high it does not fall on one's clothes or get into your mouth. A construction site is just the place to catch something bad, something unhealthy. A few days back an old hand had to get some days off to rest. He was suffering from malaria.

'It is the bloody dust,' he said. And this morning two more wanted sick leave. They did not get it. Yussuf may be a drug-addicted crummy bastard, but he is not stupid. He can tell a hangover from smallpox.

Ben drags his large legs towards the entrance to the building. It is cooler in there, less dusty and less busy if one can keep out of Yussuf's call.

'While you are about it,' a hung-over tired looking truck driver shouts to Ben, 'See if you can find that bastard Yussuf.'

'I don't want to find him,' Ben shouts back.

'His blasted tipper won't start,' the driver says. 'I was advised to keep it always running, but a bugger has got to rest.'

'So what do I tell him?'

'Just send the creep down here.'

Ben vanishes into the cool interior. The lousiest deal on floor duties is the climbing. The higher the building goes, the further you have to climb to work. There are no personnel lifts yet and the foreman will not, repeat not, let anything but building material ride the crane bucket. He is not a fun-fair manager and labourers have legs and hands to use. That is what they are paid to do.

On the third floor Kanji Bhai is having one of his usual rough times with his regular hand, the Hyena. They are both about the same age, both lean and rugged in a permanent way and both as dusty as the cement mixer. They have been in building for the same period of time, Bhai as a first class mason, East Africa and the Hyena as a professional hand and a pain

in everybody's arse. They ought to be friends but that will never be. Whereas old Bhai wears cracked leather sandals, old Hyena walks bare-foot. Bhai eats curry occasionally and drinks milk but the Hyena eats nothing and drinks *Busaa*, a thick porridge drink that fills his stomach and gets him drunk at the same time. It makes him unfriendly, unpredictable and a terrible ache in Kanji Bhai's arse.

'Vot you say?' Kanji Bhai asks.

'It can't be done,' Hyena answers.

'Yussup I tell.'

'Go lick his arse.'

Ben walks over.

'Ben,' Bhai says, 'Yussup is vere, Ben?'

'What is the matter, Bhai?'

'Tis Heena,' Bhai says. 'Notting he do. I do vork. I vork, vork, all day I vork. Heena he do notting. Yussup I vont.'

'The Indian puss does not know what he wants, Ben,' Hyena bursts in.

'Vot you say?' Bhai asks him.

'Nothing to you.'

'I talk, you talk, voo hear voo?' Bhai swears and chews on his dusty grey moustache. The Hyena curses and chews on his own dusty grey moustache.

Ben leaves them to reconcile. Kanji Bhai does not really want to report to Yussuf. As far as he is concerned 'Heena' knows more about building than that son of Gujarati shit. The Hyena too will work in his own good time.

Ben gets to the sixth floor hot and breathless. A group of hands is busy demolishing a wall. That is what the site has got to, a madhouse. Some building, others demolishing. The building inspector declared a partition faulty and it has got to be redone. A compound clash of ideas between the architects, Yussuf and the hands is resulting in a lot of demolition jobs around.

The higher Development House rises, the more complex the problems get and the harder it is to trace Yussuf.

'Seen Yussuf?' one of the demolition experts addresses Ben. He shakes his head.

'If you do see him,' another one says, 'tell that Yussuf we want him here quick.'

Ben climbs slowly. Some of these hands are getting to be so good at demolitions they have trouble readjusting to building. The masonry is getting worse day by day. Yussuf has taken to grabbing time off to hide any time a hand tries to talk construction sense into him.

'I don't care how they are building them these days,' he often shouts to a labourer, 'we are going to build it like it says in the book.'

No-one ever asks what book.

Ben has a feeling Yussuf is concealed somewhere smoking bhang and loathing worthless labourers who have to consult him on how to replace a broken pick-handle. Foremanship could be fun if he did not have so many desperate labourers crying his name so loud. The pleasure is only really complete when he has a stick of bhang in his hands and at the end of the month when the pay envelope is delivered.

Ben takes a corridor towards the only place there is a Yussuf lair on the seventh floor. It is on a balcony on the west of the building overlooking Haile Selassie Avenue and the railway station. There is a splendid view of the city from the balcony. It should be even more magnificent when one is high on bhang.

'Lieutenant.'

He jolts to a stop.

Onesmus's gigantic bulk blocks half the passage. The other half is occupied by another tough, the crane driver, recently replaced by Ocholla. He is apparently as rugged and formidable as his ill-chosen companion. The two have just come out of Yussuf's hideout, the ex-sergeant still dragging on a stub of bhang. He looks Ben up and down.

'Just the man I want,' he grins hideously, slowly chewing on his sickening tobacco.

Ben lowers the heavy hammer from his shoulder and grips its handle menacingly. 'What do you want?' he tries to sound aggressive.

'I only want you to meet a friend of mine,' Onesmus pats the other man's arm and tries to look innocent.

Ben looks from one thick face to the other. He studies the mean eyes, dusty eyebrows and careless expressions with mounting caution. The former crane driver's front teeth are all covered in dirty brown moss. But for that, the two could have been brothers.

'His name is Njenga,' Onesmus informs.

Just the kind of guy Ben does not care to know. He turns on Onesmus, 'Out of my way!'

The driver chews slowly, carelessly on his curd tobacco, spits disgusting tobacco mess at Ben's feet.

'Njenga is a quiet, peace-loving citizen,' he informs his out-numbered, out-muscled audience. 'And as you owe him a brother, I thought it is only fair that you two should meet!'

Ben's eyes dart from one to the other.

'Perhaps I should elaborate,' Onesmus shrugs. Njenga once had a

brother. Elder brother. A little mad, a little crooked, but a brother. He does not have any brother anymore. You know why? Because you killed his only brother, lieutenant. You gave him some bombs. The bombs exploded.'

Ben starts. It is amazing where you find your enemies, brother. The gorilla's brother, damn. There is a slight resemblance, yes. But it is a lousy double of a master criminal. He does not look half as self-assured; his faculties creeping in low gear, choked by alcohol and bhang. Ben shrugs,

'You know that was an accident,' he tells the ex-sergeant,

'I don't,' Onesmus smiles,

'It was,' Ben says.

'It was not,' the other spits tobacco on the floor. He drags on the thick stick of bhang, blows choking smoke at Ben.

'We are not stupid, me and my buddy,' he rumbles on. 'You may fool the police, but not us. We are smart. We have been figuring and figuring.' He looks furtively around. A couple of hands approach along the corridor, stop and go to work on a demolition job. Onesmus betrays uneasiness. Ben regains confidence,

'So,' he asks loudly. 'What have you figured?'

Onesmus looks from him to Njenga, who up to now has neither uttered a word nor shifted his hypnotized stance. He hands him the stub of bhang to reinforce him, get him to look serious.

'We figured this,' Onesmus turns to Ben. 'Bombs do not just go off. They don't explode and kill the people handling them. One has to fire them, set them so they go off unexpectedly.' He breathes deep, sucks in his large tummy. 'You killed his brother, lieutenant.'

The alleged brother shows no grief, hate or worry. His lazy eyes look a bit sleepy, automated by bhang. On his own he is a harmless imbecile. Propelled by Onesmus he is the perfect material for violent murder. This new line of accusation must be all Onesmus's design to gain an ally.

'You killed my brother,' he speaks up from his grave, dead and rotten. He does not open his mouth often enough to gain experience in addressing a second person. He was replaced by Ocholla for fear he might topple over with the crane.

'The idiot killed himself,' Ben informs him.

'Mbugua was no idiot,' Onesmus cuts in.

'My brother ... he was not idiot,' he darts a glance at his prop for approval. Onesmus acknowledges with an emphasized nod.

'Maybe not,' Ben agrees. 'But he still could not fire a .54 mortar.' Yussuf emerges from his meditation cocoon down the passage. Ben's heart receives a boost.

Onesmus looks round nervously. Then he steps menacingly close, his eyes the hard glassy globes of a bully who was once an underdog and did not like it. 'You will pay for this, lieutenant,' he hisses.

Yussuf draws closer.

'You killed him . . .' the half-dead avenger leaves the rest of the sentence suspended.

Ben shakes his head in mock sorrow.

'Since you are so keen on settling his accounts,' he says to Mbugua's brother, 'how about the five thousand pounds your crooking brother never paid me? Will you settle that too?'

The other stares back, bewildered.

'Son of a bitch.' Onesmus calls Ben. 'Let's go,' he nudges his mascot. Ben steps aside to let them hustle off.

'You one arse!' he shouts after them. 'What are you in it for, what are you getting out of this?'

The bulky driver whirls round.

'Your arse, lieutenant,' he bellows, 'when he is through with it.'

Yussuf comes up to Ben. They watch the giants roll to the end of the dark corridor and disappear into the stair well.

'Hopeless, worthless,' the foreman observes.

Ben says nothing. It is certain Mbugua's brother never missed him until Onesmus invited him to. Maybe he never even knew his only brother was dead. All these past years.

Yussuf scratches his tummy behind the thin nylon shirt, a gesture that says he is about to say or do something he is afraid to.

'What have you got in common with that Onesmus, Ben?' he manages.

'Like you just heard him say, we hate each other's arses',

Yussuf shakes his head and laments.

'He is bad company. He drinks terrible, drives worse, causes trouble on the site and . . . (graver still), he has just been in my lunchbox . . . eaten everything, the pig.'

'He brought you bhang,' Ben reminds him unconcerned. 'You need it worse than food.'

'I pay for that,' Yussuf mourns. 'He did not pay for my lunch.'

'You could have said no!'

'To him?' he exclaims, scared already. 'He is mad.'

Ben agrees, quietly. Yussuf looks around, tiredly.

'What was he telling you, Ben?'

'He was introducing me to my enemy.'

Yussuf wags his round head. He will never understand Ben either,

'You be careful, Ben,' he says. 'Those two are no good to anybody.' He conducts Ben back to his perch. He is not in the usual muddled hurry. Ben does not mind spending a few idle hours with the boss, (little boss). The empty plastic lunch box lies abandoned on the floor of the balcony, still red from the curry. Yussuf lands it an ugly look, kicks it into the corner.

'Is Njenga mad too?' Ben leans against the parapet overlooking the avenue and the polytechnic.

'He is useless,' the foreman answers. 'He comes to work drunk, sleeps on the job. I had to shift him to floor duties before he toppled over the edge with the crane.'

'You could sack him,' Ben suggests.

'I can't, Ben,' he looks furtively around. 'Don't tell this to anybody, but my brother instructed me to go easy on him.'

Ben nods. That is interesting. Yussuf looks around once more then down at the avenue. Satisfied that nobody is listening, he continues:

'Don't repeat this either, but his brother is big in the Ministry. If we sack him no more government tenders, maybe no more work permits. See, Ben, my hands are bound.'

More like cemented together, Ben thinks. He sighs. Maybe he too ought to find a brother or uncle somewhere where it counts. Some kind of reference. But, it is still a wonderful world from up here. It is terrific. The sun is nice. The air is free from dust and noise. The town lies smug in the equatorial sunshine. The city in the sun, beautifully colourful; a dream city.

He leans on the balcony, looks over to Haile Selassie Avenue. A motorist has just knocked down a pedestrian at the polytechnic crossing. The speed maniacs will finish off the youngsters yet. And – his heart falters – that is just what the mad Onesmus aims to do to him.

'You could sack One-arse-Mess,' he suggests to the foreman,

'Who is that?'

'Onesmus.'

Yussuf wags his big grey-bearded head wearily. His face bears the disappointed expression of a toothless bulldog who is nonetheless expected to bite.

'I can't, Ben,' he moans.

'Why not?'

He shrugs fat-laden shoulders.

'They are friends.'

Ben shrugs carelessly too. That is a reason to keep a murderer loose – because he is a friend of the friend of the devil.

'Ben,' Yussuf whirls round.

'Yes.'

The pudgy grey face looks dejected, afraid, almost desperate. He looks from Ben to the rugged support pilons, to the avenue below.

'I hate Onemus,' he observes seriously.

'Sack him then,' Ben says.

Yussuf shakes his head fast, clumsily. Ben curses under his breath. It is almost disgusting to see a foreman with the power of life and death, food and hunger over so many men, cowed. A construction foreman boss of so much steel and concrete, armies under his command, and he is afraid of one of his drunken drivers. Damn!

'I can't, Ben,' he works his mouth almost soundlessly. 'You see . . . not only may I not . . . I must not. I need him . . . need him so bad.' To drive the point home he gropes for a stick of bhang and lights it. Ben nods understanding. Everybody needs somebody. We all need someone. Sometimes only someone to hate.

'I hate Onesmus, Ben.'

'So do I, mate.'

Yussuf squirms uncomfortably. 'He is making it hard for me, Ben.'

Ben looks up at the struggling big man.

'How is it?'

The foreman hitches his trousers over his belly button, rubs his rough fat chin.

'He wants me to pay more for . . .' he exhibits the fat cigar. 'And this grass is not half as good as it used to be. He is cheating me . . . cheating me all the time.'

Who does not cheat, Ben thinks. Contractors are the worst cheats of them all. He glances across the city to the smokey industrial area, and back. Down on Haile Selassie Avenue the ambulance has just picked up the bundle of flesh and bone that few hours back was breathing, living, hungry student. The police patrol car pulls away. The crowd of idle onlookers disperses. The heavy traffic once more unclogged streaks down the road, oblivious of the zebra crossing and its determined pedestrians.

Ben turns his mind to the problem at hand. Bhang, Cannabis Sativa. It grows almost anywhere in the fertile Nairobi River Valley. One does not need a licence to purchase it. You could just go collect it there, when the owner is not looking. And if Yussuf had any more brains he would go down there and grow his own patch himself.

'So,' he sounds off, 'so you want me to help you out?'

The foreman nods urgently. Ben nods slowly, then says emphatically:

'And what is in it for me?'

One does not do anything for nothing these days.

'Anything, Ben,' Yussuf shrugs eagerly. 'Light duties, special privileges and . . . maybe permanent employment terms if we get a work permit next year.'

Ben thinks fast. Maybe he might just get that beast Onesmus kicked out – if he can push the foreman's drug-craving under his thumb. He nods thoughtfully.

'Is . . . is it a deal?' Yussuf extends a sweaty fat hand.

Ben nods again, grabs the thick hand.

To their left Ocholla's crane hauls up a bucketful of concrete.

'That reminds me,' Ben thumbs downwards.

'There are hundreds of hands crying for Yussuf down there.'

The foreman nods, smiles broadly and makes a quick exit. Ben recovers his hammer from the floor and climbs to the eighth floor. There are lots of men up here. They are almost all busy, pouring tons of concrete into the wooden moulds and bending steel supports into place. The busy noise is all swept by the romantic west wind and carried struggling to the thorn plains in the East.

Ocholla sits still in the cockpit of his mini-giant, soothed to a hypnotic trance by its incessant power-packed hum. He presses a button here, twists a handle there and controls the power of lift and drop stored under the dirty nails of his fingers.

Ben slides over, nods at him. He nods back, twists a knob. The cables swish downwards, pause and run slower. He peers down at the chaos below, curses and deposits the bucket in it somewhere near the diesel mixer. Then he punches the crane dead, turns to Ben.

'Where have you been?'

'With Yussuf.'

'What does that bhang-smoking son of a cow want?'

Ben leans on the crane.

'Bhang.'

'From you?' he sounds plaintive, unbelieving.

'He thinks Onesmus has been screwing him,' Ben explains. 'So he thinks I can help out. Give it to him purer, cheaper.'

'And where will you find it?' Ocholla asks.

Ben shakes his head. 'I don't know yet.'

Ocholla shrugs. 'Give it to him, Ben,' he says. 'You might get yourself promoted to assistant foreman . . . or foreman if you can get the devil to choke to death on the bhang.'

He rifles himself, fetches a wilted, wrinkled cigarette. The filter breaks. He pulls it loose, tosses it to the mixer below.

'Last one,' he says honestly.

Ben hooks out one of his own. They strike up. After exchanging a bit of small talk, Ben takes the stairs back down. Whatever he came up to do here must have already been done by somebody else by now.

The site bears the appearance of a futile battle field. Tippers and trucks calling for attention rev their engines and raise hurricanes of dust. The concrete mixer has already worked itself to a frenzy chewing, gurgling and turning its mouth in dizzying whirls. Its driver shovels more sand into the machine, then throws the spade down and curses. Like the rest of the hands he is mad this afternoon. Hungry and mad.

The owner of the Hilotoni Hotel across the avenue refused them lunch unless they could pay cash. He lectured them on business, capital inflation and the lot. Not only did they not understand him, but they could not settle the outstanding accounts. No one has money to drink *Karara* at mid-month, let alone pay for his lousy *Ugali* and *Sukuma Wiki*. And Mr Hilotoni's refusal to feed hungry workers on credit only served to confirm what they suspected all along – big or small, businessmen are mean, cheating bastards.

Machore is angrier than he is hungry and tired. Very few hands attended his lunchtime assembly, and those who came only wanted to discuss Mr Hilotoni and his decayed food. They just would not listen to Machore's breakdown of how workers are exploited by the giant corporations, or even listen to his simple steps to win the game of survival versus inflation. To crown it all, just as Machore was warming up to the verbal warfare, the Hyena shouted to him to go screw Mr Hilotoni and his rotten swill.

Like the rest of them, the Hyena is hungry. Unlike the rest of them he hates everybody in sight, not just the Hilotoni manager. He drank Chibuku for lunch yesterday, got a bit drunk and feeling younger fell asleep on a supporting girder up on the second floor. Just as he was beginning to dream about the good times ahead, he rolled off the beam to the ground two floors below. The fall nearly broke his old back, but the hands just stood there and laughed. Yussuf said the old bugger was malingering and Kanji Bhai wished the bastard had broken his arse.

That Kanji Bhai is still in a rage. His worthless helper, Hyena, is still limping around and Yussuf is still complaining about their speed of work. When Bhai tries to explain to Yussuf, the foreman curses at him. And when he turns to Ben with the 'Porty years, First class . . .' Ocholla advises him to stuff it and go shit on the avenue below.

Ben leans on the battered body of an old truck and lights himself a smoke. He smokes quietly and watches men sweat in the grilling sun. It appears everybody except Ben wants Yussuf. There is a Yussuf-calling competition running, and from the sound of it he might have more than enough winners; the sole prize his nasty attention. Yussuf is angry. Angry at Kanji Bhai, the Hyena, Machore, everybody.

'Ben.'

'Yeah.'

'Seen that son of Indian shit?'

'No.'

'I will kill the mother . . .'

Machore snorts and vanishes back into the site dust. Wanjiru, the nail girl would not let him rape her this morning. And when he tried to use force she screamed and attracted every hand to the dark corner on the first floor, Yussuf threatened to fire him next time he tried to rape any of the nail women without his prior consent.

From the same confusion and dust Yussuf emerges haggard and dusty and very discouraged. He notices Ben and hobbles over. He hitches his hands on the blubberly hips and regards Ben the way a busy foreman studies an indispensable no good idler.

Ben drags on his cigarette, hurls the filter to the ground and walks on it. 'Finished,' he announces.

Yussuf shakes his head.

'I will fire somebody today, Ben.'

'What for?'

'Nobody wants to work. They all say they are hungry and that Kanji Bhai, son of a bitch . . .' he rubs sweat of his brow. 'Go relieve the mixer, Ben.'

'But I am still unloading this truck.'

'You haven't finished?' The foreman swears profoundly in Hindi.

'There must be at least half a ton of your lousy nails and I have only two hands.'

'But you have . . .'

'They are made of steel, you know.'

'Mother of . . .' Yussuf starts, then nods compromise. There is no use arguing with the only person on the site he almost understands. 'I will get you somebody. Carry on.'

'Now!'

'Now? Oh hell,' he works his pudgy face like he is going to weep, then wipes sweat off his brow again. 'You!' he yells at a barrow-shoving human robot.

'Me?'

'Go with Ben and unload the truck.'

The rugged hand stops and stares at Yussuf through blank eyes. His hand vanishes into the rags and scratches the coarse body. He spits grit, looks from his barrowful of gravel to its destination by the mixer. Then he shrugs and walks to the lorry, abandoning the barrow right there in the middle of the confusion. Let the bloody Indian commandeer a hand from somewhere else to complete the delivery.

Yussuf looks from the man's bare back to the deserted wheelbarrow, desperation mounting to a kind of hysterical terror. Ben starts off quickly to avoid the foreman's pleas.

'You are next on the mixer, Ben,' Yussuf calls after him.

'Say, Yussuf,' Ben pulls up, 'Are these the special light duties you told me about?'

Yussuf stares back blankly, then:

'Start with the six inch nails,' he runs off to answer an s.o.s. or to smoke bhang, or to defecate.

Ben curses. It is beginning to make sense. Light duties are only light in Yussuf's numbed mind. It is not such a bad idea working up there on the new floors after all. At least once on the floors one can keep out Yussuf's insatiable demands to be understood.

The helping hand has already moved two crates in one trip. For a guy just here from hustling gravel that is a great effort. Ben watches him reflectfully. The hand looks very much the beast of burden he is; his half-naked back pouring with sweat and the trousers rolled up to his thick muscular thighs. Rivulets of sweat sweep the dust down the melancholic face. He is all hands and legs. With boys like him around, Development House will grow fast.

Ben stirs; hoists one crate to his shoulder, and lumbers off at a lurch. The damned things seem to be getting heavier.

'Hup-two-three-four, hup-two . . .' Ben stops. He turns round slowly to the source of the sound. Onesmus leans out of the cab of his tipper and hands him the ugly, undertoothed grin. He licks the thick dust-covered lips and smiles like a Satan astronaut about to lift off to Hell.

'Hi, Lieutenant!'

Ben shakes his head sympathetically and tells him:

'You did not wash your face this morning, One-Arse.'

Onesmus laughs.

'Didn't clean your arse, either. I can smell it from here.'

Ben regards him for a moment, the weight on his shoulder forgotten. His lips part in a wan, automatic smile.

'Son of a pregnant baboon,' he says.

Onesmus bursts into laughter, then stops and looks almost sad. He lowers his voice as he speaks so that his thick tongue sloshes in slimy tobacco mess.

'Hey, Lieutenant,' he says. 'I hear Yussuf has been smoking a new brand of grass,' he winks wickedly.

'So?' Ben asks him.

'So,' he spits tobacco. 'Did I hear right?'

'Ask him,' Ben turns to go, but the driver calls him urgently.

'Hey, Lieutenant.'

Ben stops, looks back.

'You know, Lieutenant . . . if I were you, Ben, I would . . . well, it is no good feeding the son of an Indian cow on pure weed. The bastard might just kill himself with it and besides it is a waste he will never appreciate. It is no good. No good at all.'

Ben studies the battered face sticking out of the equally battered cockpit. 'So?' he demands.

'So I would stop being a numb arse, make some extra *Karara* out of the monkey. You know how I mean about the grass.'

'I have no idea,' Ben admits.

'Mix it with a bit of God's grass. There is a lot of it lying wasting in Uhuru Park.'

Ben ponders that over.

'The damn bastard will never tell the difference,' Onesmus lectures him. Then he slams the truck into gear and roars away in a mountain of angry dust.

Ben holds his breath, closes his eyes tight and lets the dust settle. Maybe the crazy Onesmus has a point about the grass. Trust the devil to come up with such a novel idea. And just as the drought is hitting the bhang market, It may be worth trying. At least once. And then maybe Onesmus will alert Yussuf on the swindle. So what? Yussuf will never believe anything Onesmus says. He never did understand the mad driver. Besides, what the hell has Ben got to lose? The special light duties that include manning the mean mixer and heaving tons of lousy nails.

'Shit,' Ben spits gritty dust and continues his interrupted voyage to the ever-rising heap of boxes.

9

There is nothing like the feel of hot gravel under one's bare back. Ben wriggles his body in charged excitement, his eyes closed tight against the hot sun. Another lunch break here, and the site is as dead as ever. Machines and men lie sprawled around in as disorderly a way as the devil could ever make them. There used to be overtime pay for working through the lunch hours but that did not last long. The stingy contractors found out that they were not making any faster progress, scrapped it and settled for the natural cockroach pace of a potential twenty-five-storey job.

Ben brushes a fly off his hairy chest. It is great this afternoon break. One can almost hear the building sigh. He brushes another fly from his face and damns the flies. They eat a guy's food, screw on the edge of his glass of lunch, and then drink the sweat off his body. The bastards.

The lunchtime assembly is quite angry today. They are on today's newspapers headlines discussing a possible rent increase on the city council houses and an almost imminent rise in the prices of milk and cigarettes. Almost everybody on the site smokes. They have all joined Machore to quarrel with him, as though this will stop the price rise. All hands except Ben and his buddy Ocholla, the Hyena who lies abandoned under the shade of a truck, and the four Banianis playing cards somewhere in the building. Even Kanji Bhai has joined the labourers parliament today. Increasing the price of milk will definitely starve him to death at lunchtime.

'Roti up,' he says, rising on a point of order. 'Chicken curry up. Now de bloody milk up it go. Vot you say, Machoe, ve strike?'

Machore starts off explaining about trade unions organizations which no one understands. The fact is Machore will never call a strike. The last three foremen lost their jobs over strikes. Machore is too wily to lose his daily *Karara* fighting for a lot of barefoot labourers who will definitely never miss him when he is gone.

Ocholla emerges from the lavatory by the corner of the site and walks over to Ben still reading the letter from home. Ben stirs from the semi-limbo and blinks up at Ocholla.

'A letter from home, Ben,' Ocholla folds the letter and stuffs it somewhere on his tattered person.

Ben clears his throat.

'What do they want now, money?'

Ocholla shrugs and sits down by his buddy. 'They always want money,' he says. Ben lies back and closes his eyes.

'What is new?' he asks tiredly.

Ocholla lets a respectable lapse of time wedge itself between the question and the answer.

'They just got another little bastard, Ben. Another bloody ...'

'Congratulations!' Ben guffaws.

Ocholla eyes him curiously hostile against something, somebody. He grabs a handful of gravel and furiously hurls it at nobody. Ben senses the change in the air and speaks without looking up:

'Sorry, mate.'

Ocholla wriggles his toes through the open ends of his shoes into the gravel. From the assembled discontent grumblers' parliament a few yards away snatches of economics and slanders:

'The minister did that?'

'No, his wife.'

'She really did that?'

'These people are not human.'

'Forget that,' the speaker rules. 'Anyone can fart in public. Now, the motion on food prices. Did you know the Minister for Food owns all the food kiosks in Eastleigh? Well, he does. His wife owns half the Tree Bottoms Hotels empire. The brother actually manages the Tree Bottoms across the road. Such a damn clot he is, too. We were in school together and ...'

'I hear they are applying for a *Sukuma Wiki* retail monopoly,' another labourer chirps in.

'Oh God,' someone moans.

'It must be the hundredth,' Ocholla reflects quietly.

'What?' Ben looks up.

'The new baby.'

Ben remembers to keep his mouth shut.

Ocholla speaks up after another moment of grave quiet.

'Tell you what, Ben.'

'What?'

'I can't remember when I last slept with any of my wives, Ben.'

Ben looks up. Ocholla seems serious, so he does not laugh. He answers Ocholla's watchful eyes with a sterile blank.

After a long moment Ocholla yanks off his all-weather cap, tortures his dry hair and slams the cap back on. He explodes to his feet and bulldozes off. The shock of being a father for the hundredth time must have loosened

the bowels, given him dysentery. However, he pauses by the food price committee, raises a point of order and asks for a fag from the massive barefoot speaker. Machore advises him to go screw himself.

Ben watches the weathered body roll through the débris back to the latrines. The normally sordid mass of bones and whipcord muscles appears frail, and fluffy from lack of faith in providence. If there is anything worse than knowing that your wife is expecting a hundredth baby, it is the not knowing whose hundredth baby she is in for. Hell, Ben reflects. Who is sure of anything any more? Nobody seems aware of where they are going, where they are coming from, or whether they are doing anything at all. Not even . . .

'Machore,' Ben calls the chairman of the assembly.

'What?' Machore bellows.

'Who are they?'

'Who are who?'

'They have done this, they have done that, they own this and that, they . . . you know, like you are yapping all the time?'

'What are you trying to say, Ben?'

'I just wondered who they are.'

'Who who are?'

'Forget it,' Ben lies back and closes his eyes.

Machore scratches his dusty head and continues his interrupted address. No one gives a second thought to Ben. Him and Ocholla are pariahs. No goods from no place. No one understands them. Not Yussuf, not Bhai, nobody at all understands them. Not that the two are any more complicated than the rest of the band. The labourers do not understand many, many things. They do not understand the Inland Revenue, they do not understand balance of payment, national deficit, national treasury, banks, savings, nor for that matter inflation. They have never heard of King Feisal nor of OPEC. Labourers do know a few things about petroleum though; it explodes when you light it; tippers and lorries and the cement mixer and buses cannot move without it. They know the price of petrol goes up for a few cents from time to time and consequently the busfare rises by shillings. One thing labourers will never understand is why the prices of *Unga* and *Sukuma Wiki* keep shooting up astronomically; why the food prices at the kiosks under the trees rise with the price of petrol.

Ben swats another fly off his bare chest. Ocholla has a problem all right . . . What sort of wives are they to run a man into the ground like that, Ben wonders. Are they like Wini in any way. Understanding, undemanding, and endowed with infinite patience? She is expecting a baby too. And, Ben sighs, it could be anybody's baby. What with all those hateful cousins and

uncles who have been taking her out so often. And her white bastard boss, Johnny! But the baby has got to be Ben's. She does not sleep out often enough to be pregnant by someone else. It has got to be his. His baby. He has got to get another job soon if he is to make some kind of a father. Wini must get him the office job. The hell with his former commanding officer, the hell with the law. If they try and squeeze him again, if they only try . . . shit! They think they are gods!

He grabs a handful of gravel and scatters it. Is any of Ocholla's women as understanding as Wini? So patient, so lovable? She could have made a great wife; maybe she will yet. Hell, why did she have to be what she was before he met her? Why is it the greenest healthiest grass grows over the septic tank! Damn!

He lies back, closes his eyes. He will forget her past all right once they get married. All he has to do to forget is try and remember the new Wini, his Wini. Think of her as his wife, not the pathetic little girl he picked up at the New Garden Hotel one night years ago. With the help of Baby that should be easier. She is a respectable mother and a secretary now, and very successful in both aspects.

The sun rains down on his body soothing the nerves and muscles, relaxing them into semi-sleep. Ben lets himself go. His mind roves on exploring, discovering, approving and rejoicing. He dreams a short bright dream. It is about Wini and their child. The body relaxes further. The mind lets go too and he falls into the deep dark of a tired man's sleep.

Suddenly the world splits apart. Hell breaks loose and tumbles down, gushing, deafening fury, crushing his body, his lungs everything in choking hot dust. In the blasting din someone screams:

'Ben!'

Then darkness, pain-ridden dark, where every breath, every heartbeat, every thought is an electrifying painful shock.

After what seems like eternity the suffocating weight clears and darkness melts into light. Ben looks up into Ocholla's grave face. He jolts up, chokes and coughs. At the gravel heap where he was sleeping just a moment ago the tipper's door swings in and out producing a brain-rocking banging sound. The engine emits a cloud of dark smoke and ejects it out of the exhaust pipe into the dust of the newly-deposited gravel. All round men, rudely plucked out of their siesta, watch with bored curiosity.

Ben takes in a large lungful of hot air. His breath rustles.

'What happened?'

Ocholla glances from Ben to the truck and back.

'I was coming back,' he says quietly. 'You must have slept. He tried to bury you in that.' Ben looks from the gravel hillock to the lorry.

Onesmus grins out of the cockpit.

'A man has got to do a job, Lieutenant,' he shrugs in explanation. 'A guy has got to do his job.'

The tipper's raised back clangs down. The truck clatters out of sight for more crushed rock.

Ocholla looks from the receding machine to Ben. Then shaking his head sadly he walks back to the high gravel hill. He burrows into the hill until he recovers his cap and Ben's shirt. He shakes dust from the cap and slams it on his head. He tosses Ben's shirt at his feet.

Ben shakes his head helplessly. Ocholla has never looked this mad. Not even when calling his wives bitches. Onesmus is getting beyond a lousy joke.

'Ben?'

'Yeah.'

'Should I tell you again how bad that son of a bitch is?' He shakes his head. Ocholla shifts his feet restlessly.

'Time to go back to work,' he about turns and heads for the building and his crane.

Ben pulls on his tortured shirt. Slowly, thoughtfully, he shuffles his feet in the thick soft cement dust to the mixer. His frame shivers.

Everybody crawls back to their work stations. The construction site comes back to life. The hands slide into slow, sleepy motion gaining in momentum every minute, as the sun gets further from its zenith and the air cools. Dust gets thicker with dust. The noise climbs to a crescendo, hypnotizing men into a fast mechanical pace. Wheelbarrows make repeated tortuous journeys to the gravel heap, to the mixer and back. The one-armed crane furiously hauls ton after ton of concrete up the steel structure. Imperceptibly so. Development House rises a few feet higher, a few concrete tons tougher.

Ben battles with the moaning, looping mixer, his body and face covered in muddy dust. The mixer rattles wildly. Its motor chokes on the dust, coughs and emits suffocating exhaust fumes. He concentrates his physical and mental resources on the twirling belly of the monstrous mixer, unconsciously trying to tame it to an understandable, regular rhythm and dance.

Suddenly it is knock-off time. Hands instantly drop everything and drag their spent carcasses to the checkout queue. The queue, like everything else that is not work, forms and grows spontaneously. No one works overtime for a thankless, cheating contractor. No one.

Ben kills the motor, waits for the dust and noise to settle. He grabs his shirt from one protruding bolt at one corner of the mixer, shakes it free of dust. Putting the shirt on, he wades through construction débris towards

the duty office. It has been another lousily long day. It is still ages to pay day and a man wants a drink bad after such a day. Damn! Maybe he should borrow some cash from Yussuf. Or maybe utilize some of that bhang capital.

The truck charges from out of nowhere. For a fleeting second he stands rooted to the dust, scared motionless. Then he shifts mechanically fast. He springs to one side, hits the dust and rolls. The tipper screeches to a halt a few feet away. Ben flounders in the dust raised, choking and coughing. His head throbs, his heart races. A few people laugh; whatever there is to laugh about!

The dust clears. The truck stands clear to the left. Hands on the check-out queue laugh carelessly loud. Onesmus leans on the door of his bruised tipper chewing monotonously on his tobacco. He blows out his massive chest, glances from the other hands to Ben and bursts out laughing.

Ben's head explodes in red hot rage. He leaps up and charges, taking the overweight driver by surprise. He slams him windless against the truck knocking the laughter out of him in a surprised gasp. Then he whirls round, hurls the driver to the dust. Onesmus wallows in the dust trying to get up. Ben stamps on the fleshy belly, slips and lands on the dust. They roll under and out of the truck tearing and bashing at each other. Ben frees himself from the other's vice grip and thumps him on the mouth. Onesmus gasps. The other hands applaud. One deems it a noble idea to douse the battling snarling bulldogs with a bucketful of water. The beasts battle on in the mud, sand and gravel. Ben finds his feet first, grabs a clawbar and swings out. The steel bar misses the thick head, rams into an empty metal bucket folding it useless. He whips up the steel bar and strikes again. The wet iron slips out of his hands and digs into the mud. A hush falls over the indifferent spectators. Ben dives for the claw bar. Everybody grabs him. His head boils hot, his mind swims in red spiralling fog. He fights the restrainers, kicks at them and tears at them. They pin him down and sit on him until he calms down. The palpitations finally cease. They let go, leaving Ocholla holding his chum round the shoulders. Nobody touches Onesmus.

He drags his large body upright, the face smeared in mud, chewing tobacco and blood. He looks uncertainly round. The other rugged workers watch him warily from a distance. He hurls Ben a phlegmatic disdainful glance, and a muddy-faced bully smile. Silence falls across the site to the checkout queue. Onesmus reverses, brings the truck to a stop by the bewildered buddies. He rubs blood from his mouth, looks at Ben and snarls:

'Next time it will be for real, Lieutenant, next time.'

He shoves the machine into gear and roars off in a whirlwind of dust and

exhaust fumes. As the dust settles Ocholla looks Ben over, wags his head, confused.

'Well . . . let's go, buddy,' he shoves him to the queue. The other hands study them quietly, almost sympathetically. They are mucking around with dynamite. Nobody looks down on Onesmus for long. They have just set a record and signed their death contracts. They had it coming to them fooling around with a mad driver who also smokes bhang. It is bad to hang around such guys.

They drag their feet quietly out of the site dust to the hard tarmac on Harambee Avenue. There is little traffic in the streets round about this time of day. Most of the drivers of the plush cars knock off two hours earlier and are all either in bars or cinemas. One can even afford to day-dream along the road. They stop to let an almost empty bus roll by before crossing Government Road. There is usually no hurry to get home; after all one is going to be there all night. And with any luck one will die in a house.

Ocholla kicks an empty oil can across the road.

'What are you going to do about him, Ben?'

Ben shrugs. 'I don't know.'

Duke Street is a little more populated. They pick their way through the waiting commuters at Tusker House. The maize-roasting boys are doing a steady business; everyone in sight is chewing something and the floor is already littered with maize cobs.

'Care for a drink, Ben?'

Ben hesitates, almost agrees, then remembers how wild Ocholla's *Karara* can get, and declines. Last time he agreed to get drunk he got chattered around the town by bus half the night. He could not keep awake long enough to get off at his stop. The conductor kept waking him to demand more fare, answering to the question of 'Where am I?' with such incomprehensible mutterings as 'Lavington' or 'Eastleigh' or 'Lavington' again.

'Some other time,' Ben says of the offered drink.

'You have only until next time, Ben,' his companion reminds him. He shakes his head.

'I left my harlot wife sick,' he explains. 'She may need me.'

Ocholla nods thoughtfully, perhaps a bit sympathetic. He may not like his wives much when they make heavy demands on his already overdrawn income, but that does not mean he is not touched when a fellow worker's woman goes down with malaria or something.

Ben shifts his feet restlessly as they walk along.

Ocholla takes off his cap, roughs his hair up and replaces it. Then he reflectfully caresses his dusty moustache.

'I . . . I just don't know how to put it, Ben,' he says hesitantly.

'Put what?'

Ocholla dodges his eyes, looks away down the road. He shrugs, looks back at Ben and shakes his head. 'I don't know.'

'So long, see you tomorrow,' Ben starts to draw away.

'About that Onesmus, Ben,' Ocholla follows him down the sparsely populated street.

Ben looks up and bumps into a stranger.

'You have got to do something about him, Ben,' Ocholla goes on walking carefully, his eyes fixed on infinity.

Ben nods, his face a little clouded. 'I know.'

They stop at the junction of Grogan Road and Race Course Road. Ocholla goes on talking, looking away. He will look Ben in the eye when they are drinking and laughing but not when they are serious. It is not in him to show concern.

'You know, Ben,' he clears his throat. 'It is not right a guy advising his buddy, I mean it all sounds unreal and all that, me telling you what to do. We have been buddies for close two years now and you are brighter than I am, more educated, I mean. And . . . you know what I mean.'

Ben nods.

'You know, Ben. I am not a very brave man. If that madman was after me I'd have scared shit out of me. I am already frightened.' Ocholla tortures his dry hair once more. 'Onesmus is dangerous, Ben,' he says nervously. 'He is mad and you have made him . . . oh, shit, what am I telling you?'

'To do something,' Ben says simply.

'Yes,' Ocholla nods. 'You must do something.'

'What?' Ben asks quietly.

Ocholla shrugs helplessly, works his battered boots much like a doped horse ready to take off but uncertain what direction to take. Finally he shakes himself and laughs a hard, mirthless laugh.

'Sure you won't take a drink, Ben?'

'No.'

He turns round.

'See you tomorrow, Ben,' and saunters up Grogan Road in the direction of the Capricorn.

Ben stalks down Race Course Road heading home. There are lots of people trying to make it home on foot. Darkness falls fast. Street lamps start with the usual sickly glow that will in no time be the source of light throughout the town. His nose working nervously at the smell, Ben hurries through the shit-riddled bit of wasteland to their plot.

The house is locked from the outside. There is no light from within, though Baby is in there and making a racket. Ben fetches his key, opens up and switches on the light. Baby ceases crying and gets up on the bed, all washed up in urine and rinsed in tears. He regards Ben, the large baby-eyes wider and red with weeping. Ben pats him on the head and lifts him to the floor.

'Where is your mother?'

'She went.'

'Where?'

Baby takes the mucous-covered fingers from his mouth and points vaguely. 'To buy me sweets,' he says.

First time she went out on such an errand. She has been gone long. The room smells strongly of urine, badly in need of fresh air. He opens the window and looks around. All the utensils are as clean as new. There is not a morsel, not a crumb of bread in the house. A hungry cockroach crawls into sight in search of food. Ben steps on it and sits on Wini's bed fidgeting nervously. It could not be she was so sick she had to be admitted to hospital? After all she is only . . . how many months pregnant?

'Are you hungry?'

Baby nods.

Ben takes the boy by the hand. He leads him to the shanty kiosks behind the plot. The food there, like the food they have at Mr Hilotoni's, is not a sensation, but it is cheap and therefore tolerable. Baby eats ravenously. He must be after spending heaven knows how many hours locked up in the damp room. Ben tries to force himself to eat. If Wini is in hospital, what hospital? She could at least have left him a note not to worry. Damn!

He shrugs. Maybe he is worrying too early. She will come home soon. It is only 7.30 p.m. She will probably be home when they get back.

Baby struggles through the fourth slice of bread. Ben gets over the third theory of probabilities, tackles another and becomes more intricately entangled in fears. He imagines Wini somewhere in a ditch fallen unconscious, sweating and tossing on a hospital bed, he visualizes her in all sorts of weird places suffering.

He lights a cigarette and sits thinking for a long time. Finally he notices Baby just sitting there staring at his bread. He gets up, pays for the food and they both leave. They stop to let Baby excrete in the long grass a few yards away, then go home. The lights in the house are on. He must have left them on. There is no Wini in the room. He throws himself on the bed, closes his eyes and tries not to think.

Baby silently remounts his urine-sodden bed and lies down. Ben tries not to think about him, about the wet bed, about his mother. She could not be

out with her boyfriends. She has not been out much lately, and then only with Johnny, her boss, and only on week-ends. He switches on the radio, low. Then he rubs his face and neck. He is worrying too much. She is okay, and she will come home soon. Besides, she is free to go where and when she wants. Even without leaving a note – if she forgets to. But then she is pregnant, and should not go out so late. It is bad for her health, for the baby. His baby!

Time drags slowly by. He listens to two news bulletins, a lot of music, and has to go out to buy cigarettes to keep busy. The radio station closes at eleven. Still no Wini. The resulting silence makes her absence harder to bear. Ben smokes quietly, tries to think of his job, Ocholla, Yussuf and his bhang.

Sometime around midnight Max's radiogram blares into life and instantly threatens to tear the building down. Ben curses and turns to face the wall. The bed seems to have grown larger, emptier, colder. Wini's lingering perfume drags him into profound loneliness. Damn Max and his record-player.

Ben jolts from night-marish sleep. He just dreamed Wini got hit by a car and the baby fell out. His chest and back are bathed in cold sweat. His heart gallops wildly, the dry throat choking him with shock and fear. His hands tremble lightly as he undresses and gets into the cold bed. Wini's perfume hits him harder, knocking his senses about. He closes his eyes to exclude her absent presence. Max's radiogram booms on next door.

An hour later he can stand the racket no more. He climbs out of the bed and switches on the light. Baby's large eyes follow him through the room; the boy cannot sleep either. From under the table he fetches a length of wire. He squats by the window, switches off the power socket. One end of the conductive wire goes into the positive pin hole, the other in the negative. He takes a big breath, holds it and flicks the switch back on. The radiogram next door goes out with a loud puff! The light goes out too. He feels his way back to bed.

Max and his brothers start a riot in their house. But they can never raise as much hell as their radiogram. The whole plot sighs into peaceful silence. Now Ben can think. Then suddenly:

'Ben,' Baby calls.

'What?'

A timid pause. 'I am feeling cold.'

Ben sucks in his breath. Now what the hell is he expected to do, make a fire? Whose fault is it if the baby's cot is wet? Baby's, for making it so, and his damned mother for not taking the things out to dry. It must be tough sleeping on wet bedding all night. 'Come here,' Ben tells the boy.

Wini's bed is not warm at all in her absence, but it is not wet. And if the boy wets his mother's end of the bed, that will teach the woman to leave a helpless man with a helpless baby.

Baby flounders from his cot to his mother's bed. He climbs on and snuggles into his mother's place. Ben covers up the urine-stinking boy. 'Are you all right now?'

The boy answers with a thankful sigh, then almost instantly falls asleep. Ben envies the naive innocent mind that can switch on and off one slight heartache after the other. He shuts his eyes tight, tries to sleep. Instead, he thinks about Wini. Wini. Wini where, Wini what, Wini why, Wini . . .

From the shanty village of Mathare, a mile away, the only place in the city where they may keep chickens or perish, cocks start to crow.

Ben tosses restlessly.

10

Ben walks slowly, thoughtfully. Wabera Street looks strange when empty of its daily share of wriggling, struggling mobs. But it is good enough for him. He is not in the mood for bumping into a lot of restless, aimless wanderers like himself. Not today.

He turns left towards Koinange Street. There may just be someone in the New Garden who knows where Wini might be. They are her people, her breed. They may just know.

A few blocks up the street he turns right by Mocha Bar and heads back to Muindi Mbingu Street. It is badly lit and cold up there. A chilly wind blows from up at the campus and sweeps paper and dust down into the city. He strolls into the Delicious Day and Night Club to buy himself a pack of cigarettes. The dump is as close as you will ever get to being the least exciting place in town. The same musty beer stench, same couple of retired harlots who still have to eat, and the same old jukebox that keeps coughing between words and clearing its throat before embarking on another disc. Patrons do not come here until all other joints are closed and the only choice left is home.

The New Garden is cold and quiet. It does not seem to have changed much since he was last here. Waiters doze on high stools at the bar. Most of the girls are in anyway, where else is there to go! They sit in all sorts of discouraged positions ready to do business for a meal. Women who would normally have no time for Ben now say shy good evenings and try to smile. He frowns seriously. Any form of encouragement would have them climbing all over him. And he has only a balance of seven shillings and forty-five cents. Besides, he came for news of Wini.

The jukebox sleeps quietly by the corner. The slot machines are off. The manager never wastes electricity. He is a serious businessman. To imagine Wini came from here! He shakes his head. There are two things that certainly do not grow on trees; money and good girls.

'Where is Wini?' he asks one of the hungry girls.

'What Wini?'

'The small one.'

The girl shakes her head lazily. They hate a guy who asks for a particular girl.

'Wini does not come here any more,' another who was apparently asleep, speaks up.

'I know. When did you see her last?'

'Years ago.'

He gives the joint one more look over, about turns and leaves. So much for the search for Wini. But damn it, Wini! Three days is a hell of a long time! There is very little traffic on Government Road. Mid-month is the lousiest time of the month. Streets get cold and lonely, and everybody drives sober and carefully. There are no drunks shouting their heads off, and there are none sleeping peacefully on the pavement either. There are no street rows and the city lies unconscious, hardly breathing, all but dead. Lamps twinkle dim and tired and the display windows are clean of their numerous SALE signs that will suddenly spring back about pay-time. The shops do not cheat anybody around mid-month and consequently make no profit. It is pretty hard to cheat a penniless bastard.

He stops outside FISH AND CHIPS to admire the electric roaster at work. Strings of chicken roll, twist and grill brown sweat. He wonders where all that mouth-watering chicken sweat ends up. He has been planning to buy Baby one full chicken for a long time, but at the end of the month he forgets. Suddenly the machine stops. The attendant reaches in, retrieves one and proceeds to chop it up for a customer. Ben pops in to see this customer who eats chicken mid-month. The guy does not look impressive at all. That proves it once again. Looks are not everything. Ben sidles over to the cash machine, buys a receipt for a packet of chips. On second thoughts he decides not to buy Baby any chips. He will buy him something else later. At the receiving end he places a shilling under the voucher and discreetly pushes the two to the boy. The counter boy glances at his boss. The fat Indian is busy at the cash machine. The boy quickly pockets the shilling. Then he ladles chips into a packet, pops in two sausages and tops up with chips. Ben nods acknowledgement. That is organization. He gets himself an extra sausage for his shilling and the other man makes a taxfree bob.

He proceeds naturally to salt the chips. A young couple walks in hand in hand, over to the chicken grill. The boy swaggers. The girl hangs on his arm. She has long sleek legs like she has been doing some athletic exercises. Ben envies the bastard, his money and his girl. He walks into the street, eating his potatoes as he goes.

Round Khoja Mosque he walks slap bang into a couple of policemen and the inevitable dog. He steps aside to let them pass. The dog looks at him hungrily, the coppers suspiciously.

'I did not steal them,' he mumbles, chewing furiously.

Next stop Karara Centre. One drink, and then home to Baby. Only one drink. The boy must be hungry.

Karara Centre is one of the very few places in town where it's fun all month. The beer is cheaper, the air warmer, stuffier, more friendly. There are a few drunks sleeping at various tables. As a token to the bad times, no one in sight drinks Pilsner or Tusker or any factory brew. They are all on *Karara*. Just the thing for a murderous hangover.

Ben sidles to the counter. Still munching on his chips, he climbs on to a stool and looks around. Ocholla is not here.

'What will you ever give me?' a harlot demands, going for the chips. Before he can withdraw, she dips her murky hand into the packet and scoops some out. He is too sober to get annoyed. He hands her the remaining lot. He has eaten the sausages anyway.

'Vultures,' a fairly drunk man on his left says of the woman. Ben smiles and wonders why the bugger is interested. All across the counter they are drinking *Karara* and liking it. There is a big crowd for this time of month. A collection of regulars and a few disgusted invaders from tourist class hotels who can no longer keep up their patronage there due to the critical financial dip. They look as out of place here as their twisted ties and dusty suits. They talk loud and try to look like home, but patrons can tell them a mile off. They are phonies.

'Cigarette?' Ben's neighbour turns to him. He is an outsider all right. His battered suit screams so. The same bum at the end of the month would be smoking cheap cigars and drinking double something or other. Now he accepts Ben's modest cigarette and turns to beg for fire from another drunk on the other side.

Ben has enough money for only two Pilsners. The price of the two can buy him three, four *Kararas*. He has not drunk the liquid for a long spell. He orders. The waiter slaps it on the table. A wet glass follows. They never have them dry. He shakes out the dripping water and fills it slowly, careful not to stir the sediment at the bottom of the bottle. That stuff is slow poison. It is such slow poison Ben does not remember one person who was killed by it. He sips. It tastes like concentrated acid. He closes his eyes and empties the glass. When he reopens them, the man on his left smiles.

'Strong stuff,' he says to Ben.

An understatement, he smiles back. The damned stuff is like aviation. A bit of it makes you zoom into the streets. A bit more than that grounds you for a few days. He refills the glass, swallows at a go and orders another bottle. The acid gets to work in his belly. He shudders.

'Buy me a beer,' the begging harlot has already finished his chips. She could have eaten up the paper bag as well. He shakes his head at her,

'Cigarette?' she demands.

No one seems to bring their cigarettes in here. He gives her one.

'Fire?'

'No.'

She drifts off. He refills the glass.

'Good stuff,' the friendly drunk slurs. Ben nods, wishes the bugger would stop calling it stuff. A drunkard puts a coin in the sleeping, hungry juke-box. It stirs into life and starts gurgling. Some patrons totter to that, no one is healthy enough to dance around here. Not today. There is always only enough for the bottle.

Ben takes a glassful and grimaces.

'Cheap stuff,' the man goes on.

Damn it, when would he learn to call a drink by a name! The barman hands across a few more *Kararas* and climbs back on the stool to relax. *Karara* consumption is so conveniently slow he could take a short walk; if he could trust the booze maniacs not to rob him.

Ben gulps down another glass. Then he settles down to a more relaxed downhill journey. He thinks about Wini. When will he see her again. Damn it, Wini. Wherever the hell she is – she ought to know he and Baby are anxious.

One more drink, then off home before Baby sleeps, he resolves. *Karara* starts to take effect. Objects take strange shapes.

'Good stuff,' his monosyllabic friend nods drunkenly.

'Good for health,' Ben says.

The drunk sways at the shock of the discovery.

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

The man climbs off his stool. He totes it closer to Ben's and mounts back on. He turns the blood red eyes on Ben, the sleepy eyes of a hungry drunk.

'Is it good for health?'

Ben nods. 'It has vitamins, proteins, all. You see it is not so cooked they die.'

The man nods with cool, drunk understanding. He swivels round and snaps his fingers at the waiter. 'Two bottles,' he orders.

The barman stirs, brings the drinks and goes back to his perch.

'One is for you,' the man offers Ben. Then he scrutinizes the misty bottle and declares he can see the vitamins. The bigger particles with long tails he claims are proteins. He has been to High School, he adds. Alliance High School.

Whatever swimming animals the bastard is looking at Ben cannot see. There are things drunks can see that are not visible to normal eyes. They

can see a point where there is none in an argument. One sure thing about *Karara*. Whatever dirt it may have, the stuff has no germs. No virus can survive in all that poison.

'My name is James,' the drunks informs Ben and extends an unsteady wet hand. 'Shake hands.'

Ben takes the proffered weak hand.

'I work for the Ministry of Social Services,' James adds.

Ben is sure he has never heard of such a Ministry.

'I am a big man,' he goes on. 'I get a lot of money.'

Ben's skin starts crawling with aggression. He has just met a Class A bastard. They bore your arse off with their achievements while you watch lice race one another on their shirt collars. He orders another *Karara* and drinks furiously. James takes time off to introduce himself to another drunk and repeat the story. Time runs fast. James gets more drunk, sings a few dirty songs and failing to get an accompaniment, gives up. He buys Ben another beer. They drink silently for some time.

'I get a lot of money,' James moans three beers later.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Ben demands.

James belches. 'I am here to socialize, study people. I told you, I work with the Social Services. One has to . . . socialize, meet people.'

'Are there no people in the Ministry?'

James skips the point and goes on wildly about the workings of the Ministry. Ben rides along too drunk to protest and not caring much.

'You just see a little man,' James says almost in tears. 'You don't know who you are talking to. I am big, do you hear, I am big! You people just sit here and drink *Karara*. Who the hell do you think is working for you, developing the bloody country for you? You just crawl around and beg while we work for you.'

'I don't want to know; that is your problem,' Ben drawls.

'You don't want to . . . hic . . .'

'Drink up and go home. You are getting into my arse.'

James screams, tries to get angry and hiccups too much. He lunges for his bottle to strike Ben, misses, falls off the stool, and sustains a cut on his forehead. Blood oozes out in a thick dark trickle. Then he starts vomiting. Nobody bothers him. Ben drains his glass and wakes up the barman to pay for the beer.

'Where is the other drunk?' the barman demands.

'K.O.'ed,' Ben points out.

'He hasn't paid a damned cent,' the barman jumps over the bar.

Barmen have no respect at all for drunks of their own making. With the help of two barmaids he rifles Big James. They recover a G.K. ball point

pen, a rusty bunch of keys and a packet of cigarettes which he has ground to powder under his arse. Not a single cent by way of currency. After relieving him of his watch, they bundle him up and toss him and his junk into the street. Barmaids try to clear up the vomit.

'He has been here since two o'clock,' the barman explains. 'He has not paid a shit; kept telling me he was big and we could not finish his money. I have got a hunch he does not work anywhere.'

Ben gets up and slowly, carefully picks his way through the tables to the door. He bursts into the cold River Road. James lies by the door completely grounded by *Karara*, dead to Karara Centre and the people he came to study. Ben staggers down the road. A few yards further on he stops to urinate on a parking meter. The sound of splashing urine wakes up a sleeping watchman by a doorway.

'Hey you!' the night watchman clears his throat, tries to sound fresh.

Ben turns his head. 'Who?'

'You. What are you doing?'

'What does it look like I am doing?'

'Urinating,' the watchman rustles.

'You are damn right,' Ben walks off. He turns down the rise to Grogan Road. There are no guards along this area. Perhaps to facilitate tyre lifting. It takes a long time getting to level ground. The dusty, cold Grogan Road still reeks of grease, and shit, even at night.

11

Ocholla rams more posho into his mouth. He chews thoroughly, enthusiastically. He flashes flies from the *Sukuma Wiki*. Ocholla's stomach never lets him down. With an ally like that, Ben figures his buddy will go far. Ben looks from his food to Ocholla, tries to smile, but it does not come out too well.

'Take some of mine too,' he says, 'I don't feel like eating.'

'I can see that and I wonder why?' He accepts the proffered food. He has a high value for food. Like cigarettes, never offer anybody and never turn down an offer, for whatever reason it is extended. He ploughs through Ben's share.

Hilotoni's is as crowded as usual. Tree Bottoms is a little low on lunchers. The railway workers got paid today. They almost all went into town to those plush little joints they serve lake fish, boiled chips and watered down tomato sauce. No one comes out here across the avenue unless they have to. On pay day there are chips, sausages, hamburgers, hot hot-dogs and sandwiches. There are also those Asian joints; they serve all sorts of curries and eastern delicacies.

Ocholla belches. He washes the food down with a large mug of *Uji*. Ben waits patiently and toys with his tin mug. Finally Ocholla takes off his cap, scratches his head.

'I am as fed as you will get on one shilling,' he looks around seeing people and things for the first time. 'Good Lord, these bastards do look famished.' And the harder they eat, the hungrier they look.

Ben and Ocholla no longer siesta anywhere near the gravel hills. Nobody does. Not while that mad Onesmus is still driving for Patel and Chakur Contractors Limited. The two buddies climb to the thirteenth floor to Ocholla's crane. There they throw themselves on to the rough floor, safe from Onesmus's truck, and rest. The hot sun seeps into their bodies, pure and drugging. Tired and sleepy, they rest for a long time. At long last Ocholla stirs, finds the slippery last cigarette and lights it. Ben finds one of his own. They smoke silently for some time.

'That woman of yours Ben,' Ocholla speaks up, 'They haven't found her have they?'

'No.'

He wiggles his toes out of the shoes. The horny corns blinking in the strong light. Ben will never get used to Ocholla's crummy horny nails dancing out of the torn boots.

'How long has she been gone, Ben?'

'Quite some time.'

Ocholla blows smoke at the clear blue sky. He configures for a moment, then frowns. 'You still have the child?' he asks.

'Where could he go? He is only six,' Ben shrugs. 'He is all right. He will be fine. Sometimes he worries me. I don't know what to do about him. I keep thinking his mother will come back; sometimes I think never.'

'She will turn up some place all right,' Ocholla voices the wishful thinking. 'Where do you suppose she went to?'

Ben shakes his head hopelessly.

'Oh, she must be some place,' Ocholla says. 'Maybe she went out to . . . well, you know, Ben. Sometimes women get tired of a guy. But she will come back alright. You have got her son. Women never give up a child like that. She will turn up somewhere.' He darts a quick, cautious look at Ben.

'I hate to think she could be dead,' Ben says.

'She is not,' Ocholla affirms.

'You never know,' he closes his eyes.

She will be back soon, he reflects. Then what? First give her back her son; he is sick of playing ayah. Secondly thank her very much for the accommodation and then while he is still mad enough to do so, move out. This situation would never have developed if he had not gone to live with her in the first place. This is just a taste of what could happen if one of these days she decides to take off for good.

'Any relatives?' Ocholla looks up.

'What?'

'Has she any relatives?'

'I don't know. I should send the boy to them, I suppose. But I still have a feeling she will come back some time.'

Ocholla wiggles his toes more.

Ben looks away, watches a small plane fly low to the west towards Wilson Airport. Maybe he should give up Wini. Perhaps she . . . Suddenly Ben stands up.

'Where are you off to now?' Ocholla demands.

'To find Yussuf,' he shoves his shirt tails into his trousers. 'I have to find Wini's place of work. I might just find out something helpful.'

'Now!' Ocholla laughs lazily. 'You think Yussuf will let you?'

Ben starts off slowly. 'The bugger owes me a lot of favours,' he answers as he walks. 'And I am on indefinite light duties.'

Indefinite light duties includes doing anything that flatters Yussuf's fancy, from cleaning the lunch box to going bhang hunting. Ben climbs slowly from floor to floor calling for Yussuf. The foreman is getting harder to get as the number of possible hiding places increases. He could be anywhere, on any floor between the sixth and the first.

Somewhere on the tenth floor Ben finds Kanji Bhai and his hand, the Hyena, engrossed in a big discussion on how to best lay bricks on a partition. The Hyena is all theory and talk. Bhai demonstrates everything he says and has almost built half the partition trying to convince the adamant hand.

'Seen Yussuf?' Ben interrupts to ask.

They turn on him, hungry for an independent opinion.

'Vot you say, Ben?' Bhai asks, chewing on his gum. 'Porty year pirst clas mason East Aprica. Vot you say I make best brick lay, no?'

The Hyena speaks quite matter of factly:

'Never seen such a stupid little Indian, Ben.'

'I am looking for Yussuf,' Ben tells them.

'Porty year I lay brick, Ben.'

'Sure, Bhai, you numberer van.' Ben leaves them still arguing, and descends in search of the foreman. He finds the four brotherly banianis sitting Yoga-fashion talking, rattling away in their language. They raise their eyes, dismiss him as only another of the too much pain in the arse and continue their discussion.

A hand is busy on the eighth floor, his face and back pouring with sweat, the nails of his fingers digging into the concrete wall. A woman's head droops over his shoulder, eyes closed tight and mouth wide open, gasping for breath. For a moment Ben stands rooted to the spot, baffled by the spectacle of entangled arms and legs. Then he recognizes Machore's tattered tweed trousers and the ecstatic face of the woman nailed to the wall, and retreats.

He climbs down the numerous flights of rough stairs to the seventh floor. The long corridor to Yussuf's hideout is dark and dusty. Today the glutton Onesmus did not gobble down the foreman's lunch. Now fed and satisfied, Yussuf reclines against one wall of the balcony smoking bhang and dreaming as always. He must be dreaming sugar this afternoon. An idle smile bothers his face, his dead eyes glittering with strange life. Ben stands over the bulky form. His critical eye sweeps over the wasted muscle and fat. He should not be smoking bhang like this in the hot sun. At long last Yussuf notices him and recognizes him with a certain amount of rejoicing:

'Ben, oh you son of the cement mixer, where have you been, Ben? I have

been missing you so much. Sit down, Ben . . . make yourself comfortable, Come on . . . sit . . . here, on your arse, Ben, go on, down.'

Ben lowers himself next to Yussuf.

'You are a good man, Ben, simply great.'

What the hell about, Ben wonders. Yussuf digs his jelly bottom into the hard floor. His drugged, unshaven dead face looks abominable.

'You will be my foreman, Ben,' Yussuf informs him and drags on his stick of bhang. Ben moves closer. This bastard will certainly kill himself on bhang. Ben has not been putting enough of God's grass in it, as One-Arse directed.

'When is that?' Ben asks.

Yussuf turns dying eyes upon him.

'When I become the boss, Ben.'

Ben's face twists into a bitter sympathetic grin.

'And when is that?' he asks.

'When my old man dies.'

'I did not know he was planning to,' Ben explodes with laughter.

Yussuf shrugs. 'One cannot live forever,' he explains seriously, 'The old buzzard will have to die some time.'

Ben agrees. Yussuf is definitely on his way out too. Poor bastard!

'I have got everything worked out,' he sits up, exhibits some configurations scratched on his dark arm. 'My old man is fifty. I am thirty. He could choke to death on his curry tonight. Failing that he will die in a car accident in approximately five years. Statistics show that so many drivers are dying on the roads in a year that as many bastards as own cars today will all be killed in five years time.'

Ben nods. This is big computation, big business.

'If he lives the next five years,' Yussuf drones on, 'If he lives five years more, his old heart gets sicker, lousier from overwork. In another five years he gets a stroke and he dies. Exceptionally good doctors may keep him out of his grave for another ten years. Then he will die naturally from old age. You see, nobody lives for ever. I will be a contractor, Ben. Just you wait and see.'

Ben nods. Bhang can move mountains. It has gone and roused some dangerous monster in Yussuf's rotten brain, and now the normally worthless carcass has been tamed to chug forward. With a purpose. Yussuf, like his garbage labour force, now dreams of the good times ahead. His calculations are ingenious too. Only trouble is that in five, ten years there may be no buildings to construct.

Yussuf jerks his head towards Ben and roughs his beard.

'What do you think, Ben? Yussuf and Ben Contractors?'

'Okay by me.'

'Everything will be fine, Ben. We will sack Kanji Bhai, the Hyena, Machore, Ocholla ...'

'Ocholla is a friend of mine,' Ben tells him.

'He may stay then, but we must fire all the other trouble-makers. All the bastards.

'Onesmus?' Ben asks.

'He is a mad son of a bitch.'

Ben shakes his head sympathetically.

'Okay, Ben?'

'Sure.'

'Good idea, no?'

'Not too bad,' Ben smiles tiredly. 'But just one little snag, one wee detail.'

'What's that?' Yussuf floats wide awake.

'It is not much,' Ben leisurely. 'It is this; supposing you do live to see your old man dies, supposing you do; they let you take over, there are constructions to be done and ... somehow you manage a work permit. Just what the hell will I be doing while you and your old man grow old?'

'You cannot complain Ben. You are on light duties.'

Ben shrugs in resignation. One cannot reason with bhang. After all, as One Arse said, it is only grass.

'While you are on about light duties,' Ben strives to hold the foreman's roving intellect, 'I would like a few hours off.'

'But of course, Ben, of course,' Yussuf waves him away. 'Take as much time as you wish. You are my foreman, Ben.'

Already! Ben gets to his feet. He must be back before the foreman regains his senses and starts shouting for the no-good son of nobody. Ben tidies himself at the water tap. He cleans dust from his face and hair, combs the hair with his fingers, then hurries into the city. Only then does he realize how easily he got the day off. Sometimes Yussuf is most likeable when high on bhang.

It is not easy finding any building in any street in this town. Government Road is close to two lousy miles of stalled cars and confused humanity. Only two out of every five blocks have visible names on them. Ben resorts to looking for Culture House by elimination. It takes him two and a half trips up and down the length of Government Road. When he is tired fit to give up he finds it. The name plate nailed to the lift doorway in the building proclaims boldly in two by two inch black letters: CULTURE HOUSE. A building guard parades his new khaki uniform by the entrance. Ben consults the floor board. Messrs Jones and Company, Consultants, are

on the sixth floor. He takes the crowded lift, suddenly uncomfortably aware of his raggedness among the overdressed executives and their overperfumed secretaries. The crammed lift sighs to a stop on the sixth. He shoves his way out into a long cool corridor. An arrow points right. Inquiries. Another arrow directs him to a large double door with ground glass panels. A tiny clear glass panel reveals the inside of the office strewn with desks and people. He hesitates. It is different when you have a tiny slot window marked Inquiries. You just walk up to it, peer inside and call your uncertain wish. In an office the size of this one it is a nightmare. Who do you ask? Anyway, how do you ask for a woman who has disappeared?

He rubs the sweat off his face, shuffles his feet. Maybe he should have telephoned.

'Excuse me.'

He whirls round. He tries a nervous smile on the girl, then steps aside to let her pass.

'Can I help you?' She looks up at him with a little bit of the superiority secretaries have towards anybody that is not the manager's brother.

'Well, uh, yes . . . maybe,' he looks from her pretty face to the wall, the whole length of the cold dim passage.

She waits patiently, her smooth well-manicured fingers wrapped round the brass door knob.

'I am looking for someone,' he toils on. 'A girl . . . her name is Wini.'

'Wini who?'

He shakes his head, attempts a barren grin.

'I only know that.'

'Does she work here?'

'This is Messrs Jones and Company, is it not?'

The girl nods.

'That's it then,' he tells her, 'This is the place.'

She seems to think. Then she looks him up from the dusty old shoes to the rough dusty hair. She shakes her head, shrugs.

'Come in ask the others.' She opens the door for him.

Ben drags his heavy legs into the room. There are quite a few people at desks scattered through the large office. Thankful for the distraction from work, the men look up as one. Ben stops just inside the door. It hisses shut behind him, shutting him in with the strangers.

'He wants Wini,' the girl deserts him and makes her way to her desk.

'What Wini?' one man asks.

Ben shrugs.

'What is the name of that new girl?' One asks his workmates.

'She is not Wini,' another answers.

'There are three girls in this office,' the man addresses Ben, 'There is Jane, there is . . .'

'She is not here any more,' Ben flounders. 'She used to be here.'

The man throws up his hands in dismay.

'You are looking here for someone who you know has already left; Mother of . . .'

'I just want to know,' Ben tells him, 'Want to know where she may have gone to, that's all!'

The man shrugs, busily picks up a file and hurls it back on the desk. Then he pauses to think. Suddenly his eyes brighten. He clicks his fingers in discovery.

'Oh, Winifred, you mean, that Mr Caldwell's girl, the pretty little woman?'

Ben nods.

'He called her Wini too,' the clerk says. 'She is no longer here. She left.'

Everybody else seems to lose interest in Ben. They revert to tapping on their machines or polling over the drab fading files.

'Where did she go?' Ben's mouth rustles full of dehydrating anticipation.

'She left,' the man informs him, 'with Mr Caldwell. I heard he was going to marry her.'

Ben's heart falters. Sweat breaks out all over his skin. His head throbs painfully. He supports himself on the desk with his large corny knuckles.

'Did . . . did she leave a message for . . . for me?'

The man turns in his seat and shouts the question. Heads look up. The girl smiles, nods. She rummages in her desk. She trots over with an official khaki envelope. Ben sees all this through red hot mist, his mind numb and his body paralysed.

'Are you Ben?' Her smile appears distorted, her voice way off, an echo in the hot dry desert.

He grabs the envelope and staggers out of the office. The corridor appears suddenly dim. His legs feel heavy, lifeless. People float by him like ghosts. His head spirals in impossible, sickening loops. He totters into the mens toilet. A long mirror across one wall of the urinal reflects a haggard, dark grey face with dilated red eyes. He rips the letter open and peers at the blurred lines, the letters alternating between giant and midget. He skims through seeing deformed large letters that still make sense, hurting sense.

Feverish tremors shake his body. His heart contracts painfully, strangling itself. His eyes cloud, everything in sight melting into thick dark grey. Tears stream down his cheeks into his thick rough beard. He covers his face with his hands, clutching the letter and the cheque, strangling them in his

calloused hands, lowers his head to his knees and sobs. He sobs manly heart-rending sobs, his body and mind chilled to stillness.

He calms down minutes later, worn and depressed. He reads the letter over once more. Tears well up in his eyes again. He clenches his teeth and reads on, his muscles contracted in slowly building-up rage. He has been betrayed and cheated. He bangs on his fist against the wall and drags himself to his feeble legs. He crumples the cheque for one thousand shillings and together with the letter hurls them into the lavatory bowl and flushes the water. He watches the paper swirl crazily round, then disappear gurgling into the city sewage system.

He washes his hot face and neck and leaves the building. Desperately he flees away from Government Road, pursued by the words in the letter, words without meaning. He fights his way through the crowds to the back streets and rubbish strewn lanes, unable to go back to work, unwilling to go home. Home! His mind sits numb in his skull, unmade and unmakeable like a block of false ice. He feels lost. Alone, helpless and afraid. Just as he once was, a long time ago when he lost his job. Before Wini took him with her. Wini! And now just as then, his heart cries for something to do, someone to turn to. Now, unlike then, there is no Wini to turn to, only the empty words pursuing him. And just as before he crawls out of the cold stink of back streets across the dusty bewildering human jungle that is River Road, down a familiar narrow lane into the stuffy warmth of Karara Centre.

Nobody notices his stoop-shouldered entry, no one cares. He slinks to the bar, grabs himself three bottles of *Karara*. Then he picks a rough way through tables, upset chairs and pools of spilt beer to a dark lonely corner and loses himself there. He tilts one bottle, gurgles it down to the last fatal dregs, his unsteady hand spilling streams down the sides of his mouth and neck. He rubs his neck and thirstily, violently goes for another bottle. Half-way through the second bottle he chokes. His stomach burns, erupts into furious palpitations, then settles down to the warmth of *Karara*. He belches loudly, takes another murderous swig, his teeth working ferociously on the bottle neck, wishing he could break it off. He looks around defiantly for someone he could pick a fight with. Noise hums in his ears, alternating constantly between high and low pitch. People, images and darkness swim in and out, focus in time with the din. A regular giant gong resounds in his head, while a smaller fire alarm bell burrs in his ears. He rubs his eyes, belches and empties the second bottle. He swears and sweeps the two empty bottles off the table. They fail to break. He kicks them under another table. They remain intact. He curses, downs a third of the remaining bottle. He drinks furiously fast, afraid to stop in case the letter

should take him over again, while his mind fights to stay blank, think of nothing.

Karara Centre life picks up as the after-work patrons arrive. More bottles break, the noise level rises, the air getting hotter, stuffier, more friendly. Ben bulldozes through tables, people legs and broken bottles to the bar, for more drink. On the way back one bottle slips from his exhausted hands and explodes to the floor. The bloody bottles only break when they contain your beer. He manages to see the surviving two safely to the table. He can no longer keep up the original marathon drinking.

Presently a harlot notices his oneness and drifts over to converse and hopefully help him with the *Karara*. But before she can take the seat opposite him he recognizes she is a woman and bars his teeth in a ferocious snarl:

'I will . . . kill you!'

Realizing his aggression is well above the normal drunken instinct, she withdraws.

'Bastard!' Ben curses. All of them. Even Wini. They all are. All ready to go lay with the next cur that turns up with some money. Money! What did Wini think, leaving him the swine's cheque? Did she think he cannot earn his own money, write himself cheques, look after himself? Swines. Scavengers. Harlots. Never trust any of them. Not one.

'Never buy one a drink either,' he addresses his bottles. 'It is a waste. Women are pigs. Drink your beer with men. Men never let you down. Buddies like Ocholla . . . Yussuf . . . Onesmus . . . Shit.' White beggars! They cannot find anything good in their own country so they come to rob us. Nothing good in their own bloody kind so they plunder ours. Take our jobs, screw our girls and take them away. Sons of monkeys. If that Johnny ever shows his face in Nairobi . . . Ben will get Onesmus to crash him with the faulty truck. Crush the bastard to shit. It will cost, but it is worth it. Maybe Ben can persuade Onesmus to do it for nothing. They are not such bad enemies; they just don't like each other too much.

Ben stares unseeingly at the remaining contents of one bottle; drains it and manages to break it. Bitches! All women are dogs. They will lay with anybody for anything. Bitches, bitches . . .

Another misguided Karara Centre woman sidles over. He sees her face form, dissolve, fade and reappear ghostly. Her blurred smile comes out like a devilish snarl. Her voice echoes in his loaded mind, concussing painfully across the chilly fog within. Just as the words in the letter 'impossible to live with . . . not your baby . . . sorry . . . sorry . . .'

Ben lurches to his unsteady legs, snatches a bottle and brings it down hard on her head. She ducks and screams. The bottle glances off her

shoulder and breaks with a deafening explosion. He lets out a drink-soaked howl, his mouth spitting fire, his eyes set. Then he shudders violently, collapses back on to his seat, spills on the dusty floor amidst the remains of his bottles and passes out.

Typical of Karara Centre, no one gives a thought to the lonely drunk,

PART TWO



*The hungry horny-toed son
Of the rusty cement mixer*

12

A soft wind caresses the hard and rough back of River Road. Waste paper and trash and dust dance a light-footed tango with the wind as it drives them down the almost deserted street. Street lamps twinkled dutifully forlorn, shedding a cold orange light on to the trash and the waltzing empty cigarette packets and the few human beings on River Road.

Ben lurches out of a urine-smelling back lane and staggers up River Road. The lively hum of the Karara Centre calls, the music from the jukebox screaming his name. The cold dusty neon KARARA CENTRE beckons him. A ragged drunk bursts out of the greasy swing doors, pauses to check his bearings, and then reels past Ben muttering to himself and cursing profusely.

Ben steps just inside the bar to admire the joint. A tired drunken smile breaks over his rough bearded face. Good old Karara Centre, stuffy as hell, warm as home. Here at last are people. People he understands, people who are people, human beings. Struggling, working, drinking, eating, hungering, living men. The whole bar is in motion, a disorganized kind of motion as on the surface of a choppy sea. In one corner a family of drunks raise a racket of a row, while another lot sits dozing or asleep in the opposite corner. The burly barmaids, some of them twice the size of the average patron, pick pockets and cheat on the bills. The jukebox can hardly make itself heard above the din of life.

Ben wades to the counter, wedges himself between a drunk on a high stool and a big-arsed harlot.

'One beer,' he calls to the waiter,

'Cold or warm?'

'Cold Pilsner.'

The top pops busily off. The bottle lands frothing on the crowded counter. The glass finds him shortly afterwards.

'Money please,' the barman says.

'What money?'

'For the beer.'

'I have hardly tasted the stuff!'

A waiter squeezes himself into the non-gap between him and Big Arse

and starts screaming customers' orders. Ben sips the luke-warm beer. 'You call this cold?' he asks the barman.

'Money, please.'

Disgusted, Ben reaches in his pocket and slaps one of his pounds on the table. The barman looks it over carefully before chucking it into the till and dealing out the change. Ben counts it twice, nods and pockets it. No one trusts the other here. Why the hell should they? It is only Karara that brings them together. Big Arse smiles at Ben expectantly. He frowns, looks away. The women are not looking too good today. Harlots never look too good anywhere at the end of the month. They look all sleepy and over-worked from last night and the night before. They also look hungry, murderously grovelling for more money. Ben shrugs. In two weeks the bars will be empty, cold, and peaceful, left only to the waiters and their flies and the sale-price hookers. These will go around wearing ON-SALE pinned to the fronts of their skirts till next end of month.

He pushes the price of another beer across the counter. The barman pops it open and pushes it to him, the bottle wet from the cold water fridge and the label falling off. He pours. With no label and no top, the beer could be anything. It tastes like anything.

The air gets heavier with fumes, hotter and noisier. The jukebox gives up trying to make itself heard; dances on the spot and digs furrows in last year's hits. Nothing changes much in Karara Centre. They just grow a bit too old; the jukebox now almost bald and moustachioed with age; the twisted furniture that now sits askew, same old crowd night in, night out. And the management, Ben suspects, has no idea how to change hits in the weathered machine. The screws may have rusted away already.

The glass slips from his grasp, rolls across the counter washing other customers' elbows with beer before diving on the other side. The barman tosses him a dirty look, kicks the broken glass under the counter. Customers grunt. Ben calls them bastards. No more complaints after that. Only the big-arsed woman is not quite satisfied. Bar women are serious pedlars. They hate men who ignore them.

'Go sleep, drunk,' she tells him.

'What?'

'Why are you pouring beer?' she demands.

'It's my beer.'

'You think . . .' she clicks her tongue in the rude language only harlots understand.

Ben slides off the stool slowly, careful not to stagger. Nobody takes any notice. The woman glares boldly back, her face screwed up in distaste. His hand whips out, grabs and yanks. The bra and blouse snap. The udders

pour out, threatening to spill to the floor. A drunk voice cheers as the woman unsuccessfully tries to contain her litre-sized tits in pint-sized hands. She spits at him. He yanks at the skirt. The bastardly beast has nothing on underneath, nothing at all. Rolls of stomach flop loosely over her groin. She gives a scream that calls for everybody's attention, then snorting and blubbing drunkenly charges him. He steps back to take the shock, trips and falls over a table. She misses him and bulldozes into another table, smashing one of its legs and breaking drinks and glasses. She lies quite still in the rubble, her fat nude body as still as a basking hippo. As Ben gets up she starts to throw up in violent, retching movements that force out enormous chunks of unchewed whatever. People start laughing. Ben does not. Even drunk as he is, he can feel the danger. If a policeman happens into Karara Centre tonight he certainly would not find her funny either. He gets back to the bar, drops his beer into his stomach and heads out. The two drinkers at the corner are still arguing, calling each other names.

'If you are going to fight at all, fight,' Ben advises. 'Otherwise shut up or go home. You are keeping all those other bastards in suspense.'

Before they can focus on him, he staggers out back into the night. The cold night air hits him hard. River Road is as empty of pedestrians as ever. There are rarely ever any foot sloggers around here. They are either in the bar or far away from it. No one knows where they crawl to after leaving the joint. He stops to wonder, and urinate on a parking meter. A cold dusty wind rolls drunkenly down Hasrat Road, whatever Hasrat means. A taxi pants out of the muck in Grogan Road and you can almost hear it sigh with relief at the change.

Ben is hungry. He is always hungry these days. But after dropping a few beers into the hatch he has to throw the excited snakes down there something to vent their anger on before they start chewing on his insides. There should be places still open along River Road and he still has a pound or more. He lights a cigarette, totters across the road and swaggers down the opposite side of the road. An Arab place plays some eastern music so loud it keeps him out. Along Reata Road two policemen and a dog are so busy talking to a harlot that they don't notice him. Whatever deal they are trying to squeeze out of the girl tickles. She giggles all over and waggles her firm electric backside. The big hairy police beast is so fascinated it can hardly tear its hungry eyes off her rump to growl at Ben.

He storms into the Maharaj down the road. The restaurant reeks of garlic and there are more of them here than in some restaurant in Bombay. He is in no mood to like anybody today. Not with his head so sore and a stomach full of worms. He drops into a seat by the door, near a family poring intently over the oversized menu. The proprietor watches him

closely. The waiters watch him too. They watch him for a long while. The Asian strokes his moustache. One of the little waiters jingles the coins in his dirty blue jacket.

Ben drops his cigarette end into a dirty half-full glass of passion fruit juice that already contains a few drowned flies. He lights another, feels hot with slowly building frustration.

'See what he wants,' the counter boss tells one of the waiters.

The little waiter with so much tip money in his jacket he cannot quit jingling it, drags himself over to the table.

'Say.'

'Say what?' Ben growls.

'What you want, man,' he fishes the dirty glass carelessly so the juice slops over. 'This is very bad,' he picks out the cigarette end and slaps it on the table.

'I thought it was the ashtray.'

The man fetches a dirty rag from his work jacket, wipes the spilt juice disgusted and furious, then looks up.

'What do you want?'

'To eat.'

'What?'

'Food.'

'What food, man?'

'Bring me the menu.'

'Say what you want, man. We either have it or we don't.'

'Do you have a menu?'

'No.'

'Is that the Koran they are reading?' he points to the next table.

'Kamau,' the Indian at the counter calls.

The little waiter whips up the glass and leaves. The boss directs him to the family. He takes orders and vanishes into the back of the restaurant.

'Damn,' Ben's fist comes down hard on the table. He gets up slowly, drags himself to the counter. The two stare at one another for a moment, Ben swaying and leaning on the table:

'I was before those.'

The cashier pulls out the till. He starts dealing cash change to a customer. Then he glances at Ben, saunters to the other end of the counter and crosses his arms on his chest.

Kamau reappears laden with plates of curry-something and delivers. Ben looks from him to the boss, his head heating up, in controlled madness. He follows the Asian to the end of the counter. They stare at one another across the table for another spell of quiet hatred,

'Did you hear what I said?' he rasps.

The cashier-boss shakes his head.

'I was before those,' he jerks his thumb over his shoulder.

'So?'

'So hell,' he screams, 'I was before them, that's what.'

'You are drunk,' the proprietor says coolly.

'That's none of your goddamn business.'

The Indian pops some green leaves into his red mouth and chews ever so leisurely. Sickeningly calm.

'We don't serve drunks. This place is under Muslim management.'

'This is neither your bloody house nor a mosque,' Ben snarls. 'It is a public place. And I am the public. It is not your stinking house, do you hear?'

'It is public, yes,' the other agrees. 'Read there,' he points. Ben whirls round. He studies the dim fading board near the door. MANAGEMENT RESERVES RIGHT OF ADMISSION AND SERVICE.

He whirls back round. 'So you bastards have . . .'

The proprietor saunters away to deal more change.

Ben's head swims in red hot anger. A steam engine starts up in his chest, knocks sickeningly loudly. He starts to climb over the counter and falls off the stool. He screams with rage. The Maharaj watches. Kamau smiles. His boss reaches for the 'phone. Ben sizzles down, cools fast. Not far from here are two policemen and a dog. They despise drinkers more than the Maharaj. He forces himself to the door and out of the restaurant, dazed and no longer hungry. He does not want food now. What he wants is a machine gun. A bren gun. A basketful of grenades to go tossing into all Asian and European-owned restaurants in town. All of them, bastards!

'Taxi, sir?'

He knocks the old man over the bonnet of his old taxi, walks back towards River Road, stops and staggers into an alleyway. He kicks an upset dustbin into the dimly lit gutter. A homeless cat shoots out of hiding and clambers up a wall. He pulls up abruptly at the end of the alley. He wants to go back to the Maharaj and break everybody's neck, particularly the owner and Kamau, his serf. Damned bastards.

Instead he bombs across the road. He stops to debate which way to go, in or away from the bar. Music and laughter spill out from the first floor. The stink of beer, cigarette smoke, sweat and fornication pour out in torrents down the stairs to the landing. The crash of noise and life tempts him. The joint is known as New Eden (must be the Eden the devil made). Ocholla got his last three doses of clap from here. Three times over, and each time he came for more. Ben has been here before too. Sometimes he came for a

beer sometimes for a quick one. Whatever bad luck he had not managed to get the virus yet. Ocholla does not envy him this. He has had his share already, keeps getting it and has given up trying not to. There must be something wrong with Ben the way he comes out of it kicking.

He passes a few drunks on the way up the dimly lit dustcovered stairs. From the din emitting up there, the brothel must be a full house. A drunk old man sits on the first landing and sends a river of beer vomit down the stairs. A half full bottle of beer stands faithfully by his side. He pauses between retches to talk to the beer bottle and swallow back whatever he has left in his mouth; one cannot afford to waste good food. It does not grow on trees any more.

At the second landing the stairs continue to the rooms while a corridor conducts him to the bar. The whole place is on heat. Girls wearing shorter-than-short miniskirts wriggle for existence. The men drink beer and watch intently. Those who cannot contain themselves any longer grab a girl and ascend the dim stairs to the dark corridors above. Suckers buy beer in plenty. The New Eden is a joint Adam missed.

He pinches a few behinds, digs his elbows into a few tummies and manages to get to the tiny exercise book-sized counter.

'Beer,' he shouts into the hole. He hands in the money. The beer pops out. 'Glass?'

The sleepy face behind the counter waves negative. 'No glasses.'

Someone digs into Ben. He totters from the window, rubs the foamy mouth of the bottle dry and drinks. The beer is warm as shit. People mill around, jostle him in all ways. He steps back. A woman throws her arms round his shoulders and tries to kiss him.

'You want to screw,' she breathes stale breath into his mouth.

He shakes his head quickly.

'One quick one for . . .'

'Get lost.'

She lets go and vanishes into the crowd. He turns round, bumps into another with tits as big as a pregnant elephant. She stares at his beer. He stares at her tits in amazement. She smiles, wraps herself round him and breathes drink-sodden odour on his face.

'Fuck me,' she says simply.

'Fuck off,' he hisses, shoves her off. Immediately another one sticks her hand round his waist and tells him:

'Buy me a beer.'

'Buy you what?' his voice slow and fed up. 'Peddle your stuff and buy yourself one.'

This is what the New Eden is all about. Since Adam fought for the only

woman with the devil and lost, this is how far we have come. The women are determined to make a living. The men are out for a quiet evening away from the nagging wife. There are no rules, no holds barred in Eden. You use whatever you've got to get whatever you want. And the needs of the people are few in the joint; a coin, a drink or a lay.

He buys another beer and drifts to the corner by the noisy jukebox. From there he looks over the stock market, live-stock market. The girls are serious about business, the men drunk and excited. Life sways in waves of ear-shattering music from the off-key jukebox, swinging taunting hips, dust and smoke. A drunken couple argues loudly over the price. They could have been trading a dress or something. Nobody takes notice.

The jukebox stops. 'Hello,' someone screams into Ben's ear. He has to reset his focus to clearly see the speaker. A plump little girl, probably no more than fifteen. She is a beginner by the look of her - neat, organized and polite. She has not dropped into the oblivion of professional prostitution yet when they become over-decorated and mechanical in their indifferent negotiation for more money from their clients. And she does not breathe beer into his face like the others, thank heavens.

'Hello,' he responds after a moment's deliberation.

'May I?' she gestures towards the jukebox.

'By all means,' he climbs off the slot. She inserts the coin selects. Small hands, clean nails and a cheap copper ring (bar room engagement?) She wears a large masculine Oris watch probably from a client who could not pay in cash. She pinches the buttons for G9. The machine groans into rusty motion again. The music gushes out bold and confident:

My place is not here

It's long I haven't been there.

'Dance?' the girl smiles up at him. He drains the bottle, drops it behind the jukebox where it breaks and grabs her. They fall into step with the music. He squeezes her tight, feels for anything new that she might have. She is all new. Nothing like he has had for some time now. She smells clean. She does not douse herself in a drum of perfume to avoid having to wash like a lot of them do around here. She has hers under control. His hands stray over her back to her hips and under the micro dress to her thighs. She jerks:

'Please don't.'

'Don't what?'

'Touch my legs like that.'

'Why not?'

'It makes me nervous.'

'But . . .' he checks himself short of telling her it is business.

She closes her eyes tight, her mouth parted imploringly. He brings his hand back up to her back. She opens her eyes, glances at him and looks away. She smiles without humour. She has no objection to his hugging her and feeling over the rest of her body. They dance on while the throng around them shoves in all directions. She hums along with the record:

*I've a lovely mother
A father.
I can't remember
Sisters without number
How I fear to remember . . .*

Poor kid, he thinks. She can't be more than . . .

'How old are you?'

'Sixteen,' without hesitation,

'Where is your home?'

'Second floor,' she opens her eyes wide and laughs. He laughs too.

'Second floor, and where else?'

'I was born here.'

'Here?'

'Not in Eden, in town. In Majengo.'

'Oh . . .'

They dance on for some time. The bar gets rowdier, stuffier, hotter. 'You are new here,' he states.

She nods her young round face. Someone digs behind into them and shoves them next to the jukebox. He waits until they steady again in the waves of music and noise.

'How long have you been here?'

'Two months.'

'You dance well.'

She wriggles and laughs. He hugs her.

*They may all be gone
When I get back home.*

They walk hand in hand back to the machine. She looks over the display, shakes her head and looks up. 'Any choice?' she asks.

He starts from studying her form.

'I don't . . . I really don't know. Do they have "I Wanna Do it"? American, Harvey Scales, a good singer.'

She tosses her head and smiles.

'El Two,' she says,

They make room and dance. The way she shakes her money-maker sends jumbled messages to the communication centre. He tries hard to keep his drunken attention on his own dancing, hums along with the jukebox:

*I wanna do it
I wanna do it
Do it with you.*

'Do you really?' she asks suddenly.

'Do I what?'

'Well,' she shrugs, 'Wanna do it?'

He shakes his confused head. 'Do what?'

She points upstairs and smiles, broadly. He helps her laugh.

'I don't really know,' he shrugs too. Suddenly she looks shy, almost embarrassed.

'Maybe,' he adds. The music whines on:

*Give me some of that funky thing
Come on man ...
Give me some of that ...*

'How much is it?' he nudges the little girl. She throws her shoulders up carelessly. 'Five bob for a fast one.'

'And the night?'

'We can't,' she says.

'Can't?' surprised, 'Why?'

'I don't want to.'

Last time he was here they were shouting for lodgers. Now he says nothing. She senses his loss, smiles up, her face screwed quizzically.

'Want to?' she asks, 'A fast one?'

'Maybe.'

The songs trails into

*I wanna do it
Do it, do do do ...*

'Any other choice?' she looks up.

'No.'

She punches out *Jungle Fever*. They dance holding hard. The noisy bar swims repeatedly in and out of focus. His hands as before run and over and through her nice compact body. Others join in the dancing. The fever catches on hot and raw in the Eden sex jungle. She breathes fast, moves her hips the way they do to turn you on. She cannot turn him on. He is already full on, burning fuses all over his network. And if he is not careful he may

just burst a main valve and embarrass his trousers. The song comes to a gradual end. They remain holding tight. He feels drunkenly tired and a little too hot.

'Shall we?' she nods upwards.

A drunk bumps into them. Ben nods at her. She takes his hand, leads him through the sex and money-hungry party. The dark grey-walled passage is crammed with bargain hunters. They cluster outside the numerous battered doors and wait patiently. Some are talking themselves in, others morose over their rejected offers. They step over a man lying unconscious in the dimly lit corridor. Ben hates to imagine what might have knocked the guy out. Hand in hand with the little harlot they take the steps one by one. Half-way up a man shoots by them, his trousers in his hands. A half-dressed woman dashes after the fleeing fugitive and hurls a half-full bottle of beer after him. The bottle narrowly misses Ben and explodes on the lowest step.

'What's up?' he asks.

'The dog had no money,' the middle-aged woman pulls her petticoat tight around her. 'And he wouldn't say before we started.'

Ben follows the girl along another passage lined with men discussing politics while waiting their turn. The air is stale with urine and sex. A door bursts open. A man staggers exhaustedly out. A woman shouts from the dim room behind him.

'Next!'

Ben silently follows past closed dark doors to the end of the corridor. The little girl taps. A bed creaks inside and a female voice yells 'Wait!'

'It is me,' the girl calls.

'Susan?' the voice within asks.

'Open,' Susan orders.

The voice lowers a few decibels. 'Wait a minute,' addressed to someone within.

'Wait?' a man's voice in a plaintive whisper. 'Wait now?'

'Get off,' impatiently.

The bed groans some more. Bare feet approach and the door flies open. The room-mate stands at the door, stark naked.

'I thought it was those beasts again,' she indicates the waiting throng down the passage.

Susan shoves Ben into the stuffy, dim room and bolts the door. Her room mate returns to her waiting partner. They resume their match. No ceremony. Just like that. Ben tries not to look.

Susan walks to her bed, takes off her shoes and lies down. Ben moves in forced calm. He takes off his coat first, drops it on a chair. He sits on the

bed to undo his shoes. A giant prize cockroach traverses the dirty floor leisurely relaxed. Places you find the bastards! Instinctively he gets up to do his duty. The beast proves too cunning. He chases it under the other bed. The woman looks up at him. 'What is it?'

'A cockroach.'

'A cockroach?' she chokes and her man does not even know Ben is here yet.

'Leave it alone,' Susan calls to him.

'I lost it.'

'They breed in the bar downstairs,' she says. 'On beer.'

She had nothing under her skirt all this time. She goes back and pulls the dress all the way up to her chest. He stands rooted to the floor, staring.

'Well, come on.'

He hesitates.

'You are not shy?' Her voice bathed in mocking disbelief.

He shakes his head. Shy? Never! His hand goes hunting for the pea-sized buttons on his pants.

'Get on with it then,' she says.

He gets on to the bed. One thing is different from the start. Most of the Eden gang will just lie there as good as dead, let you do all the gymnastics and get yourself worn out. Then they shrug, shrug just once and you are done, as dead as the bedstead. Susan moves from the word go. She attacks, he defends. He struggles to keep track, tries not to miss a move and stall the ball in mid-field, losing the game completely. But she is too fast for him. He skids and spills, coming crashing down, stunned and windless, gasping for breath. Susan realizes the slip, clever girl, lets him rest and regain his bearings. Then she gives him a chance to gain a fair shot, equalize the score. He takes it gently, carefully. No unfortunate accidents. They both enjoy it thoroughly. They rest again. The couple across the room start arguing, first in whispers, then loudly.

'Enough,' the woman insists.

'Enough . . . what?'

'I said enough, you have done me enough for your money.'

'Enough? I bought you ten beers' he complains.

'You have to add money,' she informs him.

'But . . .'

The woman jumps out of bed and starts to dress.

'Get out,' she advises, cool and businesslike.

He shakes his head. She holds him by the shirt front to drag him out. He protests, tries to get furious. Suddenly they stop struggling to listen. Faint whimpers materialize out of a paper carton marked CORNED BEEF in

the corner across the room. The whimpers rise in volume into the unmistakable cry of a tiny baby. The woman stands frozen, then turns and points an accusing finger at the man:

'See what you have done, you, . . . you woke the baby!'

'But I . . .'

Susan speaks up.

'Can't you do things, quietly, this is very bad.' Her room-mate looks angrily sorry. 'It's this beast. Get out!' she yells at him.

'I did not know the baby could hear,' he pleads.

'Go away,' she grabs a shoe to strike him.

The man scrambles out of bed, snatches his coat and shoes and runs out to dress in the crowded corridor. The woman sloshes milky water from a bucket into her works and follows, shutting the door behind her. A suspenseful calm descends on the room. The baby was not supposed to have squeaked at such a crucial moment. It was not in the script. Susan holds her breath and watches Ben. He shrugs stupidly. She climbs out of bed, patters to the makeshift cot and looks in. She sticks a finger into the mass of rags in the carton. 'Stop it, boy,' she soothes. 'Stop crying. Go back to sleep.' The baby goes into full throttle and yells. The familiar sound grates on Ben's nerves. Slowly he pulls on his pants and shoes.

'Whose is it?'

'Mine.'

'Yours?' he pauses in doing up his pants.

'Yes.'

She picks up the baby and returns to the bed. The wet baby smells of urine. She sits by Ben. Without hesitation she yanks one of the breasts he lay on a moment ago and sticks it into the tiny red mouth. The baby holds with flesh-coloured hands and whimpers satisfaction. Ben watches the rough skin peeling off the face and hands, the baby as fragile as the yolk of an egg.

'How old?'

'One month.'

He gets off the bed, grabs his coat. 'I must be going now.'

She says nothing. He takes out five shillings, tosses it on to the bed,

'One month old . . . and this!' his hand sweeps the dingy room.

She bites her lower lip, a little frightened and pitiful.

'Come . . . come to trade in this kind of . . .'

'Please stop it.'

He snorts, gets into his dark coat.

'You shouldn't have . . .'

'Go away,' she says.

'Bastard slut,' he regrets it almost immediately.

She bursts into shuddering sobs, clutching the baby to her bosom. Her frame shakes violently as she cries. And she cries not as a harlot, not as a mother, but just as a helpless girl cries.

'Go away please,' she sobs, 'take your money!' she throws the five shillings at him. 'Take it and go away. Just leave me alone.'

Ben stoops and picks up the money. He fidgets restlessly, shuffles to his feet. He drops a pound, his last pound, on the bed and storms out, pursued by her sobs. He remembers Wini. Baby must have been that old some day. And now he remembers Wini's letter - 'the baby, our baby, not your baby but his'. Ben curses. His head spins, his stomach turning in protest against the stink. Nausea rises from the base of his tummy and hits the roof of his mouth. He flees down the stairs past the bar and out of the building, leaving behind the anguish and rot of Eden. He staggers two blocks, stops and becomes sick. He leans on the wall of a shop and retches his guts out, pouring out all the *Karara* and the last remains of the food he ate three days ago.

Weak and spent he walks fast towards River Road. He tries not to think about the sobbing girl and her month-old baby; about Wini. It must be past midnight. He glances at his watch - 10 30. That is when the devil stopped moving. That must have been years back. He skips across River Road and takes a byway to Grogan Road. The street lamps are out along the lane. The thieves of Grogan Road must have stolen the electric wiring again. The road is usually deserted round about this time of evening, or morning. A nightwatchman calls from the shadows. His dog barks. There never used to be dogs and watchmen around here. But all the same Ben has no intention of getting himself charged with trying to steal the numerous wheelless cars around. He runs along Grogan Road to Racecourse Road.

Max and his bastards are not in yet. It is still too early for end of month. He fetches his keys, praying he has not lost them in the Eden. A sleeper snores from across the compound, a rich-toned, contented sound. Ben has not heard that kind of snore for some time now. You do not hear sounds like that all month round. These are end of month sounds, the sounds of plenty, sounds of life. He steps into the stuffy bedroom and pushes the door shut. Baby is fast asleep in his urine-sodden bed. Roaches scurry for cover. Run for cover, monsters, run for all you are worth. Man the Invader, Man the Destroyer, Indestructible Man has come.

He crushes a few slow ones under his shoes and wonders why he bothers. As far as he figures, the vermin will always be there, whatever he does or does not do. Always! The kitchen-table and the dirty stuff on it are crawling with the hungry animals. They are almost eating the paint off the stove.

He undresses, gets into bed and switches the lights off. He tries to sleep. From somewhere across the estate someone screams for help. Someone paying overdue night tax to the numerous jobless. Ben wonders whether coppers and their dog ever get to pay the tax. They are in the taxation business too. They used to be. A triplet of men and dog stopped him one night not long ago.

'You are drunk,' one said. He was not. It was the fifteenth of the month and they ought to have known that. He told them so.

'You are drunk,' the other one said.

'Really,' the dog confirmed, peering up at him.

'Drunk and disorderly,' the older constable said,

'But ...'

'Let's go.'

'Go?'

'To the Station.'

'To the Station?' desperately.

'That is where we take drunks.'

Then Ben made the greatest mistake. Thinking that it was the Swahili getting the boys bogged down, he tried to explain in English. The elder of the two constables, so old the bugger should have retired years back, listened intently with apparent comprehension. Ben proved how he could not have been drunk as it was midmonth and he had no money yet, like anybody else, even policemen. When he finished the old man nodded vigorously, then:

'We do not understand that language of foreigners,' he said sympathetically. 'However, our Inspector at the Station does. Perhaps you should try explaining to him.'

Ben trooped along to the Station thinking that he had a foolproof case. Another mistake. As he should have guessed, the Inspector was out home for the night. But, the old copper explained, he would be back early in the morning. Very early next morning. Would Ben care to wait? In one of the cells? He protested. They shoved him in anyway, stripping him of his money and watch, neither of which he ever saw again. The Inspector came very early next morning, nine o'clock early. Ben was dragged out cold, bug and lice-ridden. They wanted his statement. He gave them his side of the story. The other side was scribbled in the casebook. His captors were nowhere near explaining distance, but they had tried to say it in the report book:

Time: 2.30 a.m.

Name: Ben Wachira. No fixed abode.

Charge: Drunk and disorderly.

The Inspector, the nice fellow he was, tried hard but could not understand otherwise. What with the suspect so ragged with cell filth and hung-over with sleep. At Makadara Court Ben gladly traded two and a half pounds for his freedom and learnt his lesson. Next time he fell in with a language handicapped triplet he would try and speak a language they understood. Like a lovely, blue one-pound bill. They all dig that. Even Constable Dog. It took experience. Ben now knows and understands the legal language. Drunk and disorderly means drunk and merry. Drunk while the copper himself has to do night patrol on a cold miserable night while you plug your arse with the good things of life in the peace he is toiling to preserve,

13

The plot is at peace. Max has not managed to get his damned record player repaired yet, thank heavens. The only other neighbour who had one was recently evicted for being reluctant to pay a newly-imposed rent rise. Somewhere outside, a radio plays soft breakfast music. A child cries. But there is peace as there never was during the dictatorship reign of Max's noise-master.

Ben turns over on the bed, picks a cigarette stub off the bedside table. This is one of the few Sunday mornings he does not work. Yussuf granted him a day off to look after certain matters of personal welfare – bhang and *Changaa*. The police have been working too bloody well lately as a result of which certain Yussuf-type commodities have got scarce. The authorities have been cracking down, an ambiguous phrase which also means official harassment, on vagrants and undesirables. Among the most unwanted bastards in this city, *Changaa* brewers and bhang farmers, usually members of the same clan, are second only to job-seekers. As a direct result of the police enthusiasm the Yussuf commodities have been getting scarcer and dearer. He prefers giving Ben time off to hunt wider than to pay more for the ration.

Ben turns on his radio. The batteries are way down as usual. He turns it off. Across the room Baby wakes up. He has long since stopped calling for mother. He will grow fast. Days were soon after his mother's disappearance when he did not quit crying unless his mouth was stuffed with dry bread or sweets. Those were the days when Ben got drunk every night so he could stand the boy's screams. A few times he considered leaving the boy and the house. A few times too he realized there was no place to go. One day he did try to actually leave. He went out, got drunk and started to pack. Baby caught him at it:

'Where are we going, Ben?' he enquired.

Ben looked down at the ragged boy, shook his head confounded. He tried to explain to the boy they were through. The boy, his mother, he was through with them. He tried really hard to explain. Maybe he was too drunk to make sense to the boy. But he may just leave yet. Just steal out of the bloody house some time at night and never look back.

'Ben,' Baby calls,

'Yes.'

'I am hungry.'

'Get some bread.'

The boy climbs out of bed. He takes a large slice of bread from the carton in the kitchen-corner and climbs back on to the cot to crunch, contented. Ben shakes his head. In a way he is thankful Wini brought her son up this way. The convenience of a son of a . . . son of a harlot is that he only knows his mother as that woman who is rarely in at night and stops in the house just long enough to provide some bread. If there is food and bed, mother is as good as there. Ben and Baby have come to an undebated agreement. He finds the bread and gives consent for its consumption. The boy does the rest. The earlier he learns to fend for himself the better. Ben will not always play mother.

Wini's portrait watches him from the wall across the room. He stares blankly back. In the letter she left she directed that he hand the boy over to a charity home. She should have done that herself before she left. He should have done it himself. But it seems he and the boy are stuck with each other now. The only think that they have is each other, and a shadow of the woman they both loved. Maybe he should not have destroyed Mr Caldwell's cheque. Money is money, no matter who offers it. Oh . . . shit!

He climbs out of bed, draws the flimsy curtains. Sunday sunshine streams into the stuffy room, warm and revitalizing. He opens the window. He peers outside and curses. The devil is here again, and what a morning to call! Across the courtyard stands the hateful epicene landlord, a bunch of gaol locks in his hand. His eviction committee, a bunch of part-time criminals who really do not care what they do to earn a pound, are busy helping a reluctant tenant move out. They get up early, the money maniacs. Since he raised the house rent the landlord has had to call regularly with his rent-enforcement thugs to help throw unwilling tenants into the street. Two months ago he held a soapbox election campaign in the same yard they are now throwing the unwilling tenants into. There were six crates of beer and a lot of smiles and love. He made a long speech on 'love your neighbour's vote' basis and made it clear that he expected all his tenants' votes in the forthcoming civic elections. Everybody was drunk and happy that day. But the election day dawned cold and wet and very unpleasant. And when the votes were counted the landlord had sixty votes against the winner's four thousand and some. He came back breathing fire and water and demanded to know what went wrong.

'Nothing, really,' said the vegetable woman. 'I just remembered there was this big consignment of greens arriving, so I had to go open the stall.'

Some of the tenants couldn't even remember where they were on the material date. The house-boss gave a curt lecture on dishonesty and raised the rent by forty shillings. That is what everybody is paying for.

Ben emerges from his house, a towel wrapped round his loins. Most neighbours are already up, a quiet subdued lot of haggard faces witnessing their own impending fate. A few neighbours had enough instinct to leave before the devil got here, and that was pretty early. Their rooms are now double locked with the giant rusty padlocks the landlord must have brought with him from hell. Max and Hombre are among the grave on-lookers. They have afforded the new rent. Business must be good.

Today they are helping the bank clerk move out. There are people of all sorts of trades represented in this plot. There is Max, and his bugs. The lot can only be professionally described as troublemakers. Then there is the childless old woman who lives on hawking green vegetable matter. There are two barmen and their families, a Grogan Road mechanic who is not a thief, and three retired whores who only do the occasional special job. Then there is the City Council policeman and the unlicensed roadside cobbler; two neighbours who spend days racing each other round the town in the course of their duties, before coming home to be good neighbours for the night. The plot has also got two office clerks and their messengers. The only professional fruit peddler got chucked out a few weeks back. And of course the good neighbourhood is represented by Ben in the building construction industry. They may yet have a minister one of these years if the almighty landlord buys himself enough votes to sneak into parliament.

But today the bank clerk must go. Ben silently slinks to the toilet. The temperamental toilet is not very healthy today. It does not flush. Neighbours have been here before him and piled the basin high with stuff. Ben throws in his lot.

The eviction crew works thoroughly, relentlessly. A coffee table sails out of the house, lands in the yard and breaks a leg.

'Stop it,' the owner screams. 'I will call the police . . . this is criminal. You must pay for this.'

He struggles with the hired hands, three convict-type bullies.

'You have broken my table, you . . . you . . .'

'We will fix that,' the landlord says from a distance. 'Soon as you pay.'

'You have no right to raise the rent,' the tenant complains. 'No right at all.' Dressed only in a vest and pair of ragged trousers the bank clerk looks pathetically comical. They must have caught him in bed.

'You know how much more tax I have to pay today?' the landlord argues. 'And the price of water . . . and the price of electricity . . . and the

cost of fuel to come here and collect? Then you talk of rights, huh. The price of food?

'I also eat,' the bank clerk complains.

'That is your problem,' the landlord shrugs. 'Everybody else is paying the new rent,' his hand sweeps round to indicate the stupefied onlookers and the double-locked doors.

A chair finds its violent way to the heap of belongings in the yard. The tenant, too scared to trust his property to the landlord and his toughs, cries: 'Somebody call the police, please, somebody!' No one moves. No one bothers. So the police come, so what? They advise you to file a case in the court of law or the rent tribunal. Meanwhile, will you move your junk and stuff out of the honourable landlord's property. One just cannot win. The vegetable hawker evicted last month proved it. He had to move all his belongings to the roadside outside. Then he sat down by them and wept, he, his wife and six children. They could not convince their nervous cat to move out into the gutter with them. It was left behind stealing neighbours' food until last week when Max and his buddies finally got fed up, tracked it down and killed it. One just cannot win.

A glass breaks inside the house. The bank clerk looks from the landlord to the furniture and the removal party.

'Stop it, please . . . somebody help!'

The landlord jingles his bunch of locks and watches quietly. He does not do the dirty work. He has class. He pays to have it done. The last of the pots and pans lands outside. One of the thugs tears down the window curtains and tosses them on to the disorganized heap.

'Empty,' he reports to his boss. The landlord's fat face moves: 'Clean?'

'Clean!'

'Good,' he waddles over to his chief thug and hands him two of the giant padlocks. Talk of organized crime! The house-magnate looks round the plot at the assembled tenants. He is the overlord around here. Let nobody make any mistake. He jingles the remaining locks, then throws them at his henchman.

The evicted man still in slippers and vest regards his possessions, then the locked house, and shakes his head helplessly. He breaks down, his voice timid and husky in defeat.

'Okay . . . I will pay,' he turns to the lord of the houses. 'I will pay, open it.' The property owner waves him away.

'I have had enough from you. I will get another tenant. There are many around.'

That is a fact. Even at the elevated rent the house will be occupied in no time.

'But I will pay . . . open my house, I have money, see?'

He takes out a bundle of bank notes from his hip pocket. The landlord's solid refusal dissolves in an interested glare.

'You had . . . you had so much money and still wanted to make trouble.' He clicks his fish mouth in disgust. 'So much money! Some people just won't . . .'

'I have things to do,' the bank clerk explains. 'I have debts to pay, things to buy . . .'

'So much money', the landlord mumbles. He receives the three hundred shillings, regards the remainder greedily. The owner stuffs the money back into his pocket. The landlord pockets his loot, signals his henchman to unlock the door. The man throws the door wide open.

'Take them back in,' the tenant indicates his property,

The landlord shrugs. 'That is your problem.'

'You took them out,' he indicates the muscle-men. 'They must put them back.'

'Talk to them,' the boss advises quietly.

The bank clerk looks from his landlord and the toughs to his property. The removal gang stare back at him like zombies. He chooses to address their master.

'You tell them,' he cries. 'You came with them. They work for you.'

'I paid them to work for me,' the old man shrugs. 'Talk to them. Try some deal.'

The man realizes he cannot come to any agreement with the vagabonds, they might even rob him while resettling him. They might have robbed him already! He swallows back a scream for help. Toughs don't like being called thieves. He turns to his neighbours. They start to disperse. He should never have awakened the dragon. He ought to have known. One just cannot win. Even a bank clerk should know that.

Ben lingers around combing his hair. He is sure he is not going to lend any hand. He is still in his towel, bare from the waist up, and the sun is nice and hot. The landlord notices him. He approaches. Ben shuffles his feet, fighting an impulse to retire out of sight. But he has nothing to worry about. He has paid the new cut-throat rent. He has nothing to fear — except, perhaps, starvation. He scrutinizes the triple-chinned old man; dressed in a dark three-piece suit in spite of the stinging morning sun.

'Hello, how are you?' The man rumbles.

'Your toilet does not flush,' Ben answers. He knows the old boy well now. Bandits do not mind being treated like bandits so long as there is no confusing who is the almighty landlord and who is the clinging, begging tenant.

'What have you done to the toilet?' He asks Ben.

'What do you mean what have I done to it?' Ben protests. 'I have not touched the bloody thing.'

'Well,' the other shrugs. 'What have they done to it, then?'

'How the hell should I know what they have done to it; it just does not work, that's all. Just does not flush.'

The old man shrugs. He knocks an untidy maize cob away from his clean shoes. Then wipes his sweaty pate and leads Ben into Wini's room. His bandits remain outside.

'When is she coming back?' he asks, his asthmatic breathing wheezing badly.

'Next month,' Ben answers.

'I thought that is what you said last month too.'

'I meant next month.'

The old man looks around, sniffing at the urine stink emanating from Baby's cot.

'This place needs repainting, don't you think?' Ben ventures.

'Next time . . .'

'I thought that is what you said last time.'

'Did I?'

Ben nods.

'I meant next time,' he examines the drab walls. 'Next time . . . next time.'

It is always next time, except the rent. The rent is here and now. He inspects the room from the dirty floor to the sooty black ceiling. His mean crocodile eyes rest on Wini's portrait. His big face seems to soften into a greedy child's fascinated stare. It is just possible, Ben thinks. It is very probably she had to lay with him to get the room, damn it!

He turns to Ben, his eyes looking tired and uncertain.

'Anything you would like repaired?' he enquires.

'The toilet.'

'Not that. In your own house.'

'The paint.'

'I said next time. Anything else?'

Ben looks around thoughtfully. He could mention the broken hinge on the door, but he may have to pay for that. The cracked light switch is too trivial to bother the busy, concerned landlord. He shakes his head, 'No.'

The landlord scratches his paunchy stomach, and turns to Ben.

'Where were you on election day?'

'In bed.'

'You forgot, huh?'

'No, I overslept.'

'A whole day?'

'Most of it.'

The old man nods to himself a few times, then:

'Overslept, of all things!' He nods some more: 'Sleeping, selling vegetables, working overtime; every bastard has an excuse. You know, you people make it hard for yourselves. You want things done for you for nothing. Why do you think I wanted to join the local government? For money? I have enough for myself. It was for people like you, to represent you, talk for you. So you can earn better salaries, so you can afford your rent.'

'I have paid.'

'I know. I know, but unless each and every one of you pays how can I buy the paint?'

'You could paint just mine,' Ben suggests.

'I said next time,' the man answers. 'I need money too. I have the car loans to pay back, my daughter is going to America to study, and . . . have you tried to buy rice recently? Do you know how much it is per kilo? And steak and chicken? Tenants are all the same. You think we are pigs.' He about turns and leaves. At the door he stops, looks back.

'Don't,' he stutters, 'don't think I do not know all about you. As soon as I turn my back you talk. Talk about me. That old man is this, that old man is that. But all I am trying to do is live a simple average life, educate my children and make them happy. I try to be nice. All the other landlords are charging three-fifty per room. You people do not want to pay three hundred. What do you want? I have the loans to pay back, and have you ever tried to repay a loan on three blocks of flats, one Mercedes car and a Morris Mini?'

Ben shakes his head wishes he had.

'Well, you do not know anything, then,' the landlord informs him. 'It is not easy.' He rolls out of the door, waddles to his car and drives off together with his thugs, to inspect the other two blocks of flats on which to repay the loan. Then home, home to Muthaiga in the rich white suburbs. The plot begins to breathe again. They are safe again. Safe from official harassment until . . . until the next time.

The evicted tenant stands alone with his property in the courtyard, frustrated into inaction. Now he snorts into motion, grabs an empty bottle and smashes it on to the floor. His face blazes murder. Ben understands, they all understand. It must be tough being chucked into the gutter. There was the story in the newspapers about the tenant who slew his landlord during a 'domestic quarrel'. His rage must have been as poisonous as that of the

bank clerk in the courtyard. And the murderer might just hang for the assassination.

Baby climbs out of the bed. He looks as dirty as the room.

'Put your things out to dry,' Ben tells him. He can do that these days. He is a quick learner. One of these fine days, Ben hopes, he will learn not to wet his bed. Ben cleaned the sheets once when the boy wet his mother's bed, an experience not to be repeated. Now, come fair or foul weather, Baby sleeps in his own bed and takes the rags out to dry in the sun. One of these fine days too he may just learn how to clean his own few clothes and how to cook. Kind of prepare him for the day Ben will have to just walk out of that door for the very last time. With the rents growing so out of proportion with wages that glorious day may not be long in coming.

Baby drags his wet bedding across the floor to spread it out on the grassy patch behind the house. Then he sweeps the floor so Ben may wash it. Ben sends him off with a shilling to buy himself some breakfast at the roadside tea kiosk. By the time he rolls healthily back, contentedly chewing on an Andazi, the room is as clean as Ben can make it.

Ben then showers in the smelly slime-covered bathroom and dresses for business, to earn the light duties and probably manufacture a few extra cents out of the imbecile foreman.

'Do not wander too far,' he orders. Baby renders his usual big silent consent.

Ben leaves to board bus number 14. Today the route is under the command of one of those conductors who regard you as though you were an unwelcome hitch-hiker, honoured with a ride in his freedom bus. The shuddering monster rattles east along the lip of Mathare Valley. From up here the shanty town appears just as a rubbish heap of paper, scrap iron, dust and smoke. Appearances are deceptive. Down there live enough construction labourers, unlicensed fruit peddlars and illicit liquor brewers to cause concern to the whole city police. It can be nightmarish hunting for vagrants down there. Almost everyone is a vagrant, that is including women and children. And they drink *Changaa* and smoke bhang, two things that cannot stand the sight of a policeman. A few coppers have got themselves knocked cold by unknown assailants down there. Coppers find it easier to follow behind the City Council constabulary who have the right to raze the place down any day in the interest of public health. In the resulting smoke and chaos the policemen descend into the forbidden valley, make a few desperate arrests, then scramble out before the place regenerates into solid, obstinate, granite resistance to law and order.

Ben rarely goes to negotiate his stock of loot from down there in hell. If they are a pain in the police arse, they are bound to be more than an itch in

his. Besides, the police accepting a kind of sour stalemate form a plain clothes cordon over the valley in a determined but vain attempt to strangle the town, cut off the illicit traffic into the rest of the city. One may freely drop into the valley and stuff oneself to death with *Changaa* and bhang but it is an appreciable feat smuggling three or four bottles out.

The bus rolls on to Kariobangi. Everybody disembarks at the terminus, Ben is about to follow suit when he notices the unusually exaggerated activity in the village. Another police patrol car pulls up behind the bus, Down the road a police van already full is being crammed with more vagrants. A couple of plain clothes policemen race a fast flying suspect into the distant bush. Ben sighs. A clean up, a bloody clean up!

'Well!' the almighty conductor of the almighty bus confronts Ben. Ben shrugs, hands him a shilling. 'Town,' he answers, glaring back. The conductor hands him the ticket and the change.

'Where are you going, anyway?'

'Just for a ride.'

'In a bus?'

'Why not? I pay for it. Isn't that what you want, money.' The conductor shakes his head. Ben sympathizes. Flogging a regular job such as a bus conductor can be brain-draining. It gets so one can sleep on the job. The conductor has not noticed anything unusual in the atmosphere. Most times he only sees money and tickets anyway. The driver, he too is a regular pay jack; only sees the bloody road, he has driven on it so many times he knows every bump. He too can sleep on the job. Now he slams the bus into first and starts the tortuous journey back. Nobody boards the bus. Everybody is too busy running or trying to explain their business. This will make impressive sensational newspaper headlines tomorrow:

MASSIVE POLICE DRAGNET

Hundreds of vagrants, illegal brewers and prostitutes in court.

The futility of it is that one can still have one's obsessions looked after tonight or tomorrow night. These clean-ups never touch the really greasy spots, the organized brothels in town, nor those cosy little joints down the alley where they push you *Changaa* then clobber you dead for the change.

The bus fills up on the way down Ring Road. It turns left leaving behind the potent dump that is Mathare Village and clatters on towards Eastleigh. The only other place Ben can safely purchase his requirements on wholesale prices is at Kibera. He will have to get out in town and take bus number 8.

The conductor taps him on the shoulder and for the hundredth time

demands to see the ticket. Ben shows him it is not false. He understands bus conductors. The bastard has got to do a job too. Otherwise he will end up cleaned up himself and Ben may take his job.

Even when one knows where to shop for *Changaa*, it still takes time. First you find the place. Get in. Then you spend a lifetime arguing over the price per bottle, which varies with the purity of the stuff. The peddler lights a sample that burns with a clear blue flame and claims it is so good it could fly an aircraft; provided of course the 'plane is not an indignant police craft and does not blow up on ignition. Ben does not doubt any of this purity guarantee. What he doubts is that the demonstration is carried out on a true sample from the drum. The sample may just contain that little bit of petrol to give the 'plane the boost.

Eventually, after listening to the normal tale of the rising cost of raw materials, house rent and protection money, he purchases three bottles. The bhang he buys from an honest-to-goodness old crow who swears on his mother's arse that he has not blended it with God's grass. Trouble with everybody is that they are so damned honest that they cannot confess they too want to make some bread. Ben gets home about 3 p.m. First he breaks open the grass package and repacks it for Yussuf's consumption. He also changes the chemical composition of the *Changaa*, sort of steps it down for the foreman. He packs the parcel ready to deliver to the Indian on the morrow.

Suddenly he realizes he has not heard or seen Baby since he came in. Where the hell is the little demon? The neighbours' children have not seen him either. Baby!

Max emerges from his room to announce:

'The boy is here with us.'

'What the hell is he doing there?' Ben demands.

'Well, nothing much . . . he is, eh . . . just sitting.'

'Who said he could come in here?' Ben charges into the room. It is stuffy and hot with grass smoke. Baby sits on the carpet with Max's boys. One of them rolls on the carpet laughing and talking to himself. A couple of them are busy playing cards.

Baby regards Ben with large red eyes, lets out a scream, totters to his feet and lurches towards Ben. His drugged body wilts and he collapses. Ben explodes. He grabs Baby, yanks off the pants. The boy has not been violated yet. He lets him lie, whirls on the room. 'Who did this?'

Nobody moves, no one speaks.

He turns to Max, his eyes ablaze, the dilated nostrils snorting.

'Who did it?'

Max trembles under the pressure.

'He will be all right, Ben,' he limps backwards. 'It was only a little. It won't do him any harm . . . he will be . . .'

Ben grabs him by the shirt collar, hauls him up and shakes him. 'You beast!'

'It was not me,' Max protests, 'I swear it was not me . . . it was Sancho's idea, I swear it!'

Ben lets go and attacks the guilty party. Sancho springs up and retreats.

'He is not your son,' he complains. The fact hits Ben a sledgehammer blow. Mountains of rage crumble over him, choking him in images of Wini and her hateful boyfriend. He swoops down like a furious tornado, whips out and knocks the frail gangster down. He lifts his foot to stamp out the detestable bug. Sancho shoots up much too fast for Ben, dives into a corner and comes up with a stiletto. He takes a gangster stance and rubs blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Ben bulldozes in, long arms flailing like a thrashing machine. He bashes Sancho on the face once, twice. The younger man staggers back, covers his bleeding nose and mouth with his hands. Ben grabs him and hurls him into the motor cycles in the corner. Then he storms round, snorting fire and spitting venom.

No one speaks. No one moves.

He scoops up the wreckage of Baby and like a spent cyclone that has done its destruction duty, swirls out of Max's room.

Ben lights a cigarette, squints at the hot sun and inhales deeply. His chest hurts, his body weak and exhausted. Not from work. He has not done anything much today. Just a few trips up and down the building looking for Yussuf. Now he has given up and let Yussuf hunt for him. It is easier that way. It is a fine day today. From up on the eighteenth floor the air is cleaner, less noisy. The sun is nice and warm, too.

Across Haile Selassie Avenue a crowd of disinterested pedestrians gathers to watch the City Council's good-health brigade at work. Cholera the Killer is in town. In the interests of public health all the roadside kiosks and other insanitary eating places have to be destroyed. The story is in all the daily papers. And across the avenue the brigade has already demolished Tree Bottoms Hotel and Sukuma Wiki. They are now busy on the Hilotoni Hotel. All the labourers' hotels must go. The labourers will get anti-cholera jabs, but those will go into the arm that works and not into the stomach. There are rumours rife that the Council will build organized sanitary Food Kiosks but no mention was made of when. Or what the food prices will be like. Neither did they say precisely who will own the new sanitary eating places nor what they will do with old man Hilotoni and his one-eyed wife and semi-illiterate son.

Ben shakes his heavy head. He should not have gone out with Ocholla last night. *Karara* for two days running is bad for a rarely full stomach. He feels quite sad too. He should not have let Ocholla take him to Eden either. But a man has got to have some exercise or the machine might fall into disuse, rust and maybe pack up. A man has got to have a girl every once in a while. But he must be careful too not to become a prostitute addict like Ocholla.

It is a good day today. From up on the eighteenth floor the air is cleaner and less noisy. The sun is nice and warm too. Ben peeks over the balcony edge, to the busy crowd below. Trucks, people and junk all mashed up in a confused muddle. It looks like a real rubbish dump down there. Trucks crawl up to the gravel mounds to offload, then they pull away in a thin trail of dust. The concrete mixer, hardly audible from up here, lets out thin puffs of smoke and cement dust.

Somewhere in that junkyard, Yussuf must be crying for Ben. There is no

hurry. Let him do a bit more looking. If he is entitled to a hideout on the fifteenth floor so is Ben on the eighteenth. Besides, Ben is still on general duties which include running errands from one confusion centre to the next and to Yussuf, the focus of confusion. It is not easy decoding what everybody has to complain about into Yussuf-language. When a hand says he is short of material, Yussuf wants to hear the man is malingering. A matter of terminology. But what does Ben report when one of the masons believes the plan is wrong and embarks on correcting it by building the way he thinks the architect meant to have it done? And what is Ben supposed to report when a mason says to go tell the son of a Bombay whore he will have his balls crushed for sending one-one-three mix instead of two-three-five mix? What he normally does is warn Yussuf there is a crazy ball-hunter after him. Yussuf does not care; as far as he knows every goddamn son-of-a-black-whore in sight is after his blood.

A white-topped tipper, Onesmus's brand new death machine, reverses to the mixer, to empty another load of sand. Ocholla's hauling bucket sighs on its way down, the thick greasy cables quivering with tons of strain.

Ben leans back to smoke, reap the fruits of his bhang traffic. A man could get to like it in the construction industry. Particularly so if one has a bhang-hungry foreman who also prefers *changaa* to beer. Finally Ben drops the cigarette-end to the ground below and leaves his hideout. The lifts have not been installed yet. He climbs the rough flights of stairs slowly to conserve the little energy gained from the cigarette. In the construction business one has to sometimes take a cigarette for lunch. The hands are crying for the foreman on almost every floor. It rarely helps to consult Yussuf. Most times he only confirms what the masons had suspected. But one usually does a better job when reinforced with the knowledge that the headman will take responsibility for anything overdone.

On the ground floor Yussuf hysterically screams for Ben. But when Ben finally presents himself the foreman regards him devoid of any recognition and turns to a dusty hand by his side.

'I don't care how long you have been building partitions,' he shouts, 'I said 3-2-1 mix, double reinforcement, and tell that drunken bastard Kanji Bhai to come out of the latrine. I want to talk to him . . . go!'

Then he turns to Ben and demands:

'What the hell is Kanji Bhai doing in the latrine?'

'Shitting, I suppose.'

'For a whole bloody day?'

'He has diarrhoea.'

'And where the hell have you been?'

'On the eighteenth.'

'I swear on my mother's arse I will fire someone today, Ben. I swear on my uncle's . . .' he turns and takes off into the dusty racket outside. Ben tags along.

Suddenly someone screams Ben's name and grabs his arm. Ben turns to stare into the haggard shrunken face of Mr Hilotoni, manager of the kiosk now in the process of being obliterated.

'Ben, Ben, Ben!' the old man cries hysterically. 'You know what they have done to me, Ben? You know what . . .'

'I have heard,' Ben tells him.

'I am finished, I am done. Help me, Ben. Please help.'

Ben looks from the sickly old man to Yussuf and back. Yussuf scratches his rough chin and squints at the old man.

'Who is he?' he demands.

Ben shrugs and addresses old man Hilotoni:

'What do you want?'

'They . . . my hotel, they have wrecked it, ruined me. It took me years to build it, Ben. So many . . .'

'What do you want?'

'I have to rebuild . . . I want money. Quickly.'

'I'm broke, mate,' Ben shakes him off.

'My money!' Mr Hilotoni screams. 'I want my money. Give me my money!'

'It is not yet the end of the month,' Ben tells him.

'Who is he?' Yussuf demands, his face puzzled.

The tortured man turns to him, his sad old eyes pleading, begging to be understood.

'I need money.'

'For what?'

'For my hotel.'

'What hotel?' Yussuf looks him up and down and tries to comprehend. Finally he scratches his rough beard.

'I don't understand,' he says. 'Go away. We have work to do.'

Hilotoni spits contempt at his feet and turns to Ben and screams:

'I will sue the shit out of you sons of bitches!' He tears out a handful of grey hair, scatters it to the four winds. 'You won't pay, huh? Your mothers' cunts you will see me today. I will call the police. I will report to the head man. Where is the foreman, who is he?'

'Yussuf is the foreman,' Ben informs him.

'Where is he?'

Yussuf clears his throat and says quietly, 'I am here.'

'You?!' All hope dying in despair.

'Yes, me.'

'Tell them to pay me, please. Ask them to pay, or I am ruined.'

'Pay what?'

'My money.' Hilotoni grabs a handful of dirt, scatters it and calls damnation on the site. Then he notices the Hyena and takes into the thick dust after him.

Yussuf turns to Ben for explanation. 'What is he talking about, Ben?'

'Money.'

'I will never understand you and your people, Ben,' Yussuf shakes his head sadly. 'Is he mad?'

'I don't think so.'

'Then what is he acting like that for? Tell him to go away; who let him on the site? Who is he?'

'Mister Hilotoni.'

Yussuf shakes his head, confused. 'A strange old man,' he says, turns, and dismissing the old man, takes off. 'How is the pyllon lot, Ben?'

'I haven't been there,' Ben tags along.

'I know you haven't,' Yussuf says without turning. 'Those boys are dying to see you.'

'Me?' Ben looks up at the haggard face.

'You are the assistant foreman, Ben.'

Ben stops. Yussuf stops and faces him, his face still rugged from the encounter with Mr Hilotoni, all confidence in human sanity murdered.

'Since when?' Ben demands.

Yussuf shrugs, distorts his fat face hopelessly.

'Their idea,' he spreads his arms innocently. 'I suppose it is all right Ben. Long as you do not demand extra pay for it. The Accountant would not approve. You know what I mean, Ben.'

'I don't, and I . . . just who the devil dreamed up this joke?'

Yussuf shrugs helplessly. 'It's okay, Ben,' he says.

'Only act like you know better and they begin to respect you. So now they want you to direct the operation.'

Lend a hand would be a better term. Yussuf has this way of calling the nastiest jobs the sweetest names. Ben at times wishes he were on normal dirt duties. There one could bury one's head in a gravel hill and look busy. As a general duties manager, Yussuf's idea of a joke, he has to pass time aiding confounded hands in performing all sorts of odd-jobs just so that the buggers may cultivate self-confidence.

Yussuf roughs his beard. 'You know, you should not hide yourself so much, Ben,' he says.

'It wasn't much,' Ben tells the foreman.

'All the same.'

They march side by side through the site. Suddenly someone screams, Yussuf pulls up glances upwards and curses.

'Mother of the pregnant Punjab monkey . . .!'

Ben has never heard the foreman swear so vehemently. He looks up and perceives enough reason to swear in any language. Ocholla's crane bucket screams free line through the hot air. The thick steel cable swishes dangerously as the heavy bucket plummets to earth. Workers scatter out of the way. The bucket crashes into a truck, smashing the steel cockpit into scrap metal and splashing tons of fresh mixed concrete around. The explosion resounds through the site and echoes across half the town. Then the noise fades. The dust settles. A hush falls over the site. Everybody, everything in sight stays frozen in shock.

'Mother of a . . . drunken . . . Indian cobra,' Yussuf hisses. Then as if on cue everybody springs into action. The white-topped tipper has been converted to useless shell. Blood spills in a steady trickle from within the wreckage. Onesmus's squashed body lies trapped within in a large mass of minced flesh and bones.

'I told the bastard to be careful,' Yussuf turns to Ben. 'The truck is brand new. I don't know what my uncle will say.'

Ben wipes the sweat off his brow.

'I may be fired, Ben,' Yussuf wails.

Ben swallows dust in nervousness. Yussuf looks from Ben to the truck to the rest of the crew. They just stand around shocked stupid.

'Don't just stand there, bastards!' he shouts, 'Do something!' A weathered hand peeks into the wreck and shakes his head.

'The fucker is dead,' he informs the foreman,

'Well, call the police,' Yussuf cries.

The man turns to go, then stops. 'What do I tell them?'

'Tell them . . . Oh God . . . just call the goddamn devils.'

Ben looks up to the nineteenth floor. A figure appears over the edge and looks down on them. His hands shaking a little, Ben lights a cigarette. Yussuf lights himself a stick of bhang. Hands mill around, almost glad of the interruption.

'Guess who got his arse messed up – One Arse Mess!' No one laughs.

Presently the law arrives, the two patrol cars wailing into the thick dust of the site. Crowds of aimless wanderers and job seekers invade the site to watch. The place gets crowded, dustier and hotter. Old man Hilotoni thinking that the police have come for him, confronts the bulky inspector.

'It is my money,' he screams at the confused officer. 'I want it. Now. Please tell them.'

Yussuf steps forward, grabs the old man by the shoulder.

'Can't you see, a man just got killed, you son of a . . .'

'Who is he?' the police inspector asks.

'Some nut, I don't know,' Yussuf answers,

'Does he work here?'

'No.'

'Get him out of here,' the officer directs his constables. 'Keep all trespassers out of the gate,' then he turns to the foreman. 'Now, where is the dead one?'

The atmosphere becomes even hotter and stuffier with the police probes. They question everyone in sight and Ocholla, the unfortunate crane driver. Trembling with fear, he tells his side of the story. The crane suddenly just went mad, out of control. He couldn't stop it. More questions. Have Ocholla and the deceased ever quarrelled? Never. The late Onesmus had no particular enemies. He did not even have friends.

The firemen arrive with axes and electric saws to cut the trapped body out of the machine. They also examine the crane's gear. A very tiny nut in the rewind system has come loose, thus rendering the cog wheel teeth ineffective. Nuts of this type do not just fall loose. But why should any one on the site want to tamper with such a complicated mechanism? Besides, there were hands in the vicinity of the crane who swear they saw nothing until the crane driver screamed.

The seasoned police inspector strokes his moustache, confounded. Accidents such as this are extremely rare. When was the crane last serviced? Yussuf has no idea. No hand remembers. The police shake their heads in sorrow, take the body and leave, with promises of coming back to continue the investigations. The truck is towed away; it has an inhibiting effect on the workers. The crowds of onlookers disperse. Work resumes, slowly at first, then wobbling to average speed two hot hours later. Every so often those on ground duties glance upwards to make sure the fatal crane bucket is still under control.

Yussuf glides along like a spent ghost worn by diarrhoea, uncertain who got killed, himself or the terrible driver Onesmus. He puffs on a little stub of bhang, just as he had throughout the police investigation.

'Ben!' Yussuf calls. Ben strolls slowly over.

'There is something I want to tell you, Ben,' Yussuf says nervously. 'That truck was almost new, Ben. Brand new. My uncles will steam my arse for this.'

Ben sighs, tiredly wipes sweat off his face. Yussuf squirms uncomfortably.

'I could get fired, Ben. Don't you understand, Ben . . . damn it, my uncles . . .'

Ben turns round and disgustedly stalks away, but before he disappears into the dust Yussuf yells at him:

'Ben! He is back, Ben. Come back; get rid of your mad old man. I don't want to see him, he is driving me mad. I am mad, I am mad! I will kill somebody today! Come and get the bastard away from me Ben!'

Ben stops, turns and retraces his steps to Yussuf and Mr Hilotoni.

'What is the matter with the Indian?' Mr Hilotoni asks Ben.

'He thinks you are driving him nuts.'

'Nuts! I only want my money. I have to bribe them not to wreck my hotel.'

'No use bribing them,' Ben tells him quietly. 'They can't help you. All the kiosks will be destroyed. It was in the papers.'

'But they said,' old man Hilotoni chokes with grief, 'The leader said he would let me rebuild.'

'No way,' Ben shakes his head in sympathy. 'He is powerless. He is just trying to screw you. Can't you see, he can't help you!'

The old man drops his eyes, his rugged face paling as in deathly despair. Ben places his hand on the dropping shoulders and tries to comfort him. The old man shudders several times, shakes himself awake. Then without another word he starts off hobbling away, looking neither left nor right, his spent frame gliding lightly on the site dust; rolling away like a ball of cotton helplessly forced towards the stinking gutter by a gust of wind stronger than it can resist.

'Who is he?' Yussuf finally asks now that he is assured of his continued sanity.

'Mr Hilotoni,' Ben sighs.

'Mr Who?'

'Hilotoni. He owned the hotel across the road.'

'What hotel?'

'Under the trees.'

Yussuf drags on the stub of bhang.

'Is he mad?' he asks.

'I don't think so,' Ben turns and this time manages to walk completely away. He climbs the stairs slowly, thoughtfully. By the time he gets to the top floor the idea, the hunch, has generated into a conviction. At one end of the floor the hands are busy hammering at steel support structures, the normal chatter almost dead. Ben ambles over to the crane. Ocholla sits hunched over the controls, a grave shadow surrounding him. He looks up, notices Ben, then concentrates on the controls without a word to the newcomer.

Ben supports himself on the crane's framework, and looks over the edge

to the ground below. Everything appears tiny and pathetic from here. It is almost impossible one could aim with so much accuracy. Onesmus's brand new white-topped truck would be only too conspicuous. It was a bloody long shot, but a good one. He turns to Ocholla. "Thanks, Buddy," he whispers.

Ocholla jerks, glances at him and looks away. He licks his thick dry lips and stares straight in front. His crane rests on the ground being loaded. His hands play restlessly over the control panel. A muscle on his neck twitches nervously. After a long time he turns to Ben.

"What are you thanking me about?" he asks, his voice rough and broken.

Ben points downwards.

Ocholla stares at him hard, his red eyes almost hostile. He opens his mouth to speak but says nothing. He shakes his head, looks away. "It was an accident," he says without turning.

"Thanks all the same," Ben shrugs.

"Go away, damn you," Ocholla hisses.

Ben disobeys. He studies the hard profile, realizing for the first time how callous and permanent Ocholla's negroid features are.

"Go away, Ben," Ocholla's voice whines, kind of begging. "It was an accident, I say. I never would kill anybody and . . . me and Onesmus, we were friends, I mean we were not enemies like you were. It was an accident and . . . I did not mean to kill him . . . I mean, Oh, God, what am I saying!"

He covers his face with both hands. Ben expects him to sob. He does not. He sighs deep and low like a choking man while his body undergoes a series of violent tremors. Ben wants to put his arms around Ocholla's shoulders, but he cannot because of the cramped size of the crane's cockpit. Then suddenly Ocholla whirls round, his eyes terrified, almost pleading.

"The police, Ben," he swallows hard. "Do you think they will . . . you know . . . find . . . find out?"

Ben shakes his head thoughtfully.

"Are you sure, Ben?" the other insists.

Ben shrugs. "They know about occupational hazards and all that stuff. In a site like this people are bound to get hurt. Small accidents and . . ." he shrugs.

Ocholla licks his dusty lips. "Thanks, Ben."

Ben rubs his rough chin awkwardly, opens his mouth to say something encouraging but cannot decide what. Ocholla peeks over the lip to his fatal bucket down below. They are still loading it and doing so with a lot of respect. With shaky fingers he fetches one of his wretched cigarettes and rams it into his mouth. Ben tries to find one of his own and fails. He smoked all his day's ration trying to get over the recurring sight of the

crushed body. Ocholla looks up at Ben. On second thoughts he takes the cigarette from his mouth, and offers it to him. Ben accepts and lights it. Ocholla rifles himself for another cigarette and comes up with nothing. He stares hungrily at the one he has just given away. Ben hands it back. Ocholla drums his fingers nervously but shakes his head.

'No . . . Ben . . .' he says. 'It is yours . . . I gave it to you.'

'Take it.'

'I am all right, Ben.'

'Go on, take it,' Ben insists.

Ocholla swallows hard and licks his dry lips. He takes off his cap, roughs up his hair, and slams it back on. He shrugs, takes back the cigarette. 'We smoke it together, Ben,' he inhales furiously.

Ben nods agreement.

'Fifty-fifty.'

He looks around once more.

'However did you do it . . .'

Ocholla shrugs, 'I don't know,' he says. After a pause he goes on:

'I am not a very brave man, Ben. You know that. I was scared stiff of him, and he was not even mad at me. It was you he was after. You are a brave man, Ben. If . . . if it was me he was after, you know, I have already told you. It would have scared the shit out of me!' He drags hard on his cigarette. 'I don't know why I did it. It was madness, madness, Ben.'

'Good madness,' Ben tells him, leaning on the crane structure.

'I should not have . . .'

Ben shrugs. It is not so nice to see the mangled body of your enemy either.

'The temptation was too great,' Ocholla drags on the cigarette hungrily like a starving man.

'Thanks, Buddy,' Ben says, and works his fingers restlessly as he watches Ocholla smoke past the fifty-fifty mark.

Ocholla peers down again. The loading is over. He turns to Ben and hands over the remaining cigarette piece. Then he punches the rewind button. The crane's motor coughs and hums into life. The steel cable creaks with strain hauling up the weighty bucket full of freshly mixed cement. He glances down again to make sure the bucket is actually coming up, still under control. Then he turns round, his weathered face hard and serious.

'You know, Ben.'

'What?' Ben looks up.

'He was going to kill you.'

Ben nods thoughtfully. And now that the threat to his life is over, he

wonders, just how far did Onesmus mean to carry it out? Would he have gone all the way, really? Would he?

'He killed three people,' Ocholla goes on. 'He hated you. The son of a bitch was going to kill you.'

Ben looks up at Ocholla. He shrugs. He draws hard on the short cigarette end and burns his fingers. He drops the butt, puts his foot on it and grinds it into the hard concrete floor.

15

On a construction job, the presence of a labourer is akin to that of the diesel mixer. His life is like that of the battered old tipper. When they are no longer virile, no more useful, they are towed away and replaced with another that works. Construction goes on just as before, for the contractor has an obligation, a job to complete for his client.

When scum like Onesmus die, they are quite quickly forgotten. Unless, of course, they happen to have distant cousins and bastard brothers interested in collecting the insurance money. But then if they had had relatives who would know anything about company insurance they would not be working old tippers over construction jobs. They would have been somewhere else managing family businesses.

A few hours after Onesmus died his fellow hands began to actually enjoy his absence. One could almost hear the building sigh with relief. Every hand reverted to the long abandoned sleepy crawl around the site. There were no death drivers to beware of and one could throw oneself down anywhere for a siesta after lunch. Only now there was no lunch any more. The workers hotels were no more.

The police came back days later to continue the investigation, but got negative co-operation from the hands. The hands do not believe in coppers. They do not believe in anybody, anything – not even Yussuf, not death. They understand hunger, exhaustion, the building. They understood Mr Hilotoni and are mad that he is no more. He was the only one with whom they could indulge in truly authentic communication.

Old man Hilotoni came back a day or two after the Law's second visit. He floated around the site, wrinkled, stooping shouldered and weak, his whole life hanging over him in a thin uncertain mist, begging to be understood. The hands still called him Mr Hilotoni, even though he no longer had the hotel. But they could not understand him much. They had no money and they were hungry. The old man then cried for a job from Yussuf. But Yussuf informed him that he was only a foreman; there was the building manager, the cashier, the worthless Banianis, Kanji Bhai, Ben, Ocholla – why pick on him. Mr Hilotoni crumbled into dust, blew away and was never heard of again.

Kanji Bhai had diarrhoea the day of the fatal accident. He missed most

of the action. He raced out of the latrine once or twice to ask what was going on, but on both occasions had to run back before he got the answer. On the last occasion he managed to inform Yussuf that he had no cholera because his cousin's doctor had examined him and diagnosed a case of having had too much hot pepper in his diet. Then Kanji Bhai fled back into the latrine, where he spent the rest of the day.

A great many things happened in the weeks after Onesmus died and the food kiosks were banned. The price of *Karara* went up by five cents. At Karara Centre the atmosphere grew quietly hostile. Half the regular patrons were vegetable hawkers and insanitary food kiosk managers. They were now idle and aggressive. The rest of the Karara Centre patrons were low income workers, hungry and very angry. They wanted to fight the kiosk owners for closing down their hotels.

Machore and Wanjiru the rail woman got drunk at Karara Centre and married. The marriage lasted one week. He caught her making faces at another patron of Karara Centre and beat them both up. She reported him to Yussuf. Yussuf could hardly recognize her deformed face and he did not understand how a woman could look so ugly.

A few more advertisements appeared on the dirty mottled walls of Karara Centre. They had invented new cigarettes, beers, whiskies, vodkas, a new kind of ghee and soaps to beat inflation. One or two posters were from the BUY ONE, ONE FREE shops, advertising new economic sizes at prices that were still higher than the uneconomic ones.

Next to the 'beer menu' there appeared the largest, briefest, most irrelevant and inconsequent advertisement of them all:

CHOLERA KILLS!

16

The bus jolts to a halt. Ben forces his way out into the waiting crowd and looks warily about. He hugs his parcel and hastens down Duke Street. He should not have stayed so long in Kibera. The Yussuf errands keep getting heavier day by day; more tedious than regular dirt duties on the site. With inflation around it gets so one does not know a bargain from the genuine article. Ben had to turn down Ocholla's invitation to *Karara* so he may go bhang hunting. If it gets any worse, Yussuf may have to go fetch the goddamn stuff himself.

The evening blows cold. The full moon, large and shiny as a two shilling silver coin, spins across the silent sky. Somewhere in Eastleigh Moslems are celebrating Idd, beating on tom-toms and wailing. He takes a short cut and surprises a man defecating on the path, for other pathfinders to skid on.

Ben stops to buy cigarettes at a crowded shanty restaurant. On second thoughts he buys some food for Baby. The kiosk owner wraps the food in old newspapers and hands it to Ben. He heads for home. A large homeless cat bounces out of the rubbish bin on the verandah and streaks across the yard.

Max's radio is back in operation. They are making up for lost time, and the neighbourhood vibrates with their soul drums. There is no light in Ben's house. And hanging on the door, a familiar sight; the extra large gaol locks used by the landlord against unfriendly non-paying tenants.

And where the hell is Baby? He is not at Max's place. Ben eventually discovers the boy in the childless vegetable woman's place next door. The boy jumps up to embrace him. The woman smiles warm welcome and bids him sit down. He declines.

'What happened?' he asks.

She shrugs. 'The landlord,' she hells him.

'But why?'

'Have some coffee,' the woman says.

'No!'

She puts the kettle back on to the charcoal brazier.

'He said something about a contract,' she fidgets with her long dress.

'What contract?'

'Something about . . . about renting the room to the boy's mother and not you.'

Ben moved forward. 'But I am paying for the bloody house!' he cries, 'What difference does it make?'

The old widow raises her shoulders to heaven in a way that seems to say 'Who can question the devious workings of a landlord, a god?' Then she looks from the boy to Ben, her ageless eyes soft and kind,

'Do sit down.'

Ben shakes his head.

'If you ask me,' she says quietly, 'he wants to raise the rent again, you know, throw you out so the new tenant pays more.'

'Damned bastard,' Ben tells her.

She shrugs again, lifts the coffee pot from the fire to her side. 'Have a bite of something,' she says to Ben. 'Baby and I have already eaten. He is a fine young man . . . have something to eat.'

'No,' he says brusquely.

She shrugs again and pours herself a cup of coffee. She finds a little cup and pours the boy some.

'They are all like that,' she says to her coffee. 'Always wanting more money. And they are not paying any better for my greens.'

Ben's face slowly takes on a fierce glow and twists into a wrathful expression. He deposits his bhang parcel and Baby's food on the floor.

'Clawbar,' he orders.

'What?'

'A clawbar,' his eyes searching around. 'Break the bloody door. Any heavy piece of metal, an axe . . .'

Her wizened eyes regard him with disapproval. 'It is not good,' she says. 'I have seen a tenant taken to court, made to pay for the locks.' She shakes her head sadly. 'It is not wise. You may both sleep here, wait for tomorrow. He said he will come back tomorrow.'

Ben glares at her, shakes his head. Come tomorrow to do what? To bring his thugs to throw Ben out? Never. Once a landlord makes up his mind to make someone homeless he never looks back.

'It is bad to break a door,' the woman advises. 'The man is standing for the Elections. The big elections to go to Parliament. He could get you imprisoned. They could ruin you completely.'

Ben spies a large metal rod under the bed. Baby gets up to follow, but Ben shoves him back on the stool. 'Sit down.'

'I hope you know what you are doing,' the woman says. Ben grabs the iron bar and storms out.

Landlord's double locks appear many and alarmingly tough. They

usually are many and tough. But the cheap wooden doors are not. They are soft as cardboard.

Ben swings the clawbar. The plot resounds with crashing wood and metal. Before neighbours can come out to investigate this noise that is louder than Max's soul drums, the door flies open. Ben steps in and switches on the light. The room is just as he left it. He sits on the bed to regain his breath and to think. Once eviction starts the problems get heavier. Beds, crooked old chairs and crockery follow you into the street. You find yourself wishing you owned nothing on this bloody earth and could just crawl about until you collapsed somewhere and slept. His eyes sweep over the suddenly over-furnished room. He wags his head dismally. He will have to get lost before Old Shylock rides back with his blood thirsty bandits.

He hauls the dusty suitcase off the wardrobe where for months it has just sat and collected dust. He empties the contents on to the floor and starts sorting out things. He must travel light and fast. The case is full of old letters, love letters and photographs. He crumples most of these, dumps them in a corner. He will get out all right. And he has made up his stormy mind to get out just as he came; just him and his suitcase. He packs the meagre clothes. He slams the case shut, locks it and totes it to the door. It is still almost empty. He stops at the door and looks back. He notices the little transistor radio, re-opens the box and hurls it in. That too is his property. What else is? The pistol in the ceiling. He drags the wardrobe to one end of the room. Then he climbs on it and reaches into the opening in the ceiling. He extracts the oil-skin wrapped revolver and puts it at the bottom of the suitcase. It was the only property he really took from the damned Sixth Army. He may be able to trade it for a meal. He carries the case to the woman's place and packs the bhang parcel.

Then he freezes. Until now he had not thought of Baby. Now his mind glides into thought. Baby is an orphan. The thought crashes through his head. But he cannot take the boy along. Where the hell is he going, anyway? He picks up Baby's food parcel and firmly, determined not to falter, marches to the boy.

'Some food I bought for you,' his voice comes out strange and dry.

Baby takes the parcel. His large baby eyes regard Ben, watching his face, trying to understand. Ben turns uncomfortably away. The old hawker's glazed eyes catch his. He shrugs helplessly.

'The boy can stay with me tonight,' she says.

Ben sighs, looks from her to the boy.

'You will be all right here.'

Baby stares back at him. 'When is Mama coming back?' he asks.

Ben's throat dries up, his mouth feels slimy and sour.

'Soon,' he gulps.

The hawker woman looks from the boy to Ben.

'And you?' she asks.

Ben glares back at her, determined to get out of the mess Wini dragged him into, once and forever. His head moves slowly from side to side. Baby springs up. 'I will go with you, Ben.'

'No!' Ben shouts and keeps the boy at bay with outstretched arms. Baby stops and stares at him hard, the baby-face suddenly and for the first time acquiring lines of strained thought. His soft mouth draws back in fear. The large passive eyes start filling up like two giant dams.

'Come here Baby,' the woman calls. 'Come on, here, Baby.'

'You stay with her,' Ben commands, with a hint of desperate cruelty. The boy remains still. Ben shudders, nervously clutches his dusty coat lapels.

'You will be all right,' his voice breaks into jagged unconvinced streaks: 'She will look after you well.' He swallows hard. 'She will give you food . . . good food, tea . . . and bread.'

Baby stands still, his little body tense and rebelliously stiff.

'Mama will be back soon,' Ben labours on. 'Bring you sweets and . . . sweets and . . . you will be all right here.'

'I don't want to stay here,' Baby states firmly.

Ben stamps his foot and shrieks: 'You don't have to want to; you will stay here! Do you hear me . . . You stay here! Whether you like it or not!'

The boy just stands there, shaking with controlled sobs, tears, large glassy tears rolling down his dirty cheeks. The woman glares at Ben in reproach. He shuffles his feet impatiently.

'Come to me, Baby,' she begs, the way she would have persuaded the child she never had. 'Come boy, here my child. You will be all right with me. I will . . . I will buy you sweets and . . . things, and . . .'

Baby turns round and quite emphatically sobs: 'No!'

She recoils, looking horrified like she has encountered a venomous snake. Then she tries again.

'It is only for tonight,' she soothes. 'Only tonight. Your father . . . Ben, will come back for you tomorrow. Tomorrow, Baby.' She looks up at Ben for support.

'Yes, yes,' he goes down on one knee, wipes the tears from the tortured face. The boy's eyes remain unwavering, fixed on him, pleading, begging. Somehow he seems to know this is the end; he is being deserted, for the last time. And Ben is set on getting out of this mess Wini got him into.

'Only tonight, Baby!' Then he remembers that day long ago the boy telling him quite innocently: 'Mama went to the shops to buy me sweets.'

He shivers. One such lie in a lifetime is more than enough. He rises. Without so much as a glance at the woman he grabs the suitcase, runs out and slams the door behind him.

Baby screams. All those previously bottled up sobs gush out in a drawn-out heart rending howl that rips the night like the powerful beam of a searchlight; searching, reaching out to Ben, out in the trash-strewn corridor. He pulls up abruptly, mad at the landlord, mad at the shrieking brat, his mother, himself. He leans on the cold wall, his body tensed against the grief-stricken yells, shaking and sweating a cold sweat. The mad screams continue, bursting his ears, blasting his troubled heart. Frothing bitter waves of rage wash over him in quick succession leaving him breathless and murderous. He bounces back to the house, bursts in, bangs the box on the ground.

'Shut . . . up!' he screams, his hand balled into a tight fist.

Baby stands transfixed to the spot, his large eyes almost popping out, and screams hysterically.

Ben lashes out, a hard fierce slap to the face. The boy rolls on the dusty floor and yells his heart out. Ben kicks with his foot and misses. The woman grabs. 'Ben!'

'You shut him up!' he bellows at her.

He hurries back out of the room to Wini's house, starts throwing the boy's things into a large handbag which up to now had lain useless under his bed. He packs it full with sheets, blankets and things. He gives the room one more look over, wishes he could set it on fire, and bangs the door shut behind him.

The woman has got Baby under control. His body shakes with violent sobs, his eyes red as fire. One side of his face has started swelling from the beastly blow. Ben grabs him by the hand and shoves the food parcel at him, 'Let's go,' he barks.

The woman looks suddenly haggard, old, and barrenly disappointed.

'You won't leave him with me?'

Ben leads the boy to the door, stops and looks back. He shrugs helplessly. 'Well . . . thanks.'

She nods, her face reverting to the determined wooden face of a childless, widowed vegetable hawker.

'Ben!'

He stops.

'Where are you going?'

He thinks for a moment, shakes his head.

'I don't know,' he mumbles, then adds quietly, 'I . . . I have some friends. It's all right.'

'When is the mother coming back?' she asks next.

For a second he regards her across the expanse of space. Their lonely thoughts flounder about in the uncertain dark and eventually find one another. 'Never!' he answers.

He closes the door softly and leaves. The little boy follows him out of the accursed plot for the very last time, forever leaving behind Max's deafening radiogram, Wini's room and the faint aroma of her perfume that still lingered on so long after her exit.

When people leave a block like this they usually turn left, dodge through a urine-stinking alleyway between the blocks and end up in the shit scattered undeveloped patch of wasteland at the back.

Ben leads Baby along the moonlit path. The city centre two miles away sparkles with the numerous neon lights at the cafes, hotels, cinemas and night clubs. There are quite a few people around. People will never stop moving; coming, going, or simply round in frustrated widening circles like the ripples of water in a disturbed pool. Life. People have to go to work, go shopping and go excrete in the long grass rather than the blocked toilet. Always.

Ben tries not to think about the barefoot boy trotting by his side. He tries hard not to think of the landlord, of the boy's mother, or where they are going and what kind of reception to expect. His mind roves wildly in the dark swept along in the turbulent currents of thought, afraid to clutch at any one in particular lest it is the wrong one. His feet work automatically picking a familiar path on the ambiguous road, a path that may lead somewhere.

He turns right at the Racecourse bridge, follows the path along the reed-overgrown Nairobi River. The shanty village lies quiet, breathless, overwhelmed by the suffocating smell of the river. The huts lie low, mysteriously dark, silent and lonely in the overcrowded shanty town. One could get lost here on a moonless night. Nearby the sewage river trickles ghostly along hesitant in the rejected waste, subdued by death and decomposition.

Ben struggles through the tall river grass, wonders how anybody finds their way around when they are drunk. After a long tedious search he spies the familiar shack. It is the right one alright. It happens to be the only one along the whole Nairobi River with a sloping roof supported on a leaning wall in a way that would make any architect start believing in miracles. The first time Ben came here he sat for hours watching the wall in suspense, expecting it to collapse at any moment. Now he approaches the door slowly, warily. Weak light filters through the cracks on the door and the walls. Smell of cooking food seeps out of the silent hut. He raps lightly

on the door. The iron sheet door resounds with noise. For a few moments after that nothing happens. He sucks in his breath and taps again. Someone clears his throat and a gruff muffled voice demands:

'Who is it?'

'Ben.'

After a thoughtful pause the door creaks open. A dark face peers out into the moon-bathed night and the intruders. The house owner scrutinizes them for a few seconds, first Ben and his suitcase, then the boy and back to Ben. He seems to try to understand without asking. Ben shifts his feet restlessly, holds his breath and waits for something to break the awkward quiet.

Ocholla's voice when it eventually finds a way out of his mouth reaches out seriously cool.

'What do you want at this time of night, Ben?'

'It is only eight o'clock,' Ben shrugs, and tries to laugh about it. Ocholla remains solidly businesslike, barricaded in his shack. 'Well, what do you want?' he demands.

Ben shrugs.

'Well, uh . . . just a visit,' he says lamely. 'A visit. Well, I had to. You know, the landlord had . . . well, it will only be for the night. Only tonight.'

Ocholla studies the suitcase and tries to believe Ben. Finally he shrugs. 'Come in then,' and throws the steel door screeching open.

They tramp in. The door screams shut on its own; an engineering genius achieved by using old tyre bands for hinges. The visitors remain standing by the door. The small hut is bare of furniture. Ocholla's few bits of clothing hang from nails on the walls. At one end near the smouldering fire is the crockery, a few tin mugs and utensils and a collection of bottles of various shapes and sizes. On the other side are the rags spread out to make a bed.

Ocholla's eyes travel quickly from Ben to Baby and back, then alight on the ridiculous suitcase. He takes off his cap, ruffles his hair and sits down on the only crate in the room.

A tiny cooking pot simmers over the wood fire. He adds some more twigs to the fire before looking up again, and straight at the boy. 'Who is he?' he asks.

'Baby,' Ben answers.

'I can see that, Ben,' he drawls. 'Whose baby?'

'The one I told you about, the one the woman abandoned.'

Ocholla uncovers the tiny pot, stirs his little dinner and sighs, his face taut and distant. 'Well, Ben?' he says finally.

Ben squirms uncomfortably. 'It will only be for a few days,' he explains.

'Then?'

'Then!' Ben shrugs, 'Then . . . well, only a few days.'

Ocholla remains unconvinced. It is one thing being buddies, drinking together, talking, eating, and even more recently sharing a cigarette end. It is quite another thing sharing a shanty hut, the absolute possession, the retreat of the vanquished heart. It is one thing asking your buddy to buy you a drink, lend you some money. But it is quite another matter forcing him to smile at you and invite you to his last morsel, the bit he will not share with his wives and children. This is betrayal of companionship, exploitation of your buddy. Bud-exploitation.

Ocholla fetches pieces of paper to hold the hot aluminium pot. He lifts the ridiculously little pot, puts it on the floor by his side and pushes more faggots into the fire. The intruders remain standing. There are no more packing crates to sit on. Baby breaks the spell. He stalks to the fireside and squats by Ocholla's pot. Ocholla looks from Baby to the food and back. He lifts the pot to the far side of him.

Baby sits down on the dusty floor. He deposits Ben's food parcel by his side, his large eyes curiously fixed on Ocholla's toy pot. His efficient stomach rumbles suddenly, loud like thunder in the quiet hut.

Ocholla whips off his omnipresent cap, almost tears off his rugged hair and slams the cap back on. After a ponderous moment he sighs: 'Might as well get down on your arse too, Ben.'

It is a good day today. The site is nice and hot, the labourers happy. They have got reasons to smile. One reason is that they have had lunch. The kiosks had to reopen; someone realized that in order to keep them working, the workers had to be fed. The Ministry directed them to get clean and reopened the workers' hotels. The kiosk owners did what they could about cleanliness; it is quite a tricky business cleaning the paper and scrap-iron walls of a shanty kiosk. Then they started serving the same old swill and cleaning the utensils in the same stinking milky dish-water. No one has had cholera yet.

But the main reason every hand is excited today is that today is payday. Payday still remains the greatest day of the month. The pay packet retains number one position in the popularity chart of any construction site. Pay time is usually lunch time; Yussuf is not going to waste busy work hours just to get a lot of bastards paid. They take it at lunch time or leave it. Everything lies forgotten in the money heat. The building, the cement mixer, trucks, everything else comes number two to the wage queue. No hand pays any attention to Yussuf's cries for help. Ragged and dusty, they shove and jostle while the queue crawls almost imperceptibly towards the office pigeon hole. They receive their envelopes, rip them open and count two, three times before they are quite satisfied. Then they stuff the hard-earned, long-overdue cash into their ragged clothes; a labourer's outfit may be as emaciated as his body but the pockets are as leak-proof as his stomach. He cannot afford to lose anything.

'See you in Eden tonight!' one hand shouts to the others.

'Today it's New Garden,' another laughs.

'Who wants to try Majengo with me?'

Now begins the real trouble. Where will it be, the bars, movies, night clubs or the brothels? It is easier when one has five shillings; there is only one place to go, the Capricorn or Karara Centre. But with fifty times that much money one is even expected to send some of it back home to one's wife or wives. It gets to be blackmail. Send it before they decide to come and fetch it themselves and find you with your Eden wives.

All the kiosk owners are here too. Hovering in the background and waiting for their elusive debtors to get paid. They have learned the trick of the

game. If you let your debtor get out of sight on pay day you will have to wait 'til next payday. Hands don't like giving money for anything. You have to grab them by the collar and threaten to bash their brains out. If they are bigger than you, then get on your knees and pray for your money back.

Some hands' wives are here too to catch their men before they pass through Eden and Karara Centre. They know the rules too; if a labouring hand passes through Eden on payday, say good-bye to the house rent and housekeeping money. Say farewell to everything that will require money.

Ben receives his envelope. Like everybody else he eagerly rips it open and counts it once to make sure he has not been cheated, and again hoping he has cheated them. They make no mistakes, the bastards.

Hands are busy all over the site. They sit or lie down and dream, about the evening. A few are drunk already in advance. The more serious ones sit alone in the shade, thoughtfully scratching figures on the ground with twigs, trying to draw some kind of a budget. A sensible budget; one that leaves a few drinks and some fun. Some of them discouraged there will not be money left even for one round at Eden lie or sit still, more miserable than they were this morning. They too dream, dream of the day they will earn enough to sustain the man and the family.

Kanji Bhai stands guard outside the latrine waiting for the slippery Hyena to come out and pay his debts. Some of the debts are months old. The Hyena thinks Kanji Bhai should be Indian enough to forget such small sums. Bhai thinks otherwise, but he just cannot resist lending his hand a shilling every now and then. Today he is determined to get his money back. He chews on his grey dusty moustache and knocks on the latrine door every so often to make sure the Hyena is still in there. The Hyena shouts to him to go in and watch, but Bhai shuffles his feet restlessly and waits outside.

Ocholla sits on a gravel hump engrossed in a newspaper. It is today's paper. Times are really fine. Ocholla is not the kind of man to bother about budgets. If his wives want him to draw one they have to give him a good course. Bring whatever they make out of the shamba, bring their bananas and chickens. Then he will most kindly oblige to do the additions and the divisions.

Ben throws himself down beside his comrade.

'I didn't know you could read.'

'I can't.'

'Searching for vacancies?'

Ocholla shakes his head, eyes glued to the paper. 'I am looking for . . .

for an insult to send Yussuf. Something strong but decent enough for a foreman.'

'In a newspaper?'

'I want a new one.'

Ben looks up and wonders. 'What has he done to deserve one?'

Ocholla lifts his eyes from the paper. 'What has he done?' he wails. 'The Indian has just sliced off a fat chunk of my money and called it tax.'

'We have all paid that,' Ben tells him.

Ocholla turns a page. 'I suggest you do something too,' he advises. 'The bastard might think he is too clever. Before you know it we may be working one lousy month to earn a small slip labelled TAX.'

Ben lies back and closes his eyes. Let Ocholla fight his own battles. He has a way of picking fights with phantoms. He ought to join the construction workers' parliament. He might learn a thing or two from them. They are out of Sessions today. They have all dispersed each back to their respective constituencies, the meagre pay packets and thoughts of their enormous families. The ragged barefoot, speaker Machore sets a good example. It is all right getting together to haggle over the non-existent rights of a cement mixer. But when it comes to balancing something that has no centre like a labourer's budget, it is more advisable to go it alone. Company will only make the truth more bitter to swallow. And it does no good grumbling either. To hell with politics – to hell with rising prices. The hands will not notice the difference for quite a few days. To hell with them.

Now, just what the hell to do with the money? First pay the kiosk bills and Baby's school fees. Maybe buy the boy a new set of clothes after that. How much would that cost? Over half the bloody pay, damn it. He ought to take the boy out tomorrow, give him a treat. Take him to a movie. Spoil him with sweets, cakes, chicken. And for Ben, a few Pilsners for a change. When did he drink one last? Hell of a long time ago. Well, a few will not disorganize his organization too much.

'Hear, Ben,' Ocholla stirs. 'Do you think this will do: MISGUIDED UNSCRUPULOUS BLOODSUCKER.' That one is as decent as they come. But . . . Ben shakes his head. 'I don't think he will love the blood bit. Try another one.'

Ocholla goes on perusing.

'Another one here: MISAPPROPRIATOR OF PUBLIC FUNDS.'

Ben shakes his head almost instantly.

'It's okay, but we are not the public, we are labourers . . . and we have wages, not funds.'

Ocholla nods thoughtfully. 'I think you have a point there,' he mumbles.

'Maybe replace public with hands, no labourers. And funds with wages.'

His large horny toes start shovelling gravel through the open ends of his shoes. He is not quite satisfied. He goes on from page to page and back. He reads the editorial, the sports page, yesterday in parliament and the classified ads.

Ben lies on his back. He shields his eyes from the hot midday sun and shifts them from the towering building to Ocholla. The two make for bad comparison; the building tall, tough, impregnable and Ocholla stoop-shouldered, as brittle as a matchstick marionette, and with needs that stretch little further than a full stomach, a drink and a prostitute. If he were not so hopelessly naive he would realize it, one cannot move a cheating constructor with words.

'Ocholla.'

The other turns round.

'I have been thinking,' Ben says in real Ocholla tradition. 'I have just thought . . . why don't you simply call Yussuf a bloody, fucking cheat?'

Ocholla has thought of that one already.

'I don't want to hurt his feelings. I don't want to lose my job either, that's why.'

And if it were not for decency, the idea would be to grab Yussuf, knock him on the head several times, turn his arse inside out and recover the missing silver links from everybody's budget. That is what the hands would love to do. But there is still end of next month to dream about. And the month after that. No hands want to lose their jobs over a few miserable shillings.

'Ocholla.'

'Yes.'

'You don't mind me interrupting?'

'Of course not, Ben,' but he does not even look up!

'Instead of hating Yussuf . . .'

'I don't hate him . . . I just don't like him tampering with my envelope.'

Ben shrugs.

'You should try to manage with the trimmed packet,' he says. 'Draw up some kind of a budget too. That might help.'

Ocholla says nothing.

'You could start by saving on the damned newspaper. Just don't waste the fifty cents.'

'Sixty cents,' Ocholla corrects.

'Yeah, sixty.'

Ocholla sighs, lies back and covers his face with the newspaper. After a moment he speaks through it. 'You know what, Ben?'

'What?'

Ocholla speaks steadily, serious. 'You are a bastard.' And after a thoughtful pause: 'If . . . if I did not know you I would think you were with them.'

'Wish I were, too,' Ben tells him.

'So do I.'

Ben squints across at him. Only then does he focus on the large headlines: **BANK ROBBED, GUARDS KILLED.**

He grabs the paper. Ocholla sits up. The same old story. Same bank ransacked again. This time three guards and two dogs got themselves killed and the bank lost two million shillings in cash.

The buddies look at one another blankly. Ocholla man-handles his wretched cap. The story makes the money in his pocket feel like worthless toilet paper.

'Good money,' he utters.

Ben nods agreement. Then he sighs and adds: 'Left not a trace, the lucky bastards.'

'Do you think they will get away?'

Ben shrugs.

'They had better,' he says. 'For their own sake and for the sake of all that money. They stand a fifty-fifty chance, too. For that much money it is a chance worth taking.'

Ben reads on.

The fifth time the bank has been ransacked. Organized crime is on the up and up. The bandits cleared the street of people in a second and left minutes ahead of the police. Apart from the dead security guards no one else was injured. This same bank was invaded by gangsters armed with a light mortar some years back.

Ben sniggers. Mbugua and his gorillas! The buggers had gone to the trouble of blowing their arses heavens high, only to be outsmarted by a pack of pistol-waving crooks.

Ocholla stirs.

'That revolver of yours, Ben?'

'What about it?'

'Is it for real, I mean does it work? Could it kill a guy?'

Ben nods.

Ocholla lies back, wriggles his dirty toes.

'Are you considering robbing a bank?' Ben asks him.

He shakes his head. 'I was just wondering how much it would fetch on the open market.'

'Got a customer in mind?'

'We could find one. Guys like those need a gun.'

Ben flips a page. 'Make sure it is a good price.'

Orcholla sits up, restless. 'I was not thinking of a fixed price,' he says. 'Rather a percentage cut on earnings. Just figure how much this one job would have fetched, even at one per cent.'

Ben laughs.

'I tried that kind of business before with a military gun. I lost my job and made a good few enemies. Not again. It is either cash or no deal for me.'

Ocholla hands him a cigarette.

'No hard feelings, bud.'

Ocholla fidgets nervously, then calls over to Kanji Bhai:

'Bhai! Open the door and check. Your man may have committed suicide.'

Bhai waves him away, shuffles his feet and calls for the Hyena. Suddenly he explodes into motion and kicks the latrine door open. He curses the empty latrine kicks the wall and swears profusely in Gujarati. Then he whirls round and runs into the building to hunt for the Hyena.

'You sure the bastard did not drown in shit?' Ocholla asks.

'He is in the building hiding,' Ben tells him. 'The latrine has a false back wall. You can push the aluminium sheet out, then replace it.'

'That Hyena is a crafty bastard.'

'Bhai is as blind as hell.'

There is still time left to the lunch break. Every hand is talking money today. The four Banianis sit out of it all, playing cards as usual. No one knows what they earn. No one cares. The rest of the band lie scattered all over the place, smoking and talking. There is no hurry to go back to work. Never! Development House will grow at its own pace, a steady, slow pace that makes sure of every foot, every support. And from up on the twentieth floor Ocholla's crane peers down at them. Twentieth floor!

'Five more to go, Ben,' Ocholla utters.

Ben is not surprised they were thinking the same thing. This happens when you work with a guy, smoke with him, toil with him and hunger with him. You get to falling sick together.

'Just a few more months,' Ben says. He blows smoke up at the hot clear sky. 'And then what?'

Ocholla sits up. 'Then what, Ben! We shall be out of a job, that's all. Out of a job and penniless.'

'Don't worry,' Ben tells him. 'Patel and Chakur will buy themselves another contract. There are lots of sites around to be developed. The question is what to do while they bribe themselves another tender.'

A truck starts up behind them.

'Tell you what, Ben.'

'What?'

'These boys won't get another tender for a long time.'

'How do you know that?'

'I just feel it,' he nods wisdom. 'Just feel it. They will be lucky if they buy themselves another work permit.'

Ben covers his face with the newspaper.

Ocholla frets a little, then starts talking at length about his family. Ben lies half awake listening but offers no comment. Never show too much enthusiasm with your buddies' family hangups. They may hate you for it. Sometimes it helps to be as confounded as they are.

'Do you think I should send them some money this month, Ben?'

Ben stirs. 'There are the school fees,' he reminds him.

Ocholla whips off his cap, rams it back on and wrings his fat nose.

'And there is the crockery, oil lamp and groceries for us,' he says. 'Tell you what, Ben. I will purchase the oil lamp. You get the extra cooking pots, two plates, two spoons and two cups for you and Baby. The sugar and stuff we buy together, right?'

'Right,' Ben agrees.

Ocholla sits quietly for some time. Then he speaks up suddenly.

'There are times I wish they did not pay us in shillings, Ben.'

Ben looks up.

'What currency do you fancy? Dollars?'

Ocholla goes on rubbing his nose. 'Food and drink,' and after a thought, 'A place to lay down one's arse.'

The mixer suddenly roars to life. Trucks start up all around and hands scramble to their feet. Ocholla grunts, reluctantly gets up, makes for his action station. Ben watches him go, crumples the newspaper, hurls it away and follows.

The bus sways wearily down Ngong Road. The woman lands her fat behind on his shoulder. He shoves her off. She hangs on to the rail, sways with the bus, miserably hanging to the rail so her miniskirt comes up pretty close to her navel. She has good legs all the way up and good underwear too. But no matter, Ben is not offering his seat to anybody in the number 8. He knows that crowd too well. You offer a quite healthy looking mare your seat. You stand up. The bus sways on. You tread on her beautiful new platforms and trigger off a barrage of curses. And the ass will not think of vacating her gift seat for a crippled old man or another woman. That's the way it is on the number 8.

The bus is supercrowded today. Crowded with the worst load of misery a bus conductor will ever have the honour of encountering. The end of the month throng; drunk stupid and saying all the dirty things they could not utter anywhere else any other time of the month. And they don't just say them, they holler. One just opens his beer-soaked mouth and howls. They shove, crush each other's toes and, Ben suspects, rob one another. And together with the stink of sweaty bodies, shoes, and vomit, there is the end-of-month thing, the aroma of satisfaction. Everybody has left their gas works full on so you can smell the hamburger they ate under the *Karara* they washed it down with.

The end of month is trouble time throughout the city. Everybody is rich and drunk, and to hell with courtesy and regulations. It is surprising public services still function, buses still toil, in spite of the things the driver and his poor conductor are exposed to. It is usually so bad they have to have two ticket conductors on duty. The kingly passengers could simply run one to an early suicide. Some bastards will not pay before the conductor goes on his knees and begs them to. There are those who claim they will fight him and screw his sister and the driver. There are some who will not deign to speak to the poor boy.

One conductor fights his way to Ben, his tortured face pouring with perspiration. Ben pays. The boy battles on through the crammed aisle. They are the worst, these merrily drunk passengers. They will even rob him. One claims he has a family to look after. The conductor agrees, but he does not give up. He too has a family to feed and he is determined to keep

his job. The drunk informs the conductor that he is an accounts clerk not an office messenger or a bloody bus conductor. The young man sweats on. Now he appears drunk. Drunk on the stuffy, hostile atmosphere as indeed is the driver and the accursed bus itself. He gnashes his teeth, bares tobacco-stained fangs swears, shoves, threatens and manages to collect a few more coins for his boss the bus magnate.

'You will die a poor bastard working for a bloody white man,' a drunk informs him.

The conductor painfully but even more determinedly aggressive crawls on.

Ben shakes his head, wipes the sweat off his face. Men have to talk. Talk all sorts of shit before they get home to their militant wives, lie about what kept them late and shut up for the rest of their lives – until the end of next month and the bus. All their month long family financial frustrations they save for the hateful conductor. None can fight their wives without sparking off a family missile war. None can call their bosses a bloodless monkey and keep their precious jobs. But the bus conductor, well, he has somehow to collect the fare and like it.

The fat buttocks sway into Ben's mouth. Her perfume catches in his throat. He taps the woman's fine rump.

'Keep your arse off me, woman.'

'It is the bus,' she cries.

'Try and hang on to the bloody rail,' he advises.

Finally the bus lurches to a halt at the Duke Street bus stop. Ben stands up, offers his seat to the fine lady and clutching his priceless Yussuf-parcel starts to get out. A two-way traffic at the door makes a commendable effort to squeeze the life-juice out of him. The world outside the bus is as determined to get inside as the passengers are to get out. They are yet to learn to do anything one at a time.

Ben hits the tarmac, pauses to make sure his parcel is intact and heads down the street away from the maddening crowd. He has made it to Kibera and back again. And the way he feels about it, Yussuf may soon have to go up there and get the *Changáa* himself or perish.

Ben gets home just as darkness begins to mystify the shanty lanes. Home sweet home, warm and brightly lit by the new Dietz paraffin lamp. Ocholla is busy preparing dinner. *Ugali* is ready by the fireside, and he is working on the *Sukuma Wiki*, no doubt lifted from the gardens behind the hut. According to Ben's thinking, Ocholla should be somewhere in River Road conversing with a bottle of *Karara*. Baby sits on the floor by the fireside and scribbles the latest school discovery on the dust. Ben fetches his packing crate and sets it on the other side of Baby.

'Did you go to school today?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

Baby nods. He has this way of regarding Ben as though he should know the truth.

'What did you do?'

'Nothing. We only played and drank milk.' He makes it sound far below his pride.

'Only that?'

'We also counted,' the boy adds.

'What is two plus two?'

'Three.'

Ocholla smiles, winks at Ben. Ben shrugs and steps one rung down the knowledge ladder.

'One plus one?'

'Four.'

Ben grunts disgust. It will be hard teaching this one anything. He may just end up the vermin his mother detested.

Ocholla finds two cigarettes from somewhere, offers one to Ben. Baby's large eyes follow the men through the ritual of lighting the cigarettes and enjoying the first heavenly puff. When he suddenly speaks up, it is as though he is going to demand a fag himself too.

'We were beaten by the teacher, Ben.'

'What happened?'

Baby seems to think and change his mind,

'Nothing.'

'What do you mean, nothing?'

The boy hesitates.

'It was . . . we were playing behind the class. The girl said she would teach me something new. She asked me to lie on her. Then the teacher came and beat us.'

Ocholla chokes on the cigarette. Ben smiles tiredly. Not a bad beginning for the son of a harlot.

Ocholla uncovers the vegetables and stirs. He stirs and stirs, then tastes for salt. 'Ready.'

'Plates,' Ben calls. Baby gets busy.

They eat quickly and efficiently. No one speaks. It is not easy to do so through a mouthful of *ugali* and *Sukuma Wiki*. Excited by the smell of food, the mice race one another from one end of the hut to the other, screech a lot of curses too, and pass time while waiting for the crockery to be dumped for the night. Then the mice will feast, dance around a while and retire for the night too.

After supper Baby starts dozing and goes to bed. He does not wet his bed anymore. Not since Ocholla tied off the boy's hose and let him run around a while before undoing the string so he may go outside and urinate on the grass. Ocholla has philosophies which range from extremely absurd to genius. Women and kids are like dogs, he says, treat them as such and you will never go wrong.

Ocholla cleans the utensils after a long break for a cigarette. Meanwhile Ben performs the Yussuf-chemistry. He takes the two bottle of *Changáa* he brought from Kibera, treats them with equal quantities of water and produces three bottles out of two. The foreman should not drink pure gin. It is bad for his health.

Ocholla fetches two tin mugs. Ben pours. They drink.

The fire crackles low and soft. The new oil-lamp throws grotesque shadows on to the rough walls. The batteries are low as usual. The green radio plays a rumbling distorted tune. What the hell, it makes a noise. They finish one bottle, go on to the next. After a time they forfeit the tin mugs, drink straight from the bottle. They talk of people, places and money. Their views though vague and hazy from the gin are basically the same. They do not argue. If one says yes and the other no, they reverse their opinions, in effect ending up still with a yes and a no. But they do agree on a lot of more important opinions. Women are bitches. Kids are animals. Politicians are bastards; a very weak point as everybody they know happens to be a bastard. Still there are good and bad bastards. What the hell does it matter? Yussuf is a bastard too. He smokes bhang and shouts ambiguous orders, but he is a bastard all the same.

At close-down the radio has talked itself hoarse. No one thinks of turning it off, no one notices. The buddies are too busy drawing up plans, making resolutions. They resolve to some time quit construction work do some decent job. They vow to stick together, collect some money, start some kind of a business. One cannot get very far on one's own these days. Unity is the thing. Then they will make money, big money. And what will they do with it? Women; drink; what the hell else could one do with money? Can't screw the stuff, you know.

'This son of yours, Ben,' Ocholla starts.

'I keep telling you, he is not my son,' Ben protests.

Ocholla slows down, reverses his thought train.

'Who is the boy's father, Ben?'

'I told you, I don't know. May be any busy fucker in this town.'

Ocholla wags his head, chases a hopeless idea round his drunken mind. 'He is a good fucker,' he nods.

'The father?'

'The boy.'

'He is only a boy.'

Ocholla looks up, his big red eyes as vacant as the grave.

'I know what I am talking about Ben,' he slurs, 'I am not drunk.' To emphasize it; he takes a giant swig from the bottle, passes it across the dying fire to Ben. 'You have a nice boy, Ben.'

Ben opens his mouth to protest, forgets what he wanted to utter.

'Wish I had a son like him,' Ocholla drawls.

'You can have him.'

Ocholla starts, looks up. 'Really, Ben?'

Ben takes a swig, tries to remember the subject, gives up.

Ocholla's mind traverses his family looking for comparisons among his sons.

'Like their mothers, little monkeys,' he mumbles. 'Not one a man. All little . . . girls. Bitches . . . bitches!'

Ben nods. 'I knew her too,' he groans. 'Bloody bitch. Her name was Wini, . . . Wini . . . Wini . . . damn it . . . know what, mate? I don't know the bloody woman's name. Years, I lived with her.'

'Ask . . . hic . . . your son,' Ocholla advises.

'How many times must I tell you, he is not my son. I don't know the bloody father.' He turns to the sleeping Baby. 'Baby come here. Come speak to Uncle Ocholla. Tell him you are not my son. Here, boy. Come speak to me Boy . . . hey, boy. Don't sleep, boy, Baby!' Baby sleeps right on.

Ben crawls to his feet totters to the sleeping boy bottle in hand. He shakes the boy half awake.

'Wake up, boy . . . hic . . . wake up.'

'Let the kid alone, he is a good man,' Ocholla calls, 'Bring the bloody bottle back here.'

Ben shakes Baby again. 'Boy . . . wake up. What was your mother's name, boy . . . what did you call her?'

'Wini,' Baby mumbles, yawns sleepily.

'Damn it, I know that one,' Ben grunts. 'Tell me the other one. What else did . . . hic . . . you call her?'

'Mummy,' Baby turns, tries to go back to sleep.

'Oh hell . . . the other name, boy, what was it?'

'Wini.'

'Shit . . . bloody, bloody hell,' Ben curses.

He lets Baby flop back and go to sleep.

'Fucking hell,' he gets back on his knees. He clammers to his feet, totters back to the fireplace and sags on to his seat.

'The bastard does not know his mother's name either,' he says to Ocholla,

'The bottle,' Ocholla calls. 'Who knows anything about a woman? Bitches . . . all of them. Your wife, my wives . . . hic . . . hell and . . .'

The oil lamp wanes and eventually dies. The fire glows soft red, illuminating the ghostly, drunk faces. Ben does not understand a word his buddy says. Darkness creeps in on them, relieved only by the big hands of moonlight that finds access through the paper and tin walls. Somewhere in the darkness between them the bottle goes missing. Too drunk to mount an effective search party, they crawl to their respective places, exhausted but very happy.

Suddenly the dark night within Ben's head splits apart with a shattering roar. His head feels boiling hot, crammed with sharp rusty nails. He turns over slowly, opens his eyes. Dawn light slips shyly into the shack.

From his sleeping place in the gloom Ocholla curses, mumbles something about his breaking down the bloody door and wringing the bleeding bastard's neck. The commotion outside rises to a peak, accompanied by a background roar as of a distant storm. The whole valley outside is alive. The door explodes again. Ben puts his head in his hands, buries it in the sacks. Ocholla curses, flounders to the door and fumbles with the catch.

'Sons of bastards,' he swears. The door creaks open. He peers outside and for a long moment all Ben can hear is heavy breathing. Finally Ocholla clears his throat.

'You . . . again?' he moans.

'Yes, it's us again.'

An undecided pause.

'What do you want this time?' Ocholla demands.

'Same as last time,' a brusque hard voice.

Ocholla seems to think for some time. Then:

'Go away,' his voice rough, broken. 'We are still asleep.'

He attempts to close the door. One of the intruders wedges his foot against the closing door. More dark figures appear on the scene. Someone starts talking fast and loud, too loud for Ben's rocking brain. He shakes his head.

'What the hell is it?' his voice croaks badly.

'Some pigs here,' Ocholla answers.

'What do they want; tell them to go to hell.'

'They can't', Ocholla answers sadly. 'They want to burn the shack.'

'To what?'

'Raze the bloody shack,' Ocholla answers. 'Ask them.'

Ben crawls out of bed to the door. He regards the assembled public health army in awe. He starts to call them somebody's arse lickers and ends up saying 'Hallo.'

'Hurry up,' the leader of the party answers impatiently. 'We have work to do.'

The rest of the health enforcement gang just hangs around looking tough. Ben decides to leave the talking to Ocholla. He is more experienced in dealing with such emergencies as guys wanting to burn down his hut at five-thirty in the morning.

'Will you guys ever give up?' is all Ocholla manages to say.

'We got to do a job,' one of the dark intruders answers.

Ocholla stands breathing like a rhino, mad fit to bang his head against a concrete wall.

'Well . . . say something else Ben,' he says without turning.

Ben struggles self-consciously.

'It is too early,' he says, then waits for reaction.

No word.

'Well . . . we eh, there is Baby still asleep. He is a little boy . . . a kid. You cannot just wake him up just . . . just to burn down a little hut. He is small you know. An orphan . . . yes, an orphan, motherless and . . .'

He looks around. No reaction from the dark hostile audience.

Ocholla scratches his hair desperately. 'Is that all you are going to say, Ben?'

Ben clears his throat. 'We cannot afford to bribe you guys,' he limps on, 'We guys are poor and . . .'

'Hell, something different Ben,' Ocholla moans. 'They know that already . . . oh shit!'

He storms round and back into the hut. Ben shrugs and follows. Ocholla bundles up his bedding and drags it outside. Ben wakes up Baby, drags the sleepy orphan outside for the men to see. They remain unimpressed. He retreats into the hut. The two men salvage their property; aluminium mugs, crockery, crates, paper, rags. The whole of Nairobi Valley is awake in chaos. Up and down the stinking murky river fire, huge tongues of red hot fire, lick up contraptions of paper and wood and extend impotent black smoke to the dark heavens above. Shanty dwellers mill around saving whatever is possible. No one cries, not even the babies. They are all expert players. The game is survival. The whole family just play a role. Their part demands they keep calm, tolerant, and when the public health army is gone, rebuild with the same quiet patience and determination.

Ocholla's cottage burns fast, as though like the others it is experienced in burning down. The occupants stand back and watch. Ben smokes quietly, his head revolving from the hangover, drawing courage from Ocholla's relaxed stance. Ocholla should have said more than he did. The peace talks were primarily for him and the City Council; his hut on their land,

'You didn't say much either,' Ben tells Ocholla.

Ocholla turns and scrutinizes him as though meeting him for the first time.

'Four years I have said things to those monkeys Ben,' he drawls. 'Four years. Called them brothers, citizens, everything! And every time they went and razed the bloody hut, anyway. Same old story always "Got to do a Job". A man gets tired of begging. And I have told them everything I know. I thought you might come up with something they would like to hear, something new!'

Ben shrugs, not knowing whether to apologize or swear.

Baby sits on one of the wooden crates wrapped up in a blanket against the biting cold. The large baby eyes look from the burning hut to Ben and to the contemplating Ocholla. He too instinctively knows the role to play. Whatever is in his virgin mind, whatever he thinks, he must keep it to himself. His passive, childish face bears no emotion.

Finally Ocholla takes off his cap, scratches thoughtfully and replaces it 'Mother fuckers!' he utters.

Ben glances at him, tosses the cigarette end into the muddy river. Now he remembers. Last night they drank the bonus bottle of *Changáa* plus one of Yussuf's. The foreman will be waiting for him, wanting an explanation.

19

There is something malignant about shanty huts. They go up in the smoke at dawn, spring to life again by twilight. One just cannot keep them down. The Council knows this. Char them as many times as you like and they mushroom back just as many times. Sticks, wire, paper and iron sheets is all it takes. The shanty house is reborn, maybe a bit frail, but quite potent and once again a health hazard. People have got to eat, defecate, live.

Ben hands Ocholla a long wooden plank. He lays it across and using a large rock hammers in a rusty nail. He whistles as he works and talks to the nails.

All along the river valley shanty dwellers are busy reconstructing. Whole families join hands in remaking the broken homes, for the huts have got to be up by dusk. It is bad to sleep in the open air. They know this from experience.

'Iron sheets now,' Ocholla calls.

'Start with paper,' Ben advises.

Ocholla considers, whistles, shakes his head.

'Sheets here, paper there.'

On the floor by their feet Baby straightens more rotten nails by hammering them between two rocks. He picks one, bashes it straight, hands it to Ocholla, the reconstruction foreman. Whether building skyscrapers or shanty huts, experience is the thing to look for.

'Oh, damn,' Ocholla curses, and raises a bruised thumb. He licks the blood, spits it out, licks again and swallows. Then he retrieves the rock and hammers the reluctant nail home.

'Paper,' he calls.

Ben hands him sheets of torn cartons.

Most of the huts are already up along the valley. Spiralling wisps of smoke announce habitancy. Outside the nearest hut a hundred yards in the maize and reeds children play, laugh and cry. The normal shanty sounds; frogs in the smelly river, children, people; the general rumble of life slowly awakens.

'Bloody, bloody shit,' Ocholla announces.

Ben looks up. There is more than enough reason to swear. Though the shanty town is more or less done, one side of the roof lies open to the skies

above. Ocholla has gone and made the roof wider than can be covered by the material they have got. The two men look at one another. Ben smiles. Ocholla shrugs, roughs his hair.

'I suppose it is all right,' he says.

'Long as it does not rain,' Ben adds.

Ocholla drops the rock he used for hammering.

'Oh hell, men have slept in worse places,' he says. 'It will do for tonight, don't you think, Ben?'

Ben shrugs.

'You should have warned me we were running short of roofing stuff,' Ocholla says.

'You are the chief engineer,' Ben shakes one wall to make sure it holds.

Ocholla puts his shirt back on. They start moving their belongings back to the hut. Baby runs up the hill to the Indian flats to steal water. Ben starts the radio going, whistling rheumatically (rotten batteries again), calling life back into the hut. They make their beds on the floor after sweeping out the ash from the morning's blaze. Ocholla lights a fire.

Baby returns with two Robbialac paint cans full of water. Ben dispatches him to the kiosks in the thick of shanty land to fetch paraffin for the lamp. By the time he comes racing back the valley is already covered in unusually dark darkness. They light the lamp, set about their daily chores. Ben cleans the battered utensils and whistles busily. Baby fetches firewood from God-knows-where, then sits down to peel the pea-sized potatoes. Ocholla pulls his cap low over his eyes and sneaks into the garden behind the hut to hijack edibles; onions, tomatoes and vegetables. Half the vegetables he harvests out in the dark turn out to be weed when exposed to the light. He looks at the loot, then his room-mates and shrugs.

'It is cheap,' he says.

'Whose garden is it?' Baby asks.

'I don't know,' Ocholla answers. 'Some cart-shoving hawker, I suppose. Never seen the bugger. I always find the place weeded. With a garden that size I don't think he misses much.'

Ben agrees. With a garden that size in a city where even vegetables are sold in carats like jewellery one is a real estate owner.

'Put more wood in the fire, Baby,' Ocholla directs. Ocholla cleans the vegetables, chops them up. A roving mangy dog peeps through the door, wags its tail and expectantly sticks its wet tongue into the shack. Baby waves it away.

'Onions,' Ocholla calls.

'Onions,' Ben repeats.

Baby does the handing over. The pot simmers contentedly and emits an

inviting smell. Ocholla pauses in the culinary duties to light himself a cigarette. Baby draws figures on the dusty floor by his horny little feet. Ben cleans the tin mugs slowly, thoughtfully, dreaming of the distant end of month. Pay day is just about the best day on earth. You shake the dust off your feet, walk tall and live. You eat chicken, meat, cakes, drink milk and beer. For a few days you are a king. Then as fast as it came, the money, the good times are gone. You automatically revert to the regular stoop shouldered slouch, go back to the dirty rear lanes and eat scraps of food from wherever you can find them.

Baby jerks up, his big eyes looking concerned.

'Do I have to go to school tomorrow, Ben?'

'Of course,' Ben answers him.

His face falls. Clearly he had hoped not to. Ben can just see the little mind in anguish, at work hoping, praying that the hut be burned down again tomorrow so he may stay home to watch the property and collect rebuilding material.

The mongrel reappears at the door, makes a whining begging sound. Baby throws it a piece of wood. Ocholla uncovers the cooking vegetables, adds salt and pepper and stirs. Baby's stomach rumbles like distant thunder.

'Ben.'

'Yes.'

'Why must I go to school?'

Ben looks up. What ever the devil has got cooking in his mind.

'Why?'

'Those other children don't go to school,' Baby states as a matter of fact.

Ben dismisses the subject.

Ocholla finds bits of paper and retrieves the pot from the fire. He puts another pot on the fire to make *ugali*. A rat scurries across the room.

'Already!' Ocholla exclaims.

The vermin have no respect. They cannot even let a dignified time lapse, let the human population settle before moving back in. Roaches are already climbing the firestones trying to get into the cooking pot.

'Ben.'

He looks up.

'I don't like going to school,' Baby says point blank.

Who does? Ben thinks. It already costs him heaven and earth to keep the little son of a harlot out of the back streets. It is beginning to sound like an obligation. Damn Wini. He too should have deserted the boy in Ngara, in her house. Or taken him to an orphanage and left him there. Hell, he

should not have lost the cheque Wini left him either. One thousand shillings is a lot of money no matter who gives it. Curse Wini. Women are real dogs.

The hungry dog reappears at the door, its ears pricked, its destitute eyes regarding the men and boy round the fire. They ignore the beast completely.

Ocholla proceeds to prepare *ugali*. Ben smokes thoughtfully. Baby draws deformed figures, rumbles in the stomach and hates school. Night crawls on slowly. Frogs scream in the stinking river. From somewhere across the valley someone yells in pain. Thieves and robbers never take a break. What do they expect to get from anyone at this time of the month anyway? End of the month is business time. That is when every night walker is expected to pay night tax. Ben has paid quite a few times. He had no choice. There were six of them one time. Mean, hungry, determined to eat.

'No trouble . . . don't touch me,' Ben raised his arms in surrender. 'Just tell me what you want.'

'Money,' the gang leader said roughly, and stretched out a huge hand that could have been better utilized digging sewers for honest wages.

Ben had a hundred shillings, the last hundred bob from his pay. He handed it over quickly.

'That is all I have,' he pleaded. 'Please leave me some bus fare . . . that is all I have, and I have got to go to work tomorrow to earn some more.'

The big gangster grunted. 'Work, work,' he said. 'What do you workers think we non-workers eat?'

Ben nearly said grass, but the size of the rough aggressive audience glued his mouth shut. There can never be conclusive victory over six hungry robbers. But though gangsters are rough they respect a sensible down-to-earth victim. They tried to get some change for Ben so he might earn them some more for another day. They left him a pound, probably stripped off another unfortunate customer. He thanked them . . . thanked the robbers . . . and went on home hoping he would not find another lot of non-workers to want his only pound.

Ocholla tastes the *ugali*. He cocks his head, chews slowly and swallows. He takes another piece and throws it at the wall; if it sticks the *ugali* is not cooked yet. The piece bounces off the paper wall. He then gives Baby a bit so they may compare verdicts. Baby nods.

'Ready,' Ocholla announces.

'Plates,' Ben orders.

Baby scrambles over the dusty floor to fetch the utensils. Ocholla ladles out the *sukuma wiki*. The *ugali* is served on one plate. Baby savagely attacks his share. The men work on theirs at a slower, complete, more

destructive pace. No one speaks. There is no time, and besides, what could one say through a mouth full of *ugali*?

The starving dog reappears at the door, wiggles its tail, begging. Times were when a fine dog like this could live its life out of the rubbish bins. Nobody throws away any food these days. There is hardly enough for humans. The dog whines, gets further into the room. Ocholla looks up with disapproval. He gets up, kicks the dog out and closes the door. The dog yelps, runs round the hut a few times and stops to think. Then suddenly:

'Ben!' Baby yells.

And there glaring down at them through the gap in the roof is the mangy dog. Hardly five feet above them.

'The devil's bastard,' Ocholla swears.

Ben grabs a large piece of wood, springs up and lashes out. The blow connects with the beast's skull. The animal screams, falls off the roof and disappears. Ben sits down to continue the interrupted dinner.

A few moments later they stop to listen. The dog yelps outside and storms off through the tall grass. Voices and footsteps approach the shack. The men stop chewing, their cheeks still packed, glance at one another expectantly. Baby goes on feeding, unaware of the change in the atmosphere.

'Ocholla,' a man's rugged voice calls loudly from outside.

Ocholla looks at Ben. He screws up his face, shrugs and turns to the door. 'Who is it?'

'It is me, Kamau,' the cheerful voice answers.

'What do you want?'

'Open up, I have friends . . . visitors for you. Open up.'

The swarthy workmate pushes the creaking door open, squeezes into the hut. Then he smiles and steps aside to let Ocholla's visitors pass.

'Mother of . . .' Ocholla begins to swear and leaves the rest unsaid.

His face turns a dusty grey hue, his eyes popping out. The abandoned mouth hangs loose, exposing half-chewed *sukuma wiki*.

One woman has a load on her head, one on the back and a baby round her chest. She stoops around a while before finding a place to deposit the baggage. At her heels comes another older woman carrying two babies, one round her chest, the other on her back. Then follows a party of little boys and girls of all sizes, ages, and all toting a little bundle of something or other. The hut gets instantly crowded. There is hardly room to breathe, let alone sit down.

Ocholla's big nose starts working nervously. He looks from the guide to the happy visitors. The expression on his anguished face declares plainly he could murder the lot.

'Your visitors,' Kamau announces unnecessarily.

Ocholla grunts.

'How did you find this place,' Ocholla growls. 'You never bothered to visit me before.'

'Well, I knew where you lived all right.'

'Go away,' Ocholla tells him simply.

Ben's skin starts crawling nervously. He wishes Kamau and his party would walk right back out of the hut and never come back. But the party just stands there smiling broadly, glad to pay their beloved prodigal father a surprise visit. The father tries hard not to frown.

'You did not write to ask to come,' he reproaches.

'We did,' the elder wife, the spokeswoman answers,

'You did not,' he insists.

'Didn't you get the letter?'

Ocholla ignores the question. He looks round at the crowd, his face gets graver still. He turns to the wives.

'Did you have to bring all the children, the whole lot?'

'They are on school holiday,' the younger woman answers. 'We have not seen you for a long time. They wanted to see you.'

'I was going to come,' Ocholla says unconvincingly. 'They should have stayed at home, worked on the field. Who the devil is minding the fields? And the cattle?'

'The cattle are all dead,' the older wife speaks up.

'Dead?' Ocholla's face twists in agony. 'Dead from what? What did you do to them?'

'Nothing . . . they just died. There was the drought, then the great diarrhoea. They all died.'

'There are the chickens to look after,' he says, 'there must be something left to mind.'

'There are no chickens any more,' the spokeswoman informs him. 'We ate them all up. During the drought. There is nothing left to look after.'

Ocholla roughs his hair. He looks at the half eaten food in his hand, regards the sea of starved faces, pushes the food aside. He suddenly seems to notice the guide. He glares at the bearer of the bad news. 'You may go now, Kamau.'

Kamau gets the message. He realizes what he has just done, slinks away to his shack, very guilty and ashamed of himself. Ocholla's wives and children and their bundles of misery just stand there looking pathetically frustrating. Now as one they start bustling around and try to fit into the hut, unaware of the lack of breathing space.

'Don't push me,' Baby screams at a little girl in a green cotton dress. He

indifferently goes on chewing his dinner, looking from face to face and wondering why so many friends all of a sudden.

Ocholla glances from Baby to the little intruders; it is not clear who he dislikes most. They mill over the hut, try to get warm at the fireside all at once. Ocholla falls into a painful forced conversation about home, maize, millet, children and school fees.

Ben eats slowly, thoughtfully. He is not going to let anyone's family ruin his dinner. He tries not to look directly at the famished eyes all on his dinner. First he feels uncomfortable; the unwelcome guest at a meagre family meal. Then he starts to get embarrassed by all those little eyes glued to his plate. Finally he becomes infuriated, offensive. He dislikes them, almost hates them. They have no right to flock in on his hut like this, violate the peace and quiet. And did they have to come so many, all of them. Did they have to come at all? Bitches!

Ocholla struggles on, determined not to let them run him down. He is clearly not allowing them to drag him into the urine-sodden family swamp.

'Don't tread on my bed,' Baby orders an emaciated child lost in the background gloom. The little girl has no idea that the rags she is standing on are Baby's territorial grounds and must not be trespassed upon.

'Don't push me,' Baby shoves another one away.

One girl with a running nose goes for Ocholla's unfinished dinner. His nose works faster, his nerves steaming out of control.

Ben can feel it too. They have been invaded, looted, all threatened with extinction. Baby's unrefined instinctive receptors seem to receive the strongest hostile signals from the invaders. It is not going to be easy surviving.

'How long are you going to be here?' Ben inquires from the smiling younger wife.

She starts off about sick children, the drought back home and school fees. Ben shrugs at Ocholla's questioning glance. Ocholla repeats the all-important question to the more businesslike woman. She gives him a quick unintelligible, ambiguous answer, then gallops on, prattling about the children and the poverty back home.

His shoulders sag in defeat. The expression of an offended father succumbs to that of a definitely drowning man, drowning in the family mire.

One boy rounds up Ocholla's fireman's cap from some place, drops it over his scrawny clean-shaven head and does a soldier's march-past in the background. Ocholla notices him, roughs his hair to almost pulling it loose, then goes through the conditioned motion of slapping his cap back on his head. When the children start fighting for his cap Ocholla looks like suffocating.

A child treads on Ben's toes. He almost apologizes himself, overwhelmed

by self-pity, pity for Baby and Ocholla and his simple, un-understanding wives.

One baby starts to cry. The men start squirming. The strangers do not seem to notice the shrieks.

'What's wrong with him?' Ocholla demands gruffly.

'It is not a he, it is a she,' the younger wife answers.

'Never mind that, what is the matter with him?'

'She is hungry,' the woman whips the baby from her back to her chest, hooks out her withered breast and starts feeding it.

The bigger children play hide and seek in the background darkness. Baby joins them nervously, superior. One wide-eyed girl edges to her mother chewing on the dirty collar of her dress.

'Mama,' she says, 'See, Mama. They have a window in the roof. Mama, I like Daddy's house.'

The woman looks up at the stars above. Ocholla glances at the gap in the roof, tortures his dry hair. The woman expresses wonder at her husband's genius. Ben wriggles uncomfortably. He really ought to have warned Ocholla about the diminishing roofing material.

'How do you close it?' one boy asks Baby.

'We don't,' Baby says simply.

'What if it rains?'

'It hasn't rained yet.'

A running, jumping child upsets the transistor radio.

'Stop that,' Baby's aristocratic voice cuts into the *melée*. He fights through, hands the radio to Ocholla. Ocholla shrugs, hands it to Ben. Ben re-sets the station, deposits the radio by his feet. Another crawler gets at it immediately.

A bewildered rat crosses the room so fast, only the adults notice.

'Do you have snakes here?' the older wife queries nervously.

Before Ocholla can swear at her, a child starts crying and interrupts. Another joins in the chorus.

'They are hungry,' the wife explains naturally.

Ben's back crawls nervously at the screeches. Ocholla's face turns devilish. 'Shut them up!' he orders.

'They are hungry.'

He snorts, looks around at the gangsters. He starts wriggling restlessly.

'There is some flour in the carton by the corner,' he shouts. 'You can get vegetables behind the house.'

'We brought dried fish,' the older woman informs him.

'Good for you . . .'

Ben now knows what has been stinking since the intruders came.

A boy mounts Ben's stool from the back, hooks tiny, frail arms round his neck and says simply: 'Carry me, horse!'

'Get off!' Ocholla screams at him.

The startled boy falls off. Ben's outsider blues get worse.

'Don't step on my bed,' Baby complains from the gloom beyond.

Ocholla frets nervously. Finally he can bear it no longer. He scrambles to his feet, his head and neck disappearing through the 'window' in the roof. He stoops back into the hut.

'Let us go, Ben,' he wails.

He hunts for the little devil with his cap, zooms in on the culprit and grabs the sacrosanct cap, almost knocking off the precariously balanced onion-head. He snorts to the door.

Ben stands up, minces over heads, tiny limbs, bundles of fish and clothing.

'Where are you off to now?' the older wife's commanding voice rings out. Ocholla bulldozes out without answering. Ben follows him into the cool, fresh, reviving air.

'Damn,' Ocholla curses. Ben follows him along the dark path, though the tall reeds and maize to the treacherous footbridge that spans the stinking Nairobi sewer. He does not ask where they are going. Anywhere out of their raped heaven will do. They climb silently out of the dead and rotting river valley to Grogan Road.

'Women!' Ocholla utters.

Ben thinks the women are okay, particularly the beautiful younger one. The children are the criminals to watch out for. The children could turn a peaceful shanty life into a riot in seconds. He pities Baby, the only member of the routed royal family who cannot escape to the peace and warmth of the good old Karara Centre. He has to stay home with the scrounging invaders and like it.

Karara Centre is fairly full for this time of month. The regular patrons are already happily tipsy, washing one another with *Karara*, screaming, quarrelling, and near the gurgling, faint jukebox, dancing. The bar is as stuffy as ever, noisier than ever. The merry drinkers have been at it quite some time now and the stench from the flooded urinal is quite anaesthetic. Licked drunks sleep on tables, on chairs on the floor, anywhere one can find room. One or two are attempting the impossible hazardous feat of sleeping on the shaky bar stools. The bar women are doing fine tonight; begging for cigarettes and robbing their drunken benefactors.

The bar is seriously hot today. No one smiles. They shout, scream, jostle and try to fight. Then they laugh, a sleepy kind of drone, shake weak hands wet with beer slops and stagger away into more enemies.

'*Karara*,' Ocholla shouts at the barman.

Ben thrusts drunks aside and makes room for himself at the bar, next to his buddy. To one side of him are a couple of old geezers in battered hats that must have accompanied them all the way to senility. They lean on one another, pat one another on the dusty shoulders and sob large globules of tears that roll into greasy grey beards.

'Mate.'

'Mate.' One shakes his grey beard.

'We have come a long way,' he moans. 'Drink,' he offers his glass.

'Drink,' the other in turn offers his. 'This may be the last.'

'You will make me cry.'

Ben shakes his head. Booze sentiment. And wherever they came from, they are not getting back there in one trip tonight.

There is quite a mixed lot of drinkers today. Pilsner, Tusker, Guinness for Power, and *Karara*. *Karara* is always tops. All the merrymakers will definitely touch a bottle of *Karara* at one time or another to gain the necessary boost. It is a formula that never fails. One beer, three *Kararas* and everyone thinks he is mayor of this town. Ben drains his bottle.

'Two more.'

They drink straight from the bottles. No one wants glasses. Glasses slop beer around and they have a habit of slipping through one's fingers.

For the next few rounds Ben offers Pilsner. It is as welcome as was the *Karara*. After the acidic *Karara* the beer tastes like sweetened urine. They drink in silence, watching the other sad drinkers. They should meet Ocholla's family if they think they have troubles, Ben thinks. As the drink starts to take effect, the room appears dimmer, the single fluorescent tube almost lost in human fumes and cigarette smoke. People look easier, more friendly and tolerable.

Ben bustles through the humanity mess to the toilet. A lonely, cold, 20-watt bulb tries in vain to brighten the drab walls. The place stinks of beer and *Karara*. The whole floor from the outer door to the two entrances marked 'Gents' and 'Ladies' lies submerged in at least three inches of water and piss. Ben stops at the outer door, regards the shit paddy fearfully. The automatic cistern flushes and adds another few millimetres to the flood. Ben shudders. A totally drunk harlot thrusts him aside, wades to the Ladies, bangs the door and lets out a torrent. Ben shakes his head, staggers through a back door to the yard behind the bar. The junk-littered yard is dimly lit by another low wattage bulb. Among the mountains of beer crates, broken bottles and bar furniture is an old wheelless jalopy that must have belonged to the original Indian proprietor. Ben picks his way to

the car to urinate on it. A drunk couple struggles in the tattered back seat like worn, passionate ghosts.

'Bastards,' he calls them with no reason.

Back in the bar Ocholla has already offered himself another drink and saved the bill for Ben. He is now busy trying to strike a bargain with a haggard old witch who can hardly keep on her feet.

Ben retrieves his stool, calls for more beer.

Ocholla's old woman staggers into an old man who whisks her off to the door claiming that they came together, she is his girlfriend, and he must take her home. She may just wake up in a backstreet tomorrow morning wondering how she got there and who the devil stole her underpants.

'Women!' Ocholla exclaims. 'They are bitches.'

'Good bitches,' Ben adds.

Ocholla nods agreement.

A terribly skinny old man storms on them out of nowhere, froths at the mouth and raises his bottle in salute: 'Karara for power!' he roars. Then he whirls round, stumbles, crashes under the table and lies still.

Ben offers his buddy a cigarette and orders more drinks. For a long moment they drink in silence.

'I hate women,' Ocholla says finally.

'I know,' Ben nods.

Ocholla belches, wags his head. 'Those bastards coming swooping on us like that,' he laments, 'Who do they think they are?'

'Your wives,' Ben answers.

'Yes, my wives. Who do you think I am talking about? I am not yet drunk, Ben. I know what I am talking about.'

'I know,' Ben agrees.

Another drunken crony bumps into them. He scrutinizes both their faces carefully through tired eyes, then:

'Forgive me . . . hic . . . citizens,' he slurs, 'I am not . . . hic . . . no hard feelings.'

'Go away!' Ocholla barks.

The man crawls away.

'They are all over the bloody house,' Ben says.

'And drunk as shit,' Ocholla adds.

'I am talking about your wives,' Ben informs him.

Ocholla nods, reflectfully disturbs his cap. He seems to think. He shudders. 'Bastards,' he says, 'Women have no sense. Always doing the wrong thing. Bringing the whole bloody brood with them.'

'Send them back home,' Ben suggests, 'Tomorrow.'

Ocholla's drunken mind seizes on the idea, digests it slowly through a

thoughtful pause. He discards the idea whole, shakes his sad head. 'They won't go, Ben,' he moans.

Ben's drunk head erupts with fury. 'But they must!' he bangs the counter. 'We can't all fit in the hut. They must leave. A man has got to have some breathing space.'

His buddy shakes his head sympathetically.

'I know, Ben, I know. But you . . . you don't know those two. They do whatever they like, with the older woman's approval and my assumed blessing.' He adds finally, 'They won't go, Ben.'

'They are only two women,' Ben cries, 'We are the men. They must obey the husband. They have to, otherwise . . .'

Ocholla turns his red exhausted eyes upon him hopefully:

'Otherwise?'

'Otherwise,' Ben shrugs, looks away. 'Otherwise . . . beat them up a little bit. There has got to be some discipline. Women and kids are like that, like . . . like dogs. Bang them on the head some and they begin to respect you.'

Ocholla thinks along this fine new line. He nods, mutters to himself, his eyes fierce and large. Ben waits patiently, expectantly. Finally Ocholla shakes his head violently.

'No use, Ben' he belches impotence. 'You . . . you don't understand. I would like to wallop them, particularly the older one. She is so nagging, always was. I would love to whack her some. But Ben . . . there are two of them, the wives, and hundreds of kids.'

'I will help you,' Ben offers. 'And there is Baby. We can lick them.'

'Really, Ben?'

He nods, and Ocholla nods too. 'Let's go, Ben, I am ready.'

They drain their last bottles, pay and walk out into the dark cold street. Ben walks into a parking meter, reverses, tries another angle of approach. The darned things seem to have multiplied in the few hours in Karara Centre.

Ocholla staggers along with his buddy. They bump into each other, hook their arms round each other's shoulders and march along the windy River Road. Suddenly Ben pulls to a stop.

'I like you, buddy,' he mumbles.

'Me too,' Ocholla says.

'You are the best friend I ever had.'

'Me too.'

Ben restarts the convoy.

'I don't know what I could have done without you,' he adds. 'Buddies like you and me, Ocholla, we could go on for ever. We understand each other and . . .'

'Ben,' Ocholla speaks up.

'Yes?'

'Where are we going to sleep, Ben?'

'I don't know,' Ben glides to a halt. 'There are your wives and the children and . . . I don't know what.'

Ocholla wags his head.

'They are all over the place, and I want a woman tonight. Let's go to Eden, Ben. My harlots are all there. You must have a woman too, Ben. How is your harlot wife? Oh, I remember, she left . . . left the baby. Hell, let's hurry before they are picked by someone else. Those harlots are bastards.'

They change course, take a urine-stinking lane that will conduct them to the brothel the soonest possible.

'Been a long time since I laid a woman, buddy,' Ben mutters. 'I want one bad, surely do.'

Ocholla whistles with excitement.

'You will see my women, Ben,' he sings. 'They are terrific, simply heavenly. They move like . . . oh, just wait till you have one . . .'

Ben leans over the parapet on the twenty-fourth floor. The hands appear tiny, sluggish in movement. They have got good cause to be. They are all hungrier than hell. No one has had lunch today. Treebottoms and Special and all the workers' hotels are no more. This time forever. They were demolished yesterday afternoon to make room for something more useful to the economy of the nation, a new tourist hotel, a sky-scraper. Just like that, without warning, the workers' hotels were gone. The workers are hungry and angry. The old hotel owners are still at the site gate waylaying all their debtors. Everybody in sight owes money. They cannot pay before the end of the month. The hotel managers are not prepared to wait that long. One has sworn to call the police. Nobody cares. The hands are hungry.

Ben tosses a pebble down. He loses sight of it quite early on its way down. He looks across the clear warm city to the smoky industrial area. An aircraft touches down at Embakasi miles away in the plains. Probably bringing in more foreign tourists from abroad to the city in the sun. The air is nice and fresh. A cool wind tugs playfully at the collar of his faded white shirt.

'What do you think, Ben?'

Ben turns from the balcony.

'You are right,' he says to the Hyena. 'Bhai is right, too. So is Yussuf. Everybody is right.'

'What sort of bullshit is that?' The Hyena complains. 'The bloody Indians are all wrong.'

'I no bloody Indian,' Kanji Bhai protests.

Ben turns away from them and tosses another pebble down. Behind him the two professional workmates argue bitterly as usual, the Hyena sitting back against the wall and doing most of the talking while Bhai works.

'I'll never learn to like Indians,' the Hyena says. 'What did that Yussuf mean making Ben the foreman? You, Bhai, I can understand. Or the worthless Banianis. But Ben!'

'Good he is,' Bhai says.

'Of course he is good,' the Hyena cuts in. 'Do you think I would have chosen you or Yussuf? I would have chosen Ben.'

Bhai pats his grey moustache. 'Apricano!' he mutters in amazement. 'Aprican they cheat Aprican. Aprican beat Aprican. Indian he help Indian, Pakistani help Pakistani, Vot you say, Ben?'

'Sure, Bhai' Ben answers without turning.

'I speak true, no?'

'Yeah.'

Across Haile Selassie Avenue the advance party is already at work fencing off the new site. A board has already been erected:

PROPOSED SITE FOR SUNSHINE HOTELS LTD

800 BED TOURIST CLASS

ARCHITECTS: J. S. HAMILTON, P. P. BHUT

CONTRACTORS: PATEL AND CHAKUR CONTRACTORS

ELECTRICIANS: D. O. PATEL

DECORATIONS: S. N. PATEL

That ought to be good news to the labourers on Development House. The bloody contractors have managed themselves another work permit and a tender. Right next to their noses is another concrete and grit job. From Development House every hand will transfer to the Sunshine Hotels Limited site. But the hands are not worrying about work. They are hungry.

The manager of Treebottoms spent the whole morning on the site hunting for Yussuf. Someone had hinted to him that Yussuf was building his own hotel on the original Treebottoms site. Of all things, a hotel! He wanted to murder Yussuf. The hands had to finally intervene, kick the old man off the site themselves, and deployed the meanest hand around, the Hyena, to watch the site gates.

The lunchtime assembly was the roughest Machore will ever chair. Everybody was in it; Ben, Ocholla, and even the card-playing Banianis joined in. They all had a point to raise. Some wanted Machore to explain why the price of sugar had gone up by so much. Others wanted his advice on the forthcoming general elections. The Banianis wanted to know why Ben had been promoted to foreman while there are more experienced workers around. No one could answer that. Yussuf was on the twentieth floor hideout smoking bhang.

Kanji Bhai rose on a point of order to defend Ben.

'Ven I came prom India,' he said, 'I get ten shilling. Perer month, follow? I vork, I vork, follow not? I get twenty perer month. Follow or not?'

'Not follow,' an impatient hand screamed at him. 'Shut up and shit down.'

Machore rose to keep order and defend Bhai's freedom of speech. It took

a lot of sweat to calm the charged assembly. Outnumbered by the sea of angry, hungry and hostile black faces Bhai had to finally forfeit his freedom of expression.

Machore then moved on to the next item on the unwritten agenda – the parliamentary elections. He explained that this is the only time the workers get a say in how they are governed. They must choose and choose wisely. Vote for the right man. Get someone who will speak for them and do so loud enough to be heard.

Kanji Bhai rose on a point of order. 'Vay you no stand election, Machoe?'

Machore swore at him and ordered him to sit down. Bhai sat down, back between Ben and Ocholla. He turned to Ocholla and asked: 'Vay he no stand election?'

'Because he is bloody chicken shit,' Ocholla told him.

'And vay he no let me talk?'

'Because you are a goddamn Indian.'

'Vot goddamn Indian?'

'A bastard Indian,' Ocholla answered.

Bhai turned to Ben for sympathy. 'I think Ocholla is right, Bhai,' Ben answered.

The weathered Indian struggled to his feet. 'I no goddamn Indian,' he screamed at Machore. 'Your madder shit, I no goddamn Indian.' He swore profusely in Gujarati, turned and hobbled away to the latrine, leaving everybody rolling with laughter. Machore adjourned the motion.

Ben turns from the parapet, leaves the Hyena and Bhai still arguing and goes in search of Ocholla. His buddy Ocholla has lost a bet. Some months back he bet, bet his arse, that the contractors would never manage another tender in this country. Ben finds him absorbed in the controls of the crane, his cap tilted at a new, expert angle.

Ben slides over. 'Well?' he says.

Ocholla glances at him and back to the controls.

'Well what?'

'Well, how do you like it?'

Ocholla licks his thick lips and twists a few knobs. Finally he punches the crane dead and leans back. He takes off his cap, fetches a cigarette from the back of his right ear.

'How do I like what, Ben?'

'Well, this . . . everything,' Ben shrugs. 'The new job across the road and . . .'

Ocholla grunts.

'I prefer Treebottoms, Ben,' he says, lighting the cigarette. 'These plan-

ners are real bastards. We have not yet completely finished this here mess and they go start a new one next door. Which means this one will be completed on an empty stomach. Hell, Ben!

Ben cocks his head. One would think there were already enough tourist hotels in town. Sunshine Hotels shit; what is really wanted is an establishment big enough to look after the simple needs of a construction labourer. And . . . to think they had to demolish three hotels, three, to build a single bloody tourist hotel. Screw them. Ben shrugs and spits dust. 'I suppose it is all right for you specialists,' he says, 'We go to the new crane and you are now what Yussuf would call an indispensable dispensable. He may even start grading you.'

'He already has, Ben' Ocholla says sadly. 'He told me I am a grade four crane driver. Ten shillings more on my pay. That's all.'

'It's something,' Ben drops.

'Something!' Ocholla cries. 'With all those women of mine and their brats. No, Ben. It is not enough. A hundred wouldn't be hardly enough.'

Ben looks away to the new site across the avenue below. Two giant bulldozers are already at work digging the foundations.

'Is it true what I heard, Ben?'

He turns round. 'What?'

'That you are foreman?'

Ben screws up his face, shrugs carelessly. 'Not until the new building starts.'

'That's all right, Ben,' Ocholla tells him. 'That is some worthwhile post. How much more do they pay you when we start?'

'Fifty.'

'Not bad, Ben, not bad.'

Ben speaks without looking at him. 'There are Baby's school fees to pay,' he mumbles, 'The bastard is taking all my money in fees.'

'It is all right, Ben, let the boy go to school.'

Ben rubs his neck restlessly. 'The Treebottoms manager is still waiting below,' he informs his buddy.

'He can go shit on the avenue,' Ocholla says. 'I have no money, Ben. The bugger ought to go back to hell, return at the end of the month. I have no money.' He adds after a pause: 'And if it were not for the bastard closing his hotel I would not have been so hungry!'

'It is not his fault,' Ben says. 'The poor man was threatened with fire. They were going to burn his lousy restaurant down.'

Ocholla takes off his cap, roughs his hair badly. 'Well, I have no money, Ben. He can go . . . shit on the new site.'

Ben straightens up. 'See you later, buddy,' he says. 'I will go see if Yussuf

will advance me some cash. Then we may have a drink and try to forget this hell. See you later.' He starts off,

'Ben!'

He stops, looks back.

'If the son of the cement mixer tries to be tight-arsed, remind him you are his new foreman,' Ocholla calls. 'Tell him you may reject the offer.'

Ben smiles bitterly. 'You think he cares a shit?'

Ocholla winks. 'He ought to: no one else here is lousy enough to be foreman. Besides, we bastards wouldn't know where in hell to find him bhang if he sacked you. The boy respects you, Ben. Be wise. Use the opportunity. Don't be a cram-arse, Buddy!'

Ben takes off and starts down in the recently installed lift. It whisks him down, fast through an atmosphere of cold cement, fresh planed wood and fresh paint. Yussuf could be anywhere on earth. Throughout the morning he had to carry his lunchbox with him even into the toilet. He knew the hands were ravenous. They could eat the plastic box if he would let them.

Kanji Bhai, on his way from his perpetual visits to the latrine, stops Ben, 'Vay that Machoe call me goddamn Indian, Ben?'

'I don't know, you ask him,' Ben answers.

Bhai scratches his dusty grey hair, pulls his trousers up his thin waist.

'Vay he no stand election? He talk vell, big head, *mingi akili*. Vay he no stand?'

'Vay you no ask him?' Ben asks him.

Bhai shrugs, waves his arms in despair: 'I ask, Ben.'

'What did he tell you?'

'He say I ask one more time he kill me.'

'Well,' Ben shrugs, 'You got your answer.'

Bhai swears and walks away, bandy legged, holding on to the belt of his oversize trousers. There are many things Ben knows that Bhai will never understand. Machore can never raise the necessary deposit to register as a candidate. And even if he could raise the money he would then have to find a constituency to contest and convince the constituents to vote for him. And who would listen to him? Only the labourers, and only at lunch time when there is nothing else to do. And he would still have a certain amount of trouble. The labourers are a tired hungry people. They don't believe in anybody or anything any more. They do not even believe in the building any more. Now they know. Just as a man will turn his back to you, a building gets completed and leaves you unoccupied. The hands just do not believe. If he bought them beer, Machore might convince the hands to listen to his promises. But they would still not vote if they got up with a terrible hangover or the weather became lousy on polling day or the queue

got too long or something. To the hands it makes little difference; just another name in the newspapers, another face in the headlines, a voice on the radio, more promises . . .

The labourers could vote for anybody. Only they don't believe any more. And the lean old Kanji Bhai cannot understand that.

Ben walks slowly from the lift through the fragrant smell of fresh paint, varnish and sweaty labourers. The men don't look particularly enthusiastic about anything. It is bad to finish anything; worse a lovable beautiful giant like Development House. With its completion also comes the extinction of a familiar atmosphere. The last good-byes to friends and fellow hands, followed by the uncertainty of the future, haunted by the past joys, the hungers and satisfaction of the Development House site.

True they may all meet again on the Sunshine Hotels Limited site. But that will never be exactly like Development House. The hands are a family with the new building. One that must fall apart now that their common course is run, the meagre rewards reaped, the day coming to a close. Who knows what tomorrow will bring; what with a new building to get used to, a bloody tourist hotel to like . . . and Ben, the foreman?

Ben can feel it already. Some hands dislike him. And he is not even foreman yet, hell!

'Ben!'

He stops. Yussuf waddles over. He seems to have grown bigger overnight. He has already started growing an authoritative moustache.

'Where have you been?' he demands.

'With Ocholla,' Ben answers.

Yussuf parts his incipient moustache. 'Get to those boys over there,' he commands. 'Those planks must be ready at the new site by Monday. Every one of them.'

Ben looks at his watch. 'There is hardly two hours left,' he informs him.

'Never mind, do what you can,' Yussuf turns to go.

'Yussuf,' Ben clears his throat. 'I wanted to see you about a matter of . . . some cash. Can you afford me . . . five pounds?'

'You owe me two, Ben,' Yussuf says.

'I know, but . . .'

Yussuf grunts, dips his fat hand into his pocket and comes up with three pounds. He counts it twice, hands it over.

'That's all I can afford.'

'Thanks.'

'You owe me that much more,' Yussuf points out.

'I know,' Ben stuffs it into his pocket. 'I will pay you soon. Soon as I get the rise . . . say, Yussuf, thanks a lot for the foreman deal.'

'Don't thank me, Ben,' Yussuf says seriously. 'It was not my idea.' 'Your uncles?'

'They had no choice either,' he sounds almost sad. 'It is the government. They want to Africanize the building industry. So they suggested we start promoting Africans.'

'Thanks for picking on me.'

'I could not think of anybody else,' Yussuf retorts. 'And Ben, my uncles do not like it. They had to promote me to make room for you and they don't like it. It will cost them so much, they will have to cut down on the number of hands.' He adds after a pause: 'And I will have to wear a turban so there is no mistaking who is the chief head-man. Wear a damned head-dress . . . like a bloody woman. I hate turbans, Ben.'

'Like you said,' Ben shrugs, 'You have no choice.'

Yussuf scratches his large belly.

'No point in your celebrating the promotion, Ben. My uncles hate you . . . I mean the whole idea of there having to be an assistant.'

'The workers hate it too,' Ben tells him. 'You should see the way they are looking at me. You ought to tell them I did not canvass for this, Yussuf. The devils might try to kill me.'

Yussuf looks up instinctively. Ocholla's crane hovers way up by the eighteenth floor.

'That one is all right,' Ben says leisurely. 'He is a buddy of mine.'

Yussuf shifts his feet restlessly.

'You owe me five pounds, Ben.'

'I know.'

He about turns and rolls away to the glass fitters at the giant glass doors. Ben makes his way to the loading crews. The boys look tired, aged. They lift each bar and piece of débris gingerly like a coffin of a dear friend, a beloved relative. Everyone looks like they are in a funeral procession, paying their last respects to the pay clerk, Yussuf and his money.

In an atmosphere such as this, work progresses at a snail's pace. Ben hangs around and tries to look busy. It is better when one is a labourer; you could just pass time discussing the foreman and the system, loathing, criticizing. As a foreman one is expected to know better.

At half-past three Ocholla asks to leave. He has to take his devastating family to Kenyatta Hospital. The wives have flu, and the kids are sick with whooping coughs, measles, devil's worms and God knows what else. Ben's son, Baby is hale and sound at school. He has hardly ever been sick at all, all these years. Nothing can keep an orphaned son of . . . son of a harlot in bed.

21

The hands file slowly to the checkout office. Another day over, another phase lived. Ben grabs his tattered coat from the rack. He struggles into it and hurries out of the site.

He turns left along a rough footpath that eventually conducts him to Harambee Avenue. The small-time kiosk under the blue gums at the city square is still open.

'Any food left?' Ben inquires.

'A little,' a saddened old cook uncovers a giant pot to reveal a bit of maize and beans mashed together with potatoes and green vegetables. The little food left in the bottom of the pot is just about enough for Baby. With everybody else out to the hospital, the boy must be starving. Unless he managed to steal himself some *sukuma wiki* from behind the hut.

'How much?' Ben asks.

The old woman shrugs. 'Thirty, forty cents.'

'Twenty,' Ben says.

'Twenty-five. You are my last customer tonight.'

'Twenty,' Ben reaches for the money.

The cook shrugs tiredly. 'Okay, twenty.'

'Wrap it up.'

The woman finds some old newspapers. She scoops the food out on to the paper, bangs the pot back against a large bucket of dirty grey washing water. Ben receives the food parcel and pays for it. He skips across the road, heading for home.

Government Road is one hell of a crowded road this time of day. He bumps into a fat housewife. She apologizes. He struts on, his food packet under his arm. He runs across the road, makes for the parking lot at the back of the street. The lot lies bare, most cars having already left. Across the parking space a couple of mounted police trot after a gang of rugged street urchins. The little '*park bwanas*' all of them aged between four and eight, explode in all directions laughing excitedly and jeering at the police. The brutish horses rear and neigh in confusion. Then as one they charge after the youths.

Ben glimpses a familiar face as the boys flee by and grabs. The worn

shirt rips. He grabs again and catches a frail thin limb. The boy struggles violently, but he hangs on.

Baby looks up into Ben's face and freezes with terror, his big eyes open wide.

'What's the matter?' one of the mounted police rides over.

Ben looks up. 'This one is mine.'

'Keep him off the streets, then,' the policeman advises, and rides after the others.

Ben stares at the boy, doubt turning into slowly mounting murderous rage. His body trembles in fury. His hand shifts to the ear-lobe. The fingers hold and squeeze. Baby shakes with fear and pain, his mouth opening wide, but he does not scream. His large eyes turn ripe-red, tears overflowing down his dirty face and dripping on to the torn shirt.

'You are hurting me, Ben,' he whines.

Ben clenches his teeth and squeezes harder, the hurt of a cheated parent strangling his heart, his mind. Baby shuts his mouth tight, stands still. He regards Ben through defiant eyes, hates him and shows it. Ben's fingers get slippery, slimy. He stirs and looks down. Blood drips from the torn ear, along the fingers into his hand. He lets go. Baby goes on glaring at him, his eyes pouring with silent tears. Ben looks away from the accusing eyes to the tall Hilton Hotel and farther to the rest of the busy, indifferent city. Suddenly he feels lonely, lost, with only the rebellious boy in front of him. Then he feels sorry for the lonely orphaned child, hates himself. After a reflective moment he squats next to the boy, places his hands round the small shoulders.

'Why?' he demands in a broken voice.

Baby shakes his head, clenches his teeth against shuddering sobs.

'I . . . I don't . . . like . . . like the teacher.' His weak body tremors feverishly.

Ben swallows back the tears in his own eyes.

'But . . . why?'

'She . . . ' sob . . . 'she pinches my . . . my ears.' He breaks down and cries, his body all broken and his mouth shivering wildly in an effort to contain the pain.

Ben looks nervously at the few idle passers-by who have stopped to watch them. He turns to the boy.

'All right, stop it,' he pats him on the shoulder. 'That's enough. Stop it, now.' His knees begin to cramp from squatting. He gets down on his knees. 'It's all right now,' he tells Baby. 'Just stop crying.'

He examines the boy's ears. Only then does he notice their condition, dark and swollen from repeated pinching and twisting. His body feels

weak, his heart deprived of its former buoyant energy. He wipes the boy's tears with the tail of his shirt. Then he clutches the boy's little hand in his calloused labouring hand and drags him up the road, his heart constricted, his body chilled in spite of the stifling late afternoon heat.

Eventually they drift to the end of the street and double aimlessly back into the busy Government Road. They dash across through the heavy traffic and walk silently down the other side. A beggar gets in their way, Ben dodges round him, then remembers Baby's food parcel under his arm. He gives it to the beggar. The man snatches it eagerly and unwraps it. Disgust spreads over the haggard face. He hands it back. Ben takes it, hurls it on to the pavement at the man's feet.

The posters outside Twentieth Century Cinema advertise a movie to keep you on the edge of your seat. On an impulse Ben walks to the ticket booth, pushes across twenty shillings.

'Two four-eightys,' he says.

The seller peers at Baby, shakes his head.

'Sorry, adults only.'

Ben curses, takes his little man by the hand and bustles off. At Cameo Cinema round the corner they are showing a western to beat all westerns. This one is for general exhibition. Ben buys two balcony tickets. The film turns out to be one of the type where pistols sound like bombs, fists like cannons, and horses gallop in a series of thunder claps. Baby enjoys the film thoroughly. It is hard to tell what has got him squirming with excitement the more, popcorn or the movie. It may be both.

It is fairly dark by the time they leave the cinema; they walk up Kimathi Street. A twenty-four hour shoe-shine boy stares longingly at Ben's battered shoes. Ben shakes his head in refusal. Who would bother to polish such junk. A couple of policemen and their dog study the two ragged window shoppers suspiciously. Ben clutches Baby's hand harder and leads him up the road. They cross the road and walk down the opposite side. The walls up and down the street are plastered with election posters: Vote X for happiness; Vote Panga for Progress in Farming; Vote Key for Opportunities; Vote Lamp for Enlightenment; Vote Pen for Education; All votes for ME. The candidates are truly determined to sell their election symbols.

Ben hates X. Last week the kids dragged in an X poster from some place and stuck it on the paper walls of the shack. Some bastard contesting the River Valley constituency, promising equal opportunities and advancement. And Ben never heard of the guy before the election campaigns started. Ocholla hates the way Mr. X sits on the wall commanding everybody's attention and promising things. It is as though a complete stranger strayed into the hut, grabbed the master's stool and promised to provide.

And his fat, self-confident face smiling benevolently all over the stuffy dusty hut. Whenever he is in the hut, Ocholla sits for long hours warily watching the threatening intruder. He would love to tear down and burn the poster, but the kids would probably drag in the even more hateful Mr Key.

A crowd of tourists clouds the entrance to Africa Hotel, lost between the baggage and their porters. These are the real people, the gods of the tourist industry, the men who got old Hilotoni exiled from Treebottoms area. These are the bastards without whose presence one is made to believe he would starve and rot in hell.

On an impulse Ben grabs Baby's hand and drags him through the rough seas of white faces, past the security guards to the heavily carpeted foyer. The hall is hazy with smoke and grey faces. A few black porters throw in some colour. A couple of African youths at the bar sip from ridiculously tall glasses and smoke cheap cigarillos.

The restaurant is not as crowded as the main bar. A waiter confronts them at the entrance. He looks them up, down and across; from Ben to Baby and back. He ponders for a second, then:

'Well, can I help you, citizens?'

Ben in turn looks the waiter up and down.

'No!'

He selects a table near the wall, propels Baby to it.

The waiter sidles over. 'Well!'

Ben reads the menu and speaks without looking up.

'One Pilsner, one Coke.'

'I am not a drinks waiter.'

'What the devil are you then?'

'Food.'

'Two number fifteens.'

This is one joint they only understand food by numbers. The waiter takes off to the kitchen. Eventually another waiter finds them. First he regards them uncertainly, then:

'Well?'

'Pilsner and Coke,' Ben orders.

The man hurries away. Ben looks around. It is not a bad joint, this Africa Hotel. Tourists know how to take care of themselves. The place would almost be perfect if the waiters would stop staring at Ben and Baby as though they just crawled out of the spotless white ashtray.

Baby sits quietly hypnotized by the dim, soft beauty of the restaurant. The sleepy peace of the place is broken only occasionally by a subdued civilized guffaw and the clicks of knives and forks. The restaurant comes nowhere near Treebottoms or Sukuma Wiki hotels for friendliness and

service. Ben has to order another round of drinks before the management rounds up the two fifteens and a waiter hustles them over. They turn out to be two thin half-cooked slices of beef, a few chips of French fries, raw carrots, onions, salad and bits of heaven knows what. As usual Baby eats furiously. He never cares what he eats or how it is cooked as long as it is food.

'When did you go to school last?' Ben asks him.

'I can't remember,' he speaks through a stuffed mouth.

Ben stops chewing, regards him for a long moment. There is this thing about the boy's infidelity that beats reason – his honesty.

'And what have you been doing all this time?'

'Nothing,' the boy answers busily.

'Nothing?'

Baby wrestles with an oversized spoon.

'Well, nothing much ...' he licks his lips. 'Parking cars, running away from police ...'

Ben chews slowly, thoughtfully. 'Did you ever beg for money, from strangers?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Nothing.'

His large spoon slips from his hands, clatters on to the floor. He starts to retrieve it. Ben stops him, calls for another one. Baby waits restlessly for the spoon. He looks from Ben to his food, to Ben.

'What do you get from parking the cars?' Ben asks.

'Money.'

'How much?'

'Ten ... twenty cents.'

He looks nervously at his food, succumbs to temptation and picks a potato chip with his fingers. He chews quickly, picks another. Finally he gets both his hands into the food and feeds.

'What do you do with the money?' Ben asks.

'Uh ...?'

Ben lets him swallow first.

'The money you get,' he repeats, 'what do you do with it?'

'Go to the cinema.'

'Only?'

'Eat *mandazi*.'

The waiter brings the spoon. He sets it on the table and steps back to watch Baby eat. Ben waves him away. He retreats to study them from a distance.

'Would you like to go back to school, Baby?'

The boy eats violently. Ben takes a long drink, takes time before repeating the question. Baby wags his head.

'I hate the teacher, she is always beating me for nothing.'

'Apart from the teacher?'

'Uh . . .?'

Ben repeats the question. The boy eats seriously. Ben shakes his head, swallows two mouthfuls of beer in quick succession and refills the glass.

'Baby.'

Baby grunts, his mouth packed full.

'I am talking to you, boy.'

The boy looks up, his mouth filled to capacity, his eyes wide open, pleading. 'Let me eat first, Ben.'

Ben grabs his hand. 'No,' he hisses almost fiercely. 'First you must answer my question.'

'What?'

Ben tones down his voice. To avoid misunderstanding he tries to sound as casual as possible.

'Would you like to go back?'

Baby's eyes open wider. For a second he seems lost, poised between definite hate for school and the possibility of angering Ben.

'Do you like school?' Ben asks.

'No!'

Ben lets go. The boy continues his rudely interrupted meal. Ben takes another big mouthful of beer and orders another bottle. There are many things he would like to talk to Baby about. Many, many things. About himself, about Wini whom the boy must have forgotten by now. About Wini especially.

The beer arrives. Ben pushes his half-eaten dinner over to Baby. The boy delves into it with the same original enthusiasm. There are thousands of things Ben wishes they could discuss. Things fathers are supposed to tell their sons. You should go to school, read and be wise. Get a big job and be somebody. You wouldn't like to be a carwash, shoe-shine, or labourer, would you, boy? No. You got to be a man, have the right to vote, choose your own representative, be yourself, right? Right on, Dad. Shit!

The waiter pushes the cakes tray over. Baby picks two large ones and digs into them voraciously. Ben orders some more beer for himself.

'Baby,' he says to the boy. 'Apart from the teacher, is there anything else you hate about school?'

'No.'

Ben lights a cigarette.

'Supposing,' he goes on, 'supposing I asked her not to pinch your ears again, would you go back to school?'

'Yes.'

'Completely, every day for real?'

A hesitant 'yes'.

In the back of his mind Ben visualizes the mounted policeman leering down at him and snarling 'Keep him off the street.'

'Listen, Baby,' Ben speaks quietly. 'I will take you back to school myself. I will ask the teacher not to beat you 'for nothing' again. And you for your part will go to school every morning, without fail, and bring me a confirmation letter from the teacher every day. Is that clear?'

The boy nods.

'I will buy you a new uniform tomorrow,' Ben adds. 'And a pair of shoes. From next Monday, it is school for you everyday for the whole day. Right?'

'Yes, Ben,' Baby smiles slyly. 'I want another cake.'

Ben smiles and beckons the waiter,

Karara Centre, the next warmest place after home. One of the extremely few places in town where one can take one's bottle of *Karara*, lose oneself in a dark corner and tell the world to go to hell without having to apologize.

Events have overtaken time. Karara Centre is not what it used to be. The patrons are not what they used to be. They used to afford *Karara*. They used to shout, totter, laugh, fight. They sit on the forms all along the dirty grey walls, each lost in their own thoughts. The old monstrous jukebox sits dejectedly chained to the wall by the door, almost rusting from disuse. Like the rest of the bar furniture, the jukebox has collected itself an unusually thick layer of dust.

The advertisements behind the bar are now a dirty brown with age; Drink City Lager; Man-Sized Pilsner; J and B. Rare, the 22 carat whisky; Drink Smirnoff Vodka; Smoke Rex; Smoke SM; Drink Johnny Walker, born in 1820, still going strong. Drink Black and White; Join the New Africans, use Newafric Skin Lightening Creams, Posters, posters everywhere. New campaign posters lined all along the wall. And the campaign posters are not much different from the Insecticide advertisements or the skin toning creams or the new economic prices for *unga*. They all advertise economic new prices, improved sizes and qualities; things one cannot see. And they are all supposed to be good for you. But most of the patrons still can't read and they rarely buy anything.

Ben lights a cigarette.

'Give me one,' his new-found *Karara* friend begs.

Ben gives him one. He will never get to really like bar-room friends. You share a little monosyllabic conversation with them and soon they want to share your cigarettes too, and then your beer. They never have enough of anything to balance the exchange.

He pours more Pilsner into his glass. Simon pours himself *Karara* and goes on:

'Guess who I'll vote for?'

'Who?' Ben asks.

'Me,' Simon nods to himself. 'You see, I am the only bastard who really cares about me. Look at those guys on the wall,' he points at the rows of

smiling faces. 'Do you sincerely believe they give a fuck about me? Or you, or anybody?'

Ben shakes his head and reminisces back to the Development House site and the encounter with Kanji Bhai: 'Vay Machoe he no stand election, Ben? He talk good. Him got much brain, *mingi akili*. Vay he no stand?'

'Because he is too good.'

'I know, Ben, but vay he no stand?'

'He is too smart, too much brain. *Mingi akili zaidi*.'

Bhai nodded, his scrawny grey-haired head, his sunken eyes radiating the wisdom of ages, wisdom gathered from the inhaled dust of hundreds of construction sites.

'Machoe *mingi akili*.'

'Enough,' Ben nodded solemnly. 'Enough to know he doesn't stand a goddamn chance.'

Then Bhai stirred as though from sleep, the old starved eyes searching Ben minutely:

'I no goddam Indian, Ben.'

'Not a chance, Bhai. Not you. Yussuf, yes; his uncles, all the Indians in the town, but not you. You are too bloody naïve.'

'Yes, Ben,' Bhai said. 'I no goddamn Indian.'

'No, bud.'

'I Pakistani, Ben,' and Bhai limped away to tell Ocholla.

'I could call them all by name,' Simon continues his address to Ben. 'Businessmen, government officials, all as crooked as hell. Name anyone you know owns a car. If they did not steal it, the money was stolen. Thieves, cheats, all as rotten as you or me.'

Ben sighs with boredom. 'Why not steal yourself a car too?' he asks. Simon shakes his head drunkenly.

'That is not what I want to say.'

Ben looks round the bar and the ragged, sickly old people lined up on the benches along the walls. They sip from their bottles and talk in subdued low tones as though afraid to speak aloud in the presence of the posters of the honourables on the wall. It seems the live people left when the posters came in. Ben imagines Machore's face among the posters. It doesn't fit. Machore's fight-scarred face is too real, has feelings. It shows when he is being mean. When he lies it shows. To succeed one needs a mask like the ones on the wall. Now, Ben realizes that they, the faceless ones, have a face, a mean-eyed bloated face, an alias.

Ben orders himself another beer.

'What I want to say is . . .' Simon belches and drones on. 'What I mean

is, you stick around a few hundred years, flog yourself a routine torture job and you are likely to die at the helm.'

Simon drinks thirstily, bangs the glass back on the table and refills it. He whirls round on Ben, his eyes clouded as those of a sick man.

'I met an old friend last week,' he goes on. 'I was low on resources, so I went up to him, said Hello. He said Hello, how am I. I told him, hungry. Could he lend me a few shillings? He asked why, what for? Because I have no job and he ought to have known that already. We used to work together when the manager suddenly decided he did not like my work and asked me to leave. So I explained I had not found another job yet and by heaven I have tried. You know what the bastard told me? He said I was not looking hard enough, that's why.'

He pauses to swallow a mouthful of *Karara*.

'Well, he eventually gave me a few shillings, reminded me he is a married man – and when do I think I will get myself married? It is so nice to settle down, he said, and we are not getting any younger, you know. Of course I know, I told him. And if all one had to do was go out and get themselves married, I would probably have a hundred wives by now. So ...'

He drains his bottle into the glass, bangs the bottle on the counter and turns to Ben.

'You see, I had a lot of friends when I had a job. Men, women, all. When I lost my job the women vanished with the boys who could afford to take them to the joints I used to. Women are no good to anybody. Only good for screwing, and screwing,' he pauses, his dark face getting twisted, ugly and bitter. 'I hate Indians too. I hate white people, too. They all fuck you up with something.' Then, after a thoughtful pause, 'Africans are the worst screws on earth. They want discount on shoeshine, newspapers, car-wash, the whole bloody shit. They almost want a tip when they give money to a beggar – bastards!'

Ben shakes his head and tries hard to follow the argument. Suddenly Simon turns to him, his mood and tone of voice completely changed:

'You see, citizen,' he mumbles, 'You see, I am a little down on funds. I had a few shillings with me and lost it somewhere.'

Ben recognizes the signs and smiles bitterly.

'Can you afford me one beer?' Simon asks, his drunk eyes imploring.

Ben starts out to refuse, then changes his mind. The cram bum has more than earned himself a drink with all that talk.

'One and only one drink,' Ben tells Simon.

'Thank you very much,' Simon beams with joy. 'Waiter, one Tusker.'

'No Tusker,' Ben protests. 'You are drinking *Karara*.'

'I have drunk too much *Karara*,' Simon complains.

'Go home then. I cannot afford you a Tusker.'

'Only one, mate?'

Ben shakes his head.

'Don't be mean, citizen. I just saw the barman give you much change.'

Ben swears. 'The money is mine, not ours. For you it is *Karara* or nothing. Trouble with you bums, if one smiles at you one is an idiot. You start exploiting us.'

Simon smiles, then breaks into forced laughter.

'Okay. . . all right, *Karara*,' he turns from the barman to Ben. 'I just thought you might afford me a beer.'

'Bastard!' Ben calls him.

'No hard feelings, citizen.'

'And don't call me that!'

'Sorry, citizen.'

Darkness falls fast outside the bar. The barman flicks a few switches and a forty watt bulb flashes on feebly. The dusty *Karara* Centre fluorescent sign outside glows cold and worn. A couple of drunks stagger out of the door and home while the rest remain behind and talk, their voices rising and falling according to the mood of the conversation.

Ocholla should have been here as promised. Ben watches the door expectantly. A ragged small man hobbles into the bar, takes a stool behind Simon. The hollow, sunken eyes look around once, twice, before he calls for *Karara*. He downs one glass and bursts out coughing, rocking his wasted carcass so much that he almost bounces off the stool.

'Poor bastard,' Ben utters.

'Poor devil,' Simon echoes, then 'As I was saying . . . what was I saying, citizen?'

Ben shakes his head. 'I don't know.' He lights himself a cigarette. Naturally Simon wants one too. Ben gives him one.

The first of the hard times slash-price whores drifts into the bar. She sidles to the bar and looks around, scouts for an easy victim. She winks at Ben. He scowls.

'Bastard vultures,' Simon says about the harlot. 'They will devour you alive.'

'Who, me?'

Simon wags his head. 'Not you, friend. You, me, every fucking man in this town.'

The weakling behind him starts coughing again, rustling like he has rusty metallic lungs. Then he turns his dying eyes on Ben, rubs his crinkled brow and picks up his glass. Ben wishes the bugger would go home and die there.

'Pick the rotting flesh off your bones,' Simon drones on about prostitutes.

'Me?'

'Not you, citizen, the bloody . . . bloody harlots . . . cigarette?'

Ben shakes his head. 'You will not chain-smoke my cigarettes.'

'No hard feelings,' the other slurs. 'No hard feelings, citizen.'

Ben climbs down from the stool and reels away to the toilet. It is not flooded with beer-stinking urine today, but it stinks like hell. Someone has left a big heap of refuse precariously suspended on the edge of the half-full basin. Ben tugs on the rusted flush. The old machine explodes into action. Water gurgles into the bowl slowly at first, then cascading down swirls the shit in dizzying eddies slowly rising and threatening to overflow. With a choking, sucking sound the lot disappears into the bowels of the city's sewage system. The suspended heap on the lip of the basin remains intact.

Ben totters back into the bar, still doing up his trouser buttons, and catches Simon drinking his beer. He charges drunkenly, hauls the *Karara* thief off the stool and under the table. They both crawl back to their feet.

'I didn't, citizen,' the culprit protests. 'I swear I didn't.'

Ben lands him a blow on his lying mouth. Blood drips out. He strikes again, throws himself off balance and staggers against the counter. Simon gets up and beats it out of the friendly *Karara* Centre into the night. Ben returns to his seat breathless, knocks the violated glass over in disgust, breaks it.

'Fifty cents,' the waiter tells him.

'What?'

'Fifty cents . . . for the glass.'

Ben glares at him. But his knuckles hurt so much he is sure he does not want to hit anybody else.

'You are a man,' the harlot speaks up.

He whirls on her. She smiles at him.

'I saw him drink it,' she tells him.

'I didn't ask you,' he retorts.

She lifts her fat bosom helplessly.

'I saw him pocket some of your cigarettes too.'

'Shut up,' Ben barks.

He turns to the barman, snorting. 'Another glass,' he demands.

Life sails smoothly on. Everybody minds their *Karara*. Apart from the hungry prostitutes, the barman and the sick *Karara* drinker, few people know there has been a war on.

Ocholla arrives soon afterwards. He shuffles to the bar, takes Simon's tool and orders a drink. Then he turns to Ben:

'Have you ever taken a woman shopping for vegetables, Ben?'

Ben shakes his head.

'Never try it, Ben,' he says tiredly. 'The bitches don't even know what they want,' he pours a glass of *karara*. 'We went for *Sukuma Wiki*. Then they wanted cabbage. One discovered fish and the other preferred meat. They started admiring some secondhand clothes before we had even bought anything. They wanted to try them on. I gave them the money for vegetables and left.'

He takes a mouthful of beer.

'I went to Ziواني on the road, bought myself a few tots of *chang'aa*. And when I came back for them . . . when I came back, the bloody women still had not made up their minds between *Sukuma Wiki*, cabbage and fish. Bastards!'

Ben shakes his head sadly.

'Women are like animals,' he utters.

'You are right, Ben,' Ocholla nods.

He quickly downs the bottle of *karara* and orders another.

'I feel quite powerful, Ben,' he says. 'Maybe it is the little money. Maybe it is the shopping. You get going around with such damn arses and you start feeling like a genius. They are so thick, Ben, so helpless. I have never felt so . . . with so much responsibility. They could hardly take themselves from stall to stall . . . bitches.'

'Women are like that,' Ben says.

Ocholla sighs.

'Well . . . you can't blame them too much, I guess,' he says. 'They have not been long in the bloody city. They will learn soon, I guess. Say, Ben . . . I found some fine joints for *chang'aa* in Ziواني. You ought to peddle Yussuf some of that stuff. One could . . . one could make three bottles out of one. That thing is like poison. It does not even feel water.'

'That's the stuff for Yussuf,' Ben belches loudly.

The tired barman bangs two more bottles on the counter. The buddies drink quickly and effectively. They have many things to celebrate tonight; Ben's promotion to assistant foreman, Ocholla's grading, and for the first time in the history of building, Yussuf allowed salary advances to be made to the dusty labourers.

Ocholla laughs suddenly.

'Those women are funny, Ben,' he says happily. 'Almost like kids. The young woman, she is beautiful, have you noticed, Ben?'

Ben nods.

'I had almost forgotten what they were like,' Ocholla goes on. 'She is wonderful, Ben, simply fantastic. I sneaked to her sleeping place last night. She was . . . heavenly. Automatic suspensions, gears, the lot. Nice and wet and hot like hell. You ought to lay her . . . I mean one like her, Ben.'

Ben grunts.

'Does the haggard old one still know how to do it too?'

'Well,' Ocholla fidgets. 'Not too bad but . . . let us face it, Ben, even those bitches at Eden are not all that great. They just fool around, pretend to do things. And then they cost, Ben, and . . . and they give you clap. They may even rob you.'

'Maybe I ought to get married too,' Ben laughs.

'Two wives, one old, one young, and thousands of little human animals,'

Ocholla scratches his large nose.

'Well,' he shrugs. 'It's up to you, Ben.'

After a pause: 'Sometimes a woman of one's own is good,' he goes on. 'Well, I suppose it's just a matter of choice. She may be right, she may be the wrong type. It is good to get married some time.'

The hands drink quietly after that. Drunkenness sets in slowly, thoroughly. Ben gingerly lifts his bottle, drinks from it. He pours some beer on the counter. The barman dutifully wipes it dry.

'Bitch,' Ocholla calls his bottle.

Ben slowly tilts his head to look at him.

'When are they moving out?' he asks.

'Who?'

'Your bloody wives.'

Ocholla shakes his head slowly, almost sadly.

'I don't know, Ben,' he answers. 'I just don't know. I tried, Ben.'

Ben holds him by the shoulder, comfortingly.

'Three bloody months, buddy,' he slurs, 'three months is a hell of a long time. The children should go back to school, the women must go home. We can't afford to keep them here. They must go back to the *shamba*.'

Ocholla shakes his head in the negative. 'They won't go, Ben.'

'They must!' Ben bangs the table violently.

'They won't, Ben,' his buddy says. 'I have tried. They all want to stay here with me. They say I neglect them.'

Ben sighs drunkenly.

'Do you think so, Ben?' Ocholla asks sincerely.

'What?'

'Do I neglect them?'

'Of course not.'

Ocholla snatches off his cap, actively roughs his hair. His shoulders droop. He hangs his head in resignation.

'I tried, Ben.'

Ben snorts angrily. 'They must go, the hut is too small for us.'

'That's what they think too,' Ocholla moans,

'Then they must go,' Ben insists. 'They must go, or build their own hut.'¹ Ocholla shudders, puts his face in his hands. Ben drinks furiously from his bottle.

'And they are complaining, Ben.'

Ben starts.

Ocholla shrugs, settles his cap squarely on his head.

'About Baby, Ben.'

Ben's eyes suddenly take on a dangerous defensive fire.

'What about him?' he demands.

'We like him . . . I mean they like him, Ben. But . . . he is a little bit too aggressive. You know what I mean, Ben. He beats the boys, rapes my girls . . . terrorizes the whole family. And they say he . . . he eats too much.'²

Ben bangs the counter so loudly everybody looks up.

'I pay for the food, don't I?'

'I know, Ben, but . . .'

'What the hell,' Ben shrieks, 'all that money I pay for one little boy's meals. And you have all those brats. Do I complain, tell me, that, do I?'

Ocholla's mind burns in anguish. 'It is not my idea, Ben.'

'Those bitches of yours, I will whip the shit out of them. Nobody talks bad things about my Baby.'

Ocholla nods thoughtfully. 'He is all right, Ben,' he says seriously. 'Such a nice young man. Clever too. Those bastards of mine never get out of their mothers' skirts long enough to breathe in some wisdom. I wish I had a son like him.'

'You never will, Ocholla. Never. Not while you let those bitches get you down.' He orders two more drinks for both of them. They drink silently for some time.

'Ben,' Ocholla licks his lips nervously. 'We have been pals for such a long time. Drunk together, lived, eaten together. A long time. It is bad to spoil such a friendship.'

'Tell your bloody wives that.'

'They are not bloody, Ben, I mean . . . they are not bad. They are only ignorant, innocent. They just don't understand buddies. You know women, Ben. They just don't understand things the way we do. They are different.'³

'They are stupid,' Ben says.

Ocholla shrugs.

'A little, maybe,' he mumbles, squirms restlessly. 'You see, Ben, I . . . I would like you and Baby to go on living with me. But my wives and kids . . .'

He lifts his cap, twirls the thick rough fingers in the long dirty hair. 'And

the hut is not big enough any more. Not like when you and Baby moved in. We . . . I could help you build another one for the two of you.'

Ben looks up. He seems to sober up, then his eyes take on a murderous, desperate look. His mouth works soundlessly for a moment. Then he shrieks: 'Son of the . . . son of the bloody . . . hell! That is not your hut; yours was razed before your bloody women came. That hut belongs to you, me and Baby. We built it together. If your wives do not like us, they can go shit in the river. Or get out.'

'No, Ben, you remember how I . . .'

'Damn!' Ben bellows in ever-mounting fury.

'I am sorry, Ben.'

'Sorry, hell!' Ben swears. 'You let women rule you, then tell me you are sorry. What kind of a fucking man are you?'

Ocholla fidgets. 'You know . . . I am not exactly like you, Ben. You don't understand. I have a wife, wives and kids. I feel different, Ben. We can't just ask them to leave. I suppose it is all right for you, but me . . .'

'Shut up.'

'But, Ben . . .'

Ben grabs his beer bottle.

'One more . . .' he stutters angrily. 'One more word out of your bloody arse and I smash your goddamn teeth in. Just one word . . . one . . .'

Ocholla freezes, his lips twitching. Then suddenly he grabs his cap, wrings it violently, murderously, strangles it, his eyes fixed on Ben. He seems to hate and fear at the same time. He slams the cap back on his head, hunches his shoulders. Then slowly, angrily, he climbs down from the stool and staggers his wounded pride out of the bar, the eternal cap screwed at a strange new angle.

Ben looks round at the curious drunk faces watching him.

'Bastards!' he screams at them, 'What are you looking at?'

He smashes the bottle on the floor. The barman starts to protest but Ben cuts him short and looks round at the suddenly strange, cold, hostile faces. They used to cheer, curse and swear. Now they just sit and watch quietly, indifferent and far away. This is not the Karara Centre that used to be. It is no more the smokey, dusty, warm Karara Centre of merry drunkards. Patrons used to sing, dance, shout, laugh, fight and vomit on the dirty floor. Not any more. There is nothing to sing about, nothing to laugh at, nothing to fight for and nothing to vomit. Now they just sit and stare blankly back at the campaign posters on the opposite wall and the ads. They just sit like dead fish; hardly drunk, cold and lonely, each lost in his own dark small world. Bleak, contagious loneliness surrounds each and every one of them. Infectious hopelessness that angers and frightens Ben. Desperate terror

encroaches on him from all sides. He leaps off the stool and charges out of the bar after Ocholla, upsetting chairs, tables and sleepy incurable drunks.

The wind-swept street lies cold, dim and unusually desolate. Ben lurches after the receding stoop-shouldered figure.

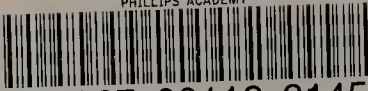
'Buddy!' he screams, 'Wait for me!'

Ocholla glances over his shoulder, shakes his head and keeps on walking.

'Ocholla,' Ben hollers hoarsely. 'Wait for me; don't leave me here alone, Buddy!'

Ocholla looks back, hesitates, stops and leans against a parking meter, Ben staggers faster down the deserted River Road.

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MEJA MWANGI's contribution to the new wave of East African writing was recognized by the award of the Kenyatta Prize for *Kill Me Quick* (AWS), a novel which features the hardships of young down-and-outs in present day Nairobi. It was followed by a novel about the Emergency called *Carcase for Hounds*, which has been made into the film 'Cry Freedom'. He has also published *The Cockroach Dance* and *The Bushtrackers*.

Ben is a man on the move—in bars, night clubs, in the streets, in brothels down River Road in Nairobi. It is on one of these occasions that he meets Wini and her son Baby. But Wini runs off with her white boss leaving her little son with Ben, and destroying his trust in women. When Ben joins up with Ocholla at a construction site, action, humour and more people come into the picture. Mwangi's light-hearted treatment of serious situations makes an unforgettable impact.

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