

OCHOLA

Khanji Bhai scrambled from under a lorry, and ran to the latrine at the far corner of the site. They rarely saw him eat, but he was always running to the toilet.

“What does he shit?” Ben wondered.

Ocholla glanced at Khanji and shrugged. He was more interested in what happened between Ben and the Gorilla.

“I had an accident soon after meeting the Gorilla,” Ben said.

The car was a write off and he lay in hospital for two months. Lying on a hospital bed, with nothing to do but think, he made up his mind to quit the army. With the money from the Gorilla, he could afford another car, buy a house and find another career. It was about time he did something for myself.

Ocholla picked a handful of gravel and hurled it at the bucket lying on its side a few feet away. He hit it again and again, while he listened to Ben.

“Onesmus had plans of quitting the army too,” Ben went on. “He talked to the others and got interested. They too are looking for a way out. Next time we went out on exercise, they misplaced the arms where the Gorilla and his gang could find them. I thought the Gorilla had someone who knew how to use the equipment, but they ended up blowing themselves up.”

“They died?” Ocholla asked.

“It took the whole day to gather the pieces,” said Ben. “The mess we were in took longer to sort out. The Army wanted us hanged, but the thugs had blown themselves up along with any evidence that they had not stolen the equipment. They fired the lot of us.”

“Crime never pays,” said Ocholla.

“Back then, things were different,” Ben told him. “Everyone was after the big money and it didn’t matter how you made it. The leaders sold the whole country to foreigners and got away with it. A lot of the big cars you see on the road were bought with blood money. I was a poor salesman, that’s all.”

He took the last puff from his cigarette, hurled it away, and then laid back eyes closed. Ocholla tossed gravel at the bucket. From the Workers’ Parliament came snippets of bitter politics as Machore sought to politicize the hands.

“And that assistant minister for trees,” Machore was not one to spare his words, “the man was a *manamba* just the other day. He is supposed to represent the *fukara* from Shantytown, but he has no idea how. He is never in Parliament, except when needed to vote for raising MP’s salaries, or asleeping drunk. These *nyang’aus* we must vote out of office.”

A haggard hand from Shantytown, one who had lunch nearly every day, rose on a point of order and asked Machore to substantiate. Someone else, also from Shantytown, one who had not had lunch for almost a month, ordered him to shut up and sit down. The truth of the Workers Parliament was no one really cared. They attended because it was lunch break and there was nothing else to do and nowhere to go.

Ben heard them squabble, as he lay thinking about his own predicament. There was no question of giving up his job to avoid Onesmus. He needed his job, now that Wini had agreed to marry him, when he raised enough money for a wedding. She would get him a job at her place of work, but until then he had to hang on to his present job.

“He will kill you, Ben,” Ocholla said.

Ben started back to the present, opened his eyes and squinted up at the sky. He sat up, flung a handful of gravel at Ocholla’s target and missed it. He lay back and closed his eyes.

From the Workers’ Parliament came snatches of scandalous statements, their intensity rising and falling with the passions

“The rich can do whatever they want with us,” Machore said. “They own everything you see including the shops, houses, *matatus*, kiosks and even the roads. Why do you think they raise the cost of living? To keep us weak and downtrodden, quietly starve to death. That is what will happen, unless we rise up and say enough is enough. No more corruption, no more exploitation. We want rights, and we want them now.”

The assembly was suddenly very silent. Then someone cleared his throat and asked what the hell Machore was talking about, and specifically which rights would protect workers from exploitation by the Government. It took him the rest of the lunch break to explain that it was not just about rights, but also about justice and integrity.

After the lunch break, Ben's gang went back to work sending the steel bars up the crane to the top floor. Then they sent several tons of concrete up and waited for Yussuf to come up with more work. The rain fell punctually at five and halted work for the last hour of the workday.

At five-thirty the hands line up at the office to check out. Ben grabbed his coat, shook out the dust and slipped it on. He stopped at the site clerk's pigeonhole to give him a word of advice.

"Get your roster right tomorrow."

"Else we plug your ass with concrete," Ocholla added.

Workers spilled out of the site onto the street having made little impression on the project. It seemed they had not done any work all day. They toiled, sweat blood, cursed the foreman and his rich uncles, and then left just as they had come.

"Don't think about it," Yussuf told them, when he saw them despair. "Close your eyes and mind for a month and there will be progress."

That was the way to build skyscrapers, without thinking. Thinking, instead, of all the women waiting to share the wages at the end of the month. Thinking of a full stomach, endless bottles of *karara* and a woman to share them with.

Discouraging thoughts at midmonth, when one were broke, but by the time one got over the disappointment they were over the hump, and on the next floor and going up.

There was little going on in town, when Ben and Ocholla left the site. Office workers had started walking home or were lining up for their *matatus*. Ben and Ocholla turned up Government Road and past the Kenya Cinema with its colourful posters advertising a film to keep them awake all night. They did not have to try to stay awake at night; thinking about tomorrow was enough.

A bus rumbled down Duke Street ignoring the traffic lights and scaring cement dust off their coats. Tusker bus stop was as usual full of restless commuters, jostling, treading on toes and picking pockets. As soon as a bus pulled up, they went berserk, men, women, school children and pickpockets climbing over one another to the first inside. The rush was not for the seats, since most of them were already occupied. It was a king of a feeding frenzy, one that would tear the bus to shreds if it were not made

of steel. And, in the midst of it all, maize roasters tried to make a living selling roast maize to the jittery crowd.

Ocholla stopped to haggle with one of the sellers.

“No need to be so touchy,” he said to the seller. “We know you didn’t buy it.”

“What do you mean?” said the man, appearing even touchier.

“You know what I mean.”

Ocholla was convinced that maize roasters and vegetable hawkers got their vegetables the same way he got his – by harvesting someone’s else’s *shamba* along the banks of Nairobi River without paying for it.

“*Wee, buda, wacha ufara,*” said the maize roaster. “I can *twanga* you right here.”

“*Twanga* who?” Ocholla demanded.

“You and your friend.”

“*Hebu* try.”

They were about to go at it, when Ben intervened. Ben was certain that maize roasters and street muggers were really the same gang doing different shifts. Already he could see idlers getting interested in the exchange.

The man broke the maize cob in two and gave half Ocholla. Ocholla gave him the money, split the half with Ben.

“Everybody trying to rip you off,” he grumbled leading through the throng.

“Sales tax,” Ben guessed, “and value added tax?”

“What value?” said Ocholla. “You talk like one of them.”

A *nyang’au* running for a bus nearly floored them. When the bus rolled away, several were hanging, one-toe-one-finger, to the doors. The hustle and bustle of the bus station fell behind them, as they headed toward River Road. Ocholla jingled the change in this pocket. Ben glanced at him, dismissed the thought as a mere wanderer, a leftover from the weekend’s carousing, and kicked a clean maize cob off the pavement into the road. A bus rolled it flat.

“I need a drink, Ben,” Ocholla said.

“Can afford one,” said Ben.

Ocholla again jingled the change in his pocket again and turned left. Ben followed across the road into an alleyway. They stepped over a heap of excrement, scaled a mountain of garbage and ventured deep into the bowels of the city. They emerged in a

grey back street smelling of mold and burned tyres, which led to another one that eventually vomited them on River Road.

The day people had already left, or were busy leaving, and River Road was filling up with the night people, gaunt faces with haunted eyes and an aura of desperation looking to feed their unusual hungers. The stink of want was almost overpowering.

Most shops were closed, or closing, but Karara Center doors were wide open and inviting, the music, the noise and the smell of beer, cigarette smoke and vomit spilling out in the darkening street.

Ben and Ocholla burst through the greasy swing doors and stopped, just inside the door, to get used to the stink of desperate and unmindful humanity. As usual, it appeared there were more people inside Karara Center than there were on the street outside. Just inside the swing doors, the jukebox boomed and screeched and making such a fuss that glasses and bottles tried to dance off the tables. The jukebox itself was chained to a ring on the wall by the entrance to prevent it from dancing out of the door and getting stolen by adoring patrons. A foul haze of smoke, dust and beer fumes hung from the ceiling as ominously as a thundercloud.

Ocholla forced his way to the bar, with Ben at his heels, made room for both of them and screamed their order at the barman. Then he turned to survey the women ranged on benches against the wall.

“The one at the corner?” he asked Ben.

“Too big,” thought Ben.

Before he could complete the thought, Ocholla had picked up his *karara* bottle and gone off to join the woman. The drunk who had just bought her *karara* read Ocholla’s concrete-mixer swagger and hastily vacated his seat.

Everyone was on *karara*, a cheap brew that looked like muddy water, tasted like sisal juice and was as powerful as diesel. It cost a third of the price of Tusker beer, which was the main reason everyone loved it.

The barman, overworked and underpaid, sat as still as a statue, his bloodshot eyes hardly moving, as he kept track of his slippery customers. The cracked mirror behind him reflected their gaunt, dusty faces. Shelves were stacked with empty liquor bottles

and the dark walls were plastered with fading posters that advertised everything from hangover cures to condoms.

Few patrons could read, but they did not worry about it. Some had ties and a few had suits, but no one pretended to be sober when they were drunk. They yelled and cursed, frothed at the mouth, fought meaningless battles and went home singing. Few of them walked home upright or in a straight line. They slid off their bar stools, and staggered out in the rubbish-strewn River Road, and somehow made it home to return the following day for more.

A ragged couple leaned on each other for support and tried to move their feet in dance. Another couple had stopped dancing and stood still, waiting for the slightest excuse to topple over. His right foot was hard on her left foot, and her right hard on his left and they were not aware of it.

One of Ocholla's favourites left the bench to lean on Ben's shoulder. She had been trying to snare Ben for as long as he knew her, and could not understand how he could be so indifferent to her, when Ocholla was so mad about every woman at Karara Center.

"Cigarette?" she asked him.

He gave her one in a hurry to keep her mouth shut. Her mouth stunk worse than the blocked toilet back home. He turned away and pretended to converse with a drunk sleeping on the stool next to him. She silently drifted back to Ocholla, who by then had his arm round the big one's neck yelling in her ear.

Ben finished his drink and made a dash to the toilet at the back. Very often the toilet bulbs were out and one had to stand back in the corridor and aim at the urinal. This time the urinal was well lit, but someone had vomited a slimy curry and beer mess in the washbasin.

Back in the bar he ordered another *karara*. Some old timers had fallen asleep in their seats, bottles of *karara* standing watch over them. The more energetic ones danced next to a sign that strictly forbade dancing. Every so often someone gathered enough resolve to charge the swing doors and go home.

Then Ocholla's date discovered he was not so wealthy as to buy her *karara* and deserted him. He rejoined Ben at the bar and called for more drinks.

"After this one, we go," he said.

“We are not drunk,” reminded Ben.

That was why they were leaving. They would go where *karara* was seriously powerful. They finished their drinks and spilt out of the swing doors, then followed a smelly lane between two old buildings that led them towards Grogan Road. The air was heavy with the smell of excrement and overflowing sewers. A cat sprang from a dustbin and bolted deeper in the back alley. They turned into a narrower lane and, eventually, emerged in Grogan Road. A broken neon sign welcomed them home to the Capricorn Bar. They claimed space at the bar and Ocholla yelled for drinks.

They sold *karara* and *chang’aa* at the Capricorn. The place had the same old, plastic chairs, battered tables and grey walls as at Karara Center. The light bulbs were so dim they could not tell the colour of the drinks, but it was *karara* alright. It had the same bitterness, the same choking smell and the same fire in the belly. No one could fake *karara*. They could make it right or make it wrong, but not false.

Halfway through their second *karara* Ocholla called for *Chang’aa*. Ben declined the offer. The last time he tried mixing *Chang’aa* and *karara*, his belly exploded in such a fury he was out for a whole weekend. That time too it was his Ocholla’s good idea to add fuel to the fire. He watched Ocholla down a glassful, roll his eyes like he was about to die, shuddered and square his shoulders like a man. Then, with his eyes afire, he whipped his cap off his head, punished his hair and replaced it.

“Ha!” he yelled. “More.”

In one dark corner an old timer wrestled with Ocholla’s big one, he trying to kiss her and she shoving him off, and both too drunk to make a row of it. At another table some businessmen discussed their affairs in low tones to safeguard company secrets. An emaciated drunkard near them talked to himself, tried to provoke them and failed in both. Another drunk lay sprawled in his own vomit, another tribute to the power of *karara* when fortified with *chang’aa*.

“More?” asked Ocholla.

They drank quietly for some time, the only disturbance being from the smell of the toilet at the back. The stench of beer urine and curry vomit was so strong it could have been emanating from under the bar counter.

“Men like us must drink,” Ocholla said suddenly. “It is the only way to remain sober in the hole.”

“Sober when drunk?” Ben thought.

“We have to forget,” said Ocholla. “We have monsters to slay.”

He took off his cap and scratched his hair.

“I have been thinking,” he said.

“What for?” asked Ben.

“Two more *karara*,” Ocholla yelled at the barman.

He reached in his coat and dragged out a reluctant cigarette. It was beaten and battered from the knocks of the day, but it was a full one, unlike the stubs Ben regularly gave him.

“Last one” he said, lighting it.

“They don’t grow on trees,” Ben dragged a reluctant stub out of the bottom of his packet and lit it.

“Are you married, Ben?” Ocholla asked out of the blue.

“I tried,” Ben said.

“You are a lucky man,” Ocholla said. “A very lucky *nyang’au*.”

He took a swig, drained his glass, licked his lips and belched.

“I have two wives,” he said, “two wives.”

“Two is good,” said Ben.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know,” said Ben. “Just trying to help.”

“Help who?”

The night was taking a desperate turn, Ben thought, watching Ocholla try to strangle his beer bottle.

“I have two very big wives,” Ocholla said, “and I don’t know how many children.”

His eyes radiated *karara* fury.

“They just drop them, one after the other.”

He dragged on his cigarette. Ben thought of something to say to make him feel better.

“We are getting married,” he said.

Ocholla stared at him.

“Wini and I.”

“Marry a bar woman?” The disgust was obvious.

“That was long ago,” said Ben. “Now she works in an office. The boss is her friend. She will get us office jobs.”

“Us? But she does not know me.”

"I told her about you," Ben said. "The friend from work whose fault it always is when I get home late."

"Me?"

"I need a good reason for coming home drunk when I'm supposed to have no money."

He felt guilty rolling home reeking of beer and having to lie how he and his best *nyang'au* got mugged and robbed of all their pay. He hated telling her stories, but the truth would have been worse. He could not tell her how it was impossible to know when to quit, when Ocholla was on the roll and had to pass by New Eden. Payday madness affected everyone, Ben included, and drove them crazy with the daunting task of trying to balance their budgets. If Ben had to pay rent from his pay packet too, they would all have had to go join Ocholla in Shantytown.

Wini was all he had, all he wanted. She was a product of the streets, but then so were a lot of other good and successful people. Everyone in the city knew that the best and greenest *sukuma wiki* came from the sewage treatment plant at Kariobangi. The ripest and sweetest tomatoes grew on illegal *shambas* along the sewage canals.

Ocholla refilled his empty glass from his empty bottle and tried to drink from it. The glass fell from his hand, rolled off the counter and broke on the floor. The barman yelled at him. Ocholla ignored him, started to drink straight from the bottle, realised it was empty and banged it back on the table.

"*Karara*," he shouted to the barman.

"You know what?" he said turning to Ben. "I can't send it. I just don't have it."

"Have what?"

"Money."

"What money are you talking about?"

Ocholla could no longer keep track of his own thoughts.

"You are *nyang'au*," he said.

"Who isn't?"

Ocholla stopped to consider and admitted they were both *nyang'aus*.

"We are all *nyang'aus*. Two more *karara*."

The barman handed them the bottles and climbed back on his stool to resume his limbo, but not for long. Ocholla erupted, banging his fist on the table and waking the whole bar.

“*Nyang’aus*,” he yelled. “All *nyang’aus*. Children sick, school fees up, and they still want new dresses for Christmas! *Nyang’au tupu*. Children and dresses, that is all they know. They will not get a thing from me.”

Ben reached for one of his growing number of glasses and caught nothing. The second one proved to be the real one. He drank and belched.

“All women are *nyang’aus*,” Ocholla ranted on. “Even your street woman.”

“I told you she was not a street woman anymore.”

“No matter.”

“She will get us jobs with better pay.”

“And I will drink it all,” Ocholla told the whole bar. “They are not getting a cent from me. I will drink it all.”

To prove the point, he ordered another round. Ben was too drunk to decline. The businessmen conclude their conference, and after another round of *karara*, peacefully crawled out home. The Capricorn Bar was a respectable place. Apart from the occasional daredevil patron, one did not call the barman a thief and a monkey before leaving. They just hauled their carcasses from their seats and tried to find their way home.

“*Ocholla pesa miingii*,” Ocholla sang in Luo. “*Ocholla father money ... Ocholla pesa mingi ...*”

Someone told him to shut up.

“Sing with me, Ben” he urged. “*Ocholla pesa miingii ... Ocholla father money ... Sing Jaduong, sing.*”

“I can’t sing,” Ben informed him.

“You are drunk like me, you can sing,” said Ocholla.

“Too drunk,” said Ben. “You sing; I’ll just sit here thinking.”

“*Mama Kiwinja, kwaheri bye-bye*,” Ocholla tried.

“Shut up,” yelled the same male voice.

“*Wewe kwenda huko*,” Ocholla said to him. “This is a free country. Sing, *Jaduong, sing. Jaduong pesa miingii, Jaduong father money ... Ocholla pesa miingii, Jaduong Baba Pesa.*”

Ben inclined his head towards Ocholla, while his hand continued pouring drinks into his mouth.

“You,” yelled the barman

Ben sat up started. The drunk on the floor had woken and was on his way out, relaying his body from table to table for support.

“You have not paid,” said the barman.

The man stopped and pointed a finger at him.

“Do you know who I am?” he said. “You will get it from my grandmother.”

He took a two more steps forward, two back and stood swaying from side to side.

“You think we are *nyang’aus* for drinking your piss?” He staggered all the way back to the bar. “Today I will not pay for it. You castrate me, if you like, I’ll not pay. *Nyang’au.*”

He turned a full circle and tried to reach the door. The barman leapt over the counter and grabbed him by the collar. The drunk leaned on him for support.

“You can beat me all you like,” he said. “You can even kill me. I will not pay.”

The barman knew where to look. The crumpled paper money was stashed in the man’s stinking socks.

“Wait for your change,” he said, leaping back over the counter.

He brought the change and stuffed it back in the man’s socks, then ushered the man to the door still protesting he would not pay.

“Good luck with tax collectors,” he said, shoving him outside.

At Karara Center they would have kicked him out minus his change.

“*Nyang’au,*” Ocholla yelled.

That could have been anyone or everyone.

“Another beer, Ben?”

“No,” said Ben.

“Go home then.”

“You too,” said Ben.

Ocholla hopped off the bar stool, lost his balance and sat on the floor.

“*Nyang’aus!*” Those had to be his wives.

He laboured back to his feet, upsetting the bar stool in the process. Ben felt his way down the stool and stood swaying from side to side.

“Hey you,” said the barman. “Money?”

Ocholla’s tried to focus on him. Then he turned to Ben.

“Have we paid?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

Ocholla searched his pockets, found some money and slapped it on the counter.

“Change,” he demanded.

“Change?” the barman laughed, “*Lete pesa*. You owe me more.”

Ocholla turned to Ben.

“I don’t know,” Ben said.

“*Nyang’au*,” Ocholla said to him, “the man is trying to cheat us and all you can say is you don’t know?”

He searched for more money. Finding none, he headed for the door.

“Pay the man,” he said to Ben. “I have bought you beer all evening.”

Ben dumped change on the counter and started to leave. The barman counted it quickly.

“You are ten cents short,” he said. “*Lete pesa*.”

“I don’t have any,” Ben staggered after Ocholla.

Grogan Road was cold and deserted. They stood swaying into each other and debated which way to go.

“New Eden,” said Ocholla.

“You have no money,” Ben reminded him.

“I have friends. They do anything for me.”

“I have a wife,” said Ben. “You go home too, *nyang’au*. You are drunk and moneyless.”

Ocholla searched himself and found a broken cigarette.

“Last one,” he said. “Fire?”

Ben found his matchbox. After breaking several matches, and losing more on the pavement, they got the cigarette glowing.

“Come with me to New Eden,” Ocholla suggested. “I know one who will be happy to meet you.”

“You are too drunk,” Ben said. “Go home now.”

“City *askaris* burned it down,” Ocholla revealed. “They said it was a health hazard. I have lived in it for years and never caught a cold from it.”

“Go to New Eden then,” said Ben. “I have a wife to go home to.”

Ocholla started up the road, hugging the wall to stop meandering onto the road, and Ben staggered in the opposite direction, determined to reach a bus stop and catch a late bus. But where on earth was he? Which way was home? He turned into a dark alley that failed to get him back to River Road. He picked another one that ended up in cul-de-sac. He leaned on the wall to relieve himself before starting back. At the entrance to the cul-de-sac he stopped to make firm decision to never again go drinking with Ocholla.