The first rain fell the day after they finished planting.

"Let it rain," Baba Pesa roared happily. "Let it rain until the earth is drunk with rain. Let it rain until the rivers overflow and wash away the bridges. Let it rain all it wants, for we have ploughed and we have planted and we have nothing more to fear."

He invited his Tajiri Bar friends to his house to sing his praise, drink his beer and tear into his goat's ribs. The Barus were there too, uncomfortable with the opulence, and hesitant with every move they made, from picking a morsel of meat out of the trays to accepting another drink.

The women sat inside the house, emerging now and then to deliver food and drink, and the men sat in the veranda discussing money, politics and rain.

Mutiso and Juda were huddled together like pariahs at the far end of the veranda, Juda in a drunken stupor while Mutiso sang him songs in a tongue he did not understand.

The Tajiri Bar gang heard from Daktari Choo what rain meant to the spread of diseases like malaria and cholera, and what he would do to eliminate them from the world, if only he had the power. The Chief offered to give him the power and silenced him. Then they heard from Choma Choma the poor state of the animals people sold him to slaughter.

"Bones," he complained.

Everyone knew he made lots of money selling bones to small people who could not afford meat, but that was hardly the point.

"Nothing but skin and bones," he whined. "And they expect to be paid with money."

"Money's good," ventured Baru, who had not uttered a single word since their arrival. "Money's good."

The gang turned on him, trying to understand who he really was and why he was speaking. Pesa had introduced him, almost apologetically, as his new friend and neighbour and left it at that. They had understood that to mean they had to tolerate him in their midst, but did they have to listen to his small people-politics as well?

Baru, unaware of the temporariness of his membership status, thought to mention a long-standing debt owed him for goats he had sold Choma Choma when they were big and fat. But, being a man of honour, he refrained from raising the issue. This, he realised, was neither the place nor the occasion to start wrangling over money.

"I didn't lose a single head," Pesa dutifully bragged, for it was well known that he could defy the weather too. "My cows are good, highbred cattle, not the humped *chenzi* misery you people keep in Kambi."

None of the members kept any humped cattle but they let it pass.

"I lost ox," Baru said, mournfully. "He was a big bag of skin and bones, but he was all I had."

"He damaged my pickup," Pesa informed the members.

"You killed him," Baru corrected. "You killed him with your pickup."

"Do you know I can sue you for the damage?" said Pesa.

"I can sue you," said Baru.

"Sue me?"

"Sue you."

"Sue me."

"You sue me first."

"Sue me, see how far you go."

The argument seemed about to progress in a strange and dangerous direction, but the members did not know how to deal with it. Back in Tajiri Bar, Choma-Choma would have bundled the offending little man and tossed him outdoors, but this was not Tajiri Bar, and the man was Pesa's new friend.

Then Mama Pesa returned with another tray of meat and they turned their attention to eating. Penina followed with a tray of head-and-hooves soup, fortified with boiled roots and herbs that Mutiso had dug up in the hills, and which he said could cure anything and was even known to grow hair on balding heads. The soup was strictly for the enjoyment of men, since women had no bald heads to cure

He was singing quietly to himself at the far end of the veranda when Mama Pesa's tray reached him.

"Mutiso?" she called.

"Mama," he said.

"Are you awake?"

"A little."

"Eat then before you get drunk. Juda?"

Juda was fast asleep in his seat.

"*Wacha alale*," said Mutiso. "Leave him sleep. Juda is a good boy but very drunk. Let him sleep."

"Soup?" Penina asked him.

"*Ati supu?"* he said rising. "*Sijui*. "I must go soon for it is getting dark and I'm nearly drunk."

"Don't go yet," Mama Pesa said to him. "The big sausage is almost ready."

"I'm just going to water the barn wall," he told her.

He had drunk very little alcohol indeed, and most of his giddiness came from watching Pesa and Baru eating and arguing together like old friends. He peered at the peopled seated at the other end of the veranda, shook his head and said to himself, "I'd never have thought."

"I'm quite confused myself," Mama Pesa admitted. "Let us hope for more such days."

Then Mutiso stepped off the veranda and stopped astonished.

"*Woe lo, lo, lo, kumbe inanyesha,"* he exclaimed, looking up at the skies. "You mean it's raining?"

"Where have you been?" she asked him. "It has been drizzling all afternoon."

He stepped out in the rain and tried to run to the barns. After a few unsteady steps, he realising he could not run, and the ground was wet and slippery. He stopped and watered Mama Pesa's roses instead.

"No more drinks for him," Pesa said to Penina. "Tell him he can go home now."

Penina laughed and went about her chores.

"You don't need money," Pesa said to Baru, continuing their discussion. "You'll cut down your trees."

"Cut my trees?" Baru asked startled.

"You can't cut mine?"

"But we are not allowed to cut trees," Baru reminded.

"Who says?" demanded Pesa. "*Nani nasema?"*

"The law says, …" said Chief Kahiu.

"What law?"

"Government law."

"What Government?" asked Pesa. "We shall cut down this man's trees and build him a house like this one. Forget Government; Money speaks."

He turned to the Chief, daring him to contradict him.

The Chief shrugged and said, "I will issue a permit."

"Who needs your permit?" asked Pesa. "This man has planted more trees than you and your Government. Why should he come to you for a permit to cut his trees to build himself a house? Why must he ask you permission to cut his own trees?"

"The law is an ass," said Choma Choma.

"Who asked you?" Pesa turned on him, inflamed.

"Well," ventured Daktari Choo, diplomatically. "Rules are made to be broken. So we shall break them."

"What about the new OCS?" asked Choma Choma. "He shoots people."

"I have a gun too," said Pesa. "I can take care of him myself."

"Leave the policeman out of this," the Chief said, trying to pacify him. "I'll take care of everything. I'll do what only I can do. Are we agreed?"

They nodded in agreement, which left Baru thoroughly confused, for he was of the old school that dreaded authority but respected the law.

"Money speaks," declared Choma Choma.

"*Tena*?" said Pesa.

Mama Pesa brought more food. They devoured it heartily, but Baru declined, confessing he had never eaten so much in his entire life.

"*Shika haka basi*," said Pesa forcing him to accept another rib. "*Yumbukaga na kiria imeretie*."

"Dear God," exclaimed Mama Pesa. "The old man is drunk."

Mutiso was dancing barefoot in the rain, doing an intricate traditional dance she had never imagined he could. Pesa and Baru rose to watch the strange rain dance and were amused at how much the old herdsman seemed to be enjoying himself. A sudden sparkle lit Pesa's eyes and he started taking off his shoes.

"What are you doing?" Mama Pesa asked alarmed.

Pesa laughed and took off his coat.

"Don't you dare," she warned him.

He took off the expensive wristwatch he had bought in a Nyeri backstreet, which the seller had sworn to him was pure gold, pure waterproof and not even stolen, all of which he found later to be untrue.

"What on earth are you doing?" Mama Pesa demanded watching him hand the watch to Penina for safekeeping.

"I'm about to dance," he announced happily.

"In the rain?" his wife asked, scandalised.

"In the rain."

"Like a small boy?"

"Why not?"

"You are old men," she warned. "You could both die of cold."

"*Hakuna*," he told her. "We are not so old."

His guests shrunk in their seats, afraid they were about to be invited to participate in another of Pesa's unpredictable madness.

"Are you drunk too?" Mama Pesa asked him.

"As a donkey," he assured her. "But I can still dance. Remember how I used to swing you on the floor?"

"Don't remind me."

Turning now to his friends of the Tajiri Bar counter, he invited them to join him.

"We can't," they declined.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"They are not mad," informed his wife.

"Watch me," he said, readying himself.

They watched him roll up his trouser legs. Never having been to Tajiri Bar, and therefore being quite uninformed about Pesa's sudden attacks of insanity, Baru was more than embarrassed. He was confounded.

"Come, my friend" Pesa took his hand, encouragingly. "We prayed for it, so let's now dance to the rain."

"Like children?" Baru asked, horrified.

"Like men."

"I haven't danced in the rain since I was a boy."

"It's easy," Pesa said to him. "Come, let's give it a try."

Baru turned to where Mutiso, his only true friend, danced alone in the rain, looking cold and wretched like a chicken caught out in a storm, waiting for a friend to come to his aid and bring him out of the rain. It did not seem right to let him die of pneumonia by himself, while they sat and watched.

Baru rose hesitantly, took one uncertain step, then another. The rain had turned to a steady downpour. Then, while everyone watched horrified, Pesa and his newfound friend joined Mutiso on the lawn. Mama Pesa nearly died from embarrassment as she watched them dance in the rain like a boys. The rain fell and the old men danced, reeling and cavorting on the grass, while the Tajiri Bar gang sat low in their chairs praying for the rain to stop before Pesa remembered and insisted that they join him.

Pesa and Baru could not understand a word Mutiso sang, so they sang their own version, with words borrowed from every song they had ever heard and strung together without any regard to meter or rhythm.

Mbura ura wo-thai
Nguthinjire wo-thai
Ciana thai wo-thai
Njiru, njiru, njiru, njiru.

The spirited singing brought everyone out of on the veranda to find out what was going on. Mama Baru nearly died from the shame and embarrassment of finding her husband covered in mud and hopping up and down like a small boy, singing songs she had not heard since she was a small girl.

"What came over them?" she wondered.

Mama Pesa could only shake her head. Penina and Wangari sat down to watch the spectacle. It was their laughter that eventually woke up Juda. For a brief, alarming moment, he had no idea where he was. He looked about lost, realised he did not recognise anyone, and was about to rise and go home when he saw that he was home and it was raining. Then he saw the figures frolicking in the rain. It took him a long time not to understand what was going on. He sat down, rose again and leaned on a pillar to wonder out aloud, what they were doing?

"They are dancing." Moses informed him.

"In the rain?"

"So it seems."

"Why?"

"They are happy."

"What about?"

"I don't know."

Juda studied the scene a little longer, while lightning slashed the darkening sky and thunder rolled down from the mountains and the rain poured in earnest.

"When old men behave like boys," he said to Moses, "There's reason to worry."

He drained his bottle and went in search of his mother. She was standing right next to him, so it took him a while to find her.

"Mother," he asked. "Am I allowed another drink?"

"Yes, Juda," his mother said to him. "If old men can dance in the rain, you can have another drink. Elija, go get your brother a drink."

"He knows where it is," said Elija.

"Elija," Mama Pesa wagged her finger at him.

"Why me?" Elija complained.

"I'm older than you," Juda reminded.

'So what?"

"Elija," Mama Pesa ordered.

He rose and went for the drink.

"What got into them?" Juda asked of the dancers.

“Don’t believe your father,” she said, with a heavy heart. “The wild streak doesn’t come from me.”

He laughed so loud everyone turned to look, and, though it was irregular, he put his arm round his mother’s shoulders and hugged her.

“Mother,” he said happily. “You are my best friend. For you I’d do anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

She looked in his eyes and smiled a bemused smile, but there was sadness in her eyes.

“For you, I’d even go to India,” he informed her. “If it would make you happy.”

“That could make me happy,” she said, thoughtfully.

“Consider it done,” he said suddenly and laughed so happily she began to doubt its likelihood.

“There is only one small condition,” added.

“What’s that?” Her heart began sinking again.

“Wangari comes with me,” he said.

Her smile dropped, her shoulders drooped and the sad, permanent frown returned to her face.

“What madness is this now?” her posture seemed to ask.

“I want her to,” he said.

“What for?” she asked.

“To look after me,” he explained.

“Why?”

“Because I want her to.”

Mama Pesa shook her head and said, “Your father will never allow it.”

“My only condition,” he said.

She turned to stare in the rain and wonder why her life had to be such a series of heartbreaking trials, why she could not have birthed normal children with normal problems, children who sought their mother’s guidance at every turn, instead of complicated genii who built such high barriers to maternal joy.

Unable to see what else she could do or think, she instructed Penina to light the lanterns, for the darkness was making her sadder.

Then the old men, tired of their rain dance, dripped back to the veranda and her husband ordered her bring them a brazier and his best bottle of brandy. He had purchased a litre of brandy from the barracks at Nanyuki and he ordered it to be served with hot water, lemon and honey to his gallant friend and neighbour before he died

of pneumonia. Mutiso declined the medicine and opted for his soup concoction instead, and seemed the better for it.

They were drinking their brandy, and warming themselves by the charcoal brazier, when Juda summoned his father to the darkening corner of the veranda and away from unwelcome ears. There he revealed his plan.

"Why?" asked Pesa.

"Wasn't that what you wanted?"

"You said no."

"I'm saying yes."

"Why?"

"That's my business," said Juda. "What do you say?"

"I must think about it," Pesa said.

The truth of the matter was Pesa had found out that, with the ten bagfuls of coins and washers that his neighbours had so generously donated, he could only afford to send Juda sixty miles away to Nanyuki and no farther. He would have to dig very deep in his own pockets to send Juda as far away as India. He was yet to be convinced of the necessity of squandering his hard-earned wealth sending a clearly an uneducatable rogue back to school.

"I'll think about it," he said, walking away.

Juda was about to explode in a rage the like of which had never been experienced before, even in this house of furies, when his father turned and came back.

"I have thought about it," he announced. "When do you leave?"

"Soon as possible," said Juda.

"Tomorrow," said Pesa.

"Tomorrow?" Juda asked startled. "I have to pack."

"Good," Pesa finally smiled. "Come, we must announce it to my friends."

"Wait," said Juda. "There's a proviso."

"A what?"

"A condition."

"Spit it?"

"She comes with me."

"Whom?"

"Who else?"

"What for?"

Juda shrugged. He had no reason other than to get back at his father and, perhaps subconsciously, to make it impossible for him to ever leave Kambi.

"That's my only condition," he informed.

Pesa studied him for a long, tense moment. He tried to remember a time in his life when Juda had made him happy, when his very name had elicited anything other than fury. He thought for a long moment about it. Finally, he nodded and said, calmly, "Why don't you take Confucius as well?"

"I intend to," said Juda.

"What?" he bellowed.

"Just kidding," Juda said, quickly. "Just kidding. What do you say?"

Pesa thought, cocked his head and thought again. He was not used to being outmanoeuvred. He liked it even less when the person outsmarting him was Juda. He could not decide right away what to do or say about it, so he injected his own condition.

"Proviso!" he yelled, startling the gang of old men huddled in the corner. "It must be America."

"Why America?" Juda demanded. "Why always America?"

His father paused to think about it. Juda waited. The truth was that his father had no idea, other than that America was where rich men's sons went to farther their higher education. Juda suspected his father's true motive to be to forever silence the small people at Tajiri Bar with made up news of his son's exploits in America.

"My only condition," said Pesa, making certain the whole party heard him. "Think about it."

"I don't need to think about it," Juda hollered, also to be sure everyone heard him clearly. "My answer is no!"

"Think again," said Pesa.

"Why?"

"You are drunk."

"So are you," Juda said. "But what has that got to do with it?"

"My money!"

"My life!"

"You have nothing without me."

While Juda thought of a fitting retort, Pesa turned to leave, stopped. He studied Juda's tortured face, as he weighed the whole idea in his mind and searched for loopholes, and decided that the worst possible outcome of their discussion was that Juda would wake up with a grade one hangover the following day and with no recollection whatsoever of his momentous decision. No point wasting time and anger on a passing fancy.

"*Fanya hivi*," he said, in as fatherly a voice as he could raise. "You do this - you go sober up, then we can talk."

Then he walked away and, this time did not change his mind.

Juda got seriously drunk after that, lost himself in an alcoholic haze and did not find himself at all until they woke him up shortly before midnight to inform him that Wangari had gone in labour, so difficult that Mama Pesa could not help her. They woke up Daktari Choo. The Daktari confessed that, though he could deliver calves when sober, he had no idea how to deliver babies when drunk. Choma-Choma had never delivered anything, and the Chief had no idea how to either. Mutiso was useless in the present crises and, when they were certain that no one present could help Wangari, they decided that she had to be rushed to Nyeri General.

They carried her through the rain to the car and laid her on the back seat. Juda and Mama Pesa squeezed in next to her, while Baru and Mama Baru got in the front seat with Baba Pesa. Then, with the tractor leading the way to tow them out of the worst mud holes should they get stuck, they started out on the longest journey of their lives.

Elija drove the tractor with Moses riding dangerously on the towing block. Their headlights hardly making any impression on the darkness and the rain, the vehicles sipped and slithered down the rain-washed road. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed as the vehicles, mostly out of control, bounced from bank to bank and struggled to remain in the middle of the road and out of the ditches along the edge of the road where not even the tractor could tow them out.

It was a cold and dark night, and Pesa Way had turned to a vast river of mud from the gullies and ditches that emptied themselves into it. The wheels spun uselessly, as the *God-given*, followed the tractor down the road, floating on a river of mud so thick it was nearly a landslide.

Wangari moaned in agony. Juda held her hand speaking earnestly in her ear and begging her to hang on and to be brave, and everything would be all right. Mama Pesa had helped out in all sorts of complicated deliveries before, but now all she could do was pray. She prayed as she had never done before, begging for mercy for the young thing that was so innocent of the sins for which she was about to pay. She prayed for Elija and Moses, riding on the tractor exposed all manner of dangers, and prayed for those they had left at home.

Thunder roared and the rain fell, as Pesa, now almost sober, yelled at the rain to let up so he could see his way to the highway. They made it down the hill and across the first bridge, then slithered through the plain, now a lake of floodwaters. They slid through Kambi, fast asleep except for Juda's friends making trouble at Fujo Bar, and struck out across the last plain before the highway. They

begun to believe they would make it, for they were almost to the highway and had only one more bridge to cross. Then Elija stopped the tractor and run in the rain back to the car.

Pesa lowered his window.

"What?" he demanded.

"The bridge is gone," Elija reported.

"*Namna gani*?" Pesa roared. "How?"

"It's not there," he said.

"*Namna gani*? How?"

"The river took it."

"Why?" asked Pesa.

"Don't ask me," Elija yelled back, for he too was fed up with the cold and the wet. "I wasn't there."

Pesa grunted angrily, and threw the door open, nearly knocking Elija down with it. He stepped into the shin-deep mud and stopped astonished at how deep and cold it was.

"Show me," he said to Elija.

They sloshed their way back to the bridge. In the yellow glow of the tractor's lights, he saw a vast current of mud flowing across the road at the point where the bridge should have been.

"See," Elija pointed. "It's gone."

The bridge indeed appeared to have never been; to have been swept away by the floods.

"Now what?" Pesa asked himself.

They could not just turn round and go back with a dying girl in the car. Besides, they both now realised, driving back up the road would be harder than it had been coming down. But Elija was eager to give it a try just to get out of the rain.

Then Pesa looked again and saw logs and debris tumbling slowly and hesitantly across the road.

"There, there, look, see," he said suddenly animated. "The bridge is still here."

"Where?" Elija asked, doubtfully.

"Under the water," he said.

The bridge was merely submerged not washed away.

"Get back on the tractor," he ordered his son. "We'll make it,"

Now it was Elija's turn to ask angrily, "How?"

"I can handle it."

"How?"

"This is nothing," Pesa informed. "We have seen worse."

"We?"

"You should have seen me wade across a flooded Sagana during the war carrying a wounded comrade on my back," Pesa bragged.

"Which war?"

"The Mau Mau war," Pesa informed. "It was no picnic on Mount Kenya. This is nothing.

"Father I …"

"Listen, don't be a coward," Pesa said. "No river dare carry away my tractor. You drive in the middle of the road; you'll find the bridge."

"Me?"

"Who else is there?" he bellowed.

Elija was not a coward, but he had a more realistic imagination than his father. He could see the tractor toppled over by one of those logs washing over the bridge, and he could hear hippos and crocodiles wrangling over the bodies of the car's occupants in the Euaso Nyiro all the way in Rumuruti.

Then Juda came sloshing in the mud to find out why it was taking so long.

"Don't worry," Pesa said to him. "Go back to your mother."

"The bridge is gone," Elija informed him.

"Gone where?" Juda asked.

"Don't listen to the coward," Pesa said to him. "We have found the bridge."

"He'll kill us all," Elija said to his brother.

"Quiet," Pesa barked. "A girl is about to die and all you do is moan about dying, like an old woman?"

They faced each other, one as defiant as the other, and Juda was afraid of what might follow. He calmly explained to them that the bridge had to be there, that it could not have been washed away, because, as they all knew, the Boer Boeserk had built things to outlast Kambi. In any case, the bridge was studier than anything that they had crossed so far and it had survived worse floods than the present ones.

"I'm not driving through that," Elija declared.

"You are," Pesa ordered.

"I'm not."

"You are."

"You can't make me."

Pesa was about to pick him up and hurl him in the river.

"I can do it," Juda announced.

"You are drunk," Elija informed him.

"I can drive," Juda had never sounded more confident.

“You will not,” Pesa informed him. “It’s my tractor; I’ll drive it myself. You’ll drive my car.”

“Why him?” Elija wailed.

“He’s not a coward,” his father replied. “But you drive *pole-pole*, Juda, do you hear. Drive slow-slow and don’t drown my car. We’ll make it.”

“We’ll all die,” grumbled Elija.

“Then we all die,” said Pesa. “You and Moses can walk back home, like cowards, or get in the car. Your weight will keep it stable. And stop moaning like your mother; you make me sick.”

They were soaking wet, water running down their faces and into their eyes and mouths. It was freezing cold. They unwound the thick steel towrope from the tractor and attached it to the car, making doubly sure that it was securely attached.

“We’ll make it,” Baba Pesa kept saying to himself. “You keep the engine running, you hear? Whatever you do, don’t take your foot off that pedal, you hear?”

“I hear,” said Juda.

He had been in school long enough to understand the importance of his father’s instructions. He was aware this was the worst moment to be driving his father’s *God-given* for the first time in his life, but he also realised that it was an awesome responsibility, and precarious enough to permanently jeopardise all future trust and perhaps even wreck family ties and relationships beyond all repair. But none of them had any choice in the matter anymore. None of them had any choice in anything they did from here on.

Baba Pesa hopped on the tractor. Elija and Moses squeezed into wherever they could find room in the car. Wangari was half conscious, moaning constantly, and the smell of desperation was overwhelming. They informed the others what was happening, what had been discussed, and that Pesa was in charge from here on. The fear was tangible.

Then the car jerked forward and they were off.

Baba Pesa coaxed his tractor slowly forward, until the front wheels vanished under water. Then he edged forward until the wheels made contact with the bridge. The floodwaters swirled under him, washed over the pedals, rose halfway up the tractor and lapped at the sides of the engine. Revving the engine loudly, he edged forward onto the bridge and, without giving the water a chance to get a grip on the wheels suddenly accelerated. The tractor leapt forward, hesitated and then swam across the bridge in one fast and smooth movement.

The car hit the water with a splash and went completely under. Then it bobbed up, just as panic gripped the occupants, and started to drift. But it was heavy and well loaded and, before the women could think to scream, they were on the other side of the bridge and slithering and sliding the last hundred yards to the tarmac road.

Once on firm ground Pesa stopped the tractor ran back to inspect his car. He was ecstatic to see no damage and overjoyed to find the engine purring as reassuringly as ever.

"Did you drown?" he asked the stunned passengers.

"No," Juda reported. "Not a drop got into your car."

"What did I tell you?" he shouted. "This is not a *debe*, this is a Mercedes."

Even Juda had to admit that it had been the right vehicle for the job. Not many cars could have waded the Kariminu and come out with the engine running. Lesser cars would have been on their way down the river to the Indian Ocean by now.

"Get in the back," Pesa ordered him. "Elija, get out. You and Moses will take my tractor home."

"How?" asked Elija.

"You saw how I did it," Pesa told him. "Don't drown it."

And with that they were off, speeding down the Nyeri-Nyahururu road at an incredible speed. Mama Pesa closed her eyes and gave thanks for their deliverance, and prayed for life, life and the continuation of life.