

Frog in a Blender

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How do you tell a Kuyu man is dead?

There was usual silence in the house, silence before the storm, followed by doubts, then by a familiar, bubbling of brains waking up and the festering of minds too weary with alcohol. It was music to the ears of the one who caused the shift, the man on the stage. He had an audience, a potentially entertainable one, if he could find its collective funny bone.

“Anyone?” he asked.

“Boring,” said a woman in a pink wig and fluorescent pink lipstick to match.

“Anyone else?”

“Boring,” she said again.

“I heard you, woman,” a tired smile masked his impatience. “You would notice, if you took your fingers out of your daddy’s wallet for a second.”

There was uncertain lull, then a sudden commotion as men felt for their wallets. Some wallets were missing along with the girls previously whispering in the men’s ears. There were car and house keys missing too, a phone and a jacket. There was swearing and cursing. Men accusing one another of lifting wallets, stealing beers and girlfriends. The club was about to turn into a riot. Watching from the side bar, the club owner signaled to the man on stage to do something about it.

“Come on people,” said the man on stage, “We have been here before. We know what goes on here. You buy her a drink, she slips you something, you fall asleep and wake up poorer.”

They were familiar faces, people he came across in clubs around town. People who did not acknowledge his artistry as a comedian on stage, and sometimes hurled bottles at him, but greeted him like an old friend in the street and, laughing, reminded him of jokes he did not remember telling. Ghetto celebrity was how his cousin described it. But ghetto or not, it was preferable to slogging through life anonymously broke.

“When it is gone, it is gone,” he said to his audience. “Settle down and tell me how you can tell dead from live Kuyu.”

“A kuyu is a tree?” said the bored woman.

“No, it is not.”

“My grandfather’s grave is under a kuyu tree,” she said. “I should know.”

“In Kuyu land?”

“Stop talking to me,” she said. “I am busy.”

She had found the roll under the man’s armpit.

He shielded his eyes from the glare of the spotlight, peered in the darkness beyond. Uncle Dave’s Comedy House was full, as was every comedy club in town the weekend of the end of the month. Men with money to burn and women, not wives, to light it up for them. All cuddling and drinking and petting and living large. All the things forbidden a short while back during corona days. The prophets of doom and gloom had retreated to cook up another scare and normal life was back in town with all that it entailed.

The band was in recess, out back by the urinals, smoking weed and drinking clear liquids from unlabeled bottles. Mr Dave was not concerned about what they smoked and drunk in their break, as long as they did it outside.

They were good boys, picking up pieces of their dreams from the ashes of the one-world Government’s apocalyptic nightmare. They were good boys who would have incredible tales to tell their grandchildren. They were there when kings, presidents, politicians, scientists, demons, gods, and demigods usurped the roll of the almighty and decided who should live and who should die. That reality, along with realising they had just survived the most diabolical lie in the history of mankind usually had them so primed that by the third recess they would be playing a medley of every song ever written and bouncing off the walls to the delight of the end-month audience.

“How do we know a Kuyu man is dead?” The man on the stage would not let go.

The room remained dead still and oblivious. It was the wishing hour. Any man not dead drunk and asleep wished he were home, lying next to someone he recognised. Women too wished they were somewhere else, a livelier place, in the company of younger and stimulating men. Doing something more interesting than drinking and sleeping. Any man not asleep with one eye open had his head on a woman's bosom, and any woman not dead drunk was inspecting the contents of her man's wallet.

"Leave the fool some bus fare," was a regular call from the stage.

"Mind your business," one of them called back.

"No hard feelings, my sister," he said to her. "I know how it is. I started life as customs inspector."

She flipped him her middle finger. Hard as a mongrel's hair, she was once a member of a county assembly, part of the 30% gender representation mandated by law to be as loud and aggressive, and as corrupt and obnoxious, as men. Then she stole county funds, was fired, and went back to being what she had always been. She was awake and sober, in despite downing bottles of red wine with bottles of beer chaser. She did not come to Uncle Dave's for the laughter. No one came to Uncle Dave's to laugh. They came for the cheap beer, sold for less than recommended retail price to keep them coming, and for the Lingala music. Mr Dave knew his customer's. Their need for laughter was second to their need for courage to go home face the other 30% gender representation waiting with a long-handled pan in hand. The comedian's job was to keep the men awake and drinking until they dropped, ran out of money, or had to go deal with the home dragon.

"Anyone?" he yelled in the microphone.

There were no takers. He glanced at the bar. Mr Dave shook his head and tapped at his watch. It was still the wishing hour. He had three quarters of an hour to go.

"Just this one before I let you go," he pleaded with the audience. "Can anyone tell me why there are always old roosters with young hens in the club and never old hens with young cocks?"

"Boring," said the woman.

She was a veteran wallet inspector and the self-appointed official heckler. Their paths crossed so regularly in the various clubs around town he considered inviting her to be part of his act.

"If you interrupt me one more time," he said to her, "I will have you banned."

"Burned?" she laughed. "My fire is hotter than yours."

"Mr Dave," he called to the bar.

The woman glanced at the bar. Mr Dave, the club manager indifferently sipped his fruit drink. She made a face at the comedian and continued inspecting the wallet of the sleeping man in the seat next to her.

The comedian decided to ignore her. He had made three appearances that night and, apart from the bored woman, who was always bored, and annoying, no one seemed to have noticed him or wondered about his presence on stage. The men talked loudly, fondled their dates, and fell asleep. The dates inspected their wallets, ordered expensive drinks, kept the change and, on occasion, returned the wallets. Sometimes they were still around when the man woke up.

When the man on the stage finally stopped his annoying rant, and the band reclaimed the space, men who could still stand staggered to the dance floor, reeled around for a minute then dropped back in their seats and fell asleep.

"You," the comedian pointed in the audience. "Yes, you with the ugliest woman in the club."

Men jolted awake. They squinted at their girlfriends in the sleepy light, decided their women looked okay for bar women, then looked at the other men's women around them, and they too seemed fine for bar women. So, who was the idiot talking to?

"Go home and die," one of them shouted at the man on the stage.

"No, no," said his woman, "Go home, eat shit, and die."

The room finally had someone to laugh at.

"No, no," said another wise ass, "Go home, get corona, isolate yourself, eat shit and die."

He finally had their attention.

"All in due time," he said. "But, first, imagine this."

The room was attentive.

"Imagine you are going down River Road pushing your old *mkokoteni*, the old one because the new one has been repossessed by JK Bank, the people who promised they would never do such a heartless, and ungodly thing because they were patriotic, and good Christian and God-loving and all that shit, and told you all the crap they tell idiots like you who are about to be screwed. And now, because they came for the same one, the God-given one for which they made you start going to church on Sunday, you now push the old one you had rented out to your cousin, who is also now looking for someone to kill you like you have killed his dream of becoming a successful, self-employed Kuyu man. Imagine you are pushing this same old, crapped out pushcart down the road loaded with hate and bitterness and broken dreams and old beer bottles and rusty old iron and old shoes and discarded household junk and shit that you sell for a living, because that is what your life has come down to and life is not easy for hard-working man. Believe me, life is tough for a hard-life man. Always running, dodging, weaving, bobbing, hustling, and always hungry. Always hungry and always

angry. And always on the lookout for an angry county *askari*, a hungry, fat, corrupt policeman, looking for a bribe for himself and his boss. Did you know that the ragged, barefoot madman you see walking down the road with a sack on his shoulders talking to himself and collecting the plastic shit you toss out of your car window has to have a license to do that? To pick up your litter and trade it for a plate of food? Yes, he must have a county license and a city license and pay taxes too, which is more than most of you do. Because that is the law. Don't ask me of which demonic country."

He gestured, both index fingers pointing at the ground and mimed. 'This one.'

"And then, as if that is not tough enough to give you swine flu, or corona, or any other novel flu for which your one-world Government has declared that you must be forcibly vaccinated and branded, you get a phone call from a number you have never seen before. You ignore it and keep pushing. The phone rings again. Again, you let it ring itself to silence. You are too experienced to send any more money to convicts at Kamiti Maximum Prison in exchanged for a map of where they buried loot from the heist for which they are serving life. How many of you have received such convincing phone calls? Hands up those who have."

Not a hand went up.

"Did you send money?"

The hands stayed down.

"Of course, you have, and you did," said the comedian. "So, now you let the phone ring, hoping the criminal gives up. You are yet to learn criminals behind bars have nothing but time on their hands. He calls you over and over and you ignore him. Then you remember you have friends and family who call you too and you answer your phone. A cousin you have not heard from for decades informs that another cousin, Onyango Kona, has been lying at city mortuary since February. Family, friends and relatives have been meeting at City Square Restaurant since he died, and they want your contribution to the funeral expenses."

He paused to let them imagine the death of a cousin they did not know. Not even the bored wallet inspector had time for such phantasy. She unbuckled the belt of the sleeping man beside her, unzipped his trousers, and reached inside his underwear. She felt around down there for the rest of his money.

"Bored sister?" the comedian said to her. "The one on the left. It is under the rock on the left."

"Boring," she said, without looking up, but she did as he suggested and came up with nothing.

Realising the joke was on her, she shot him a look and mimed spitting at him. She zipped the man's trousers and buckled his belt. Whatever else was said about hard life-women, they worked as hard for their money as their hard-life men from whom they stole it. They were more thorough than wives when it came to searching sleeping men for hidden loot. Like big, fat, corrupt policemen, they knew every nook and cranny where desperate men stashed money they did not want found.

"You," he said to a man emerging from a rice induced stupor, "you with your zipper undone."

Several men looked down at their trouser zippers.

"Yes, you," the man on the stage said. "Imagine this for a moment. A woman calling herself Cousin Marjory calls to tell you that your cousin Onyango has died. Onyango Kona Kona is dead? you ask. Very dead, she says. When? you ask. February, she says. How, you ask, because, just this morning, he phoned you to borrow money to bet on Man-U against Man-C in the finals of the English Premier League. No, she says, that can't be true because she just got off the phone with Cousin Kim, who informed her the clan expects everyone to contribute and send money for the funeral by phone?"

There was a flicker of interest in the audience. Funerals, clans, and money always struck a chord with an audience. He paused to let it catch and hopefully turn to interest in the rest of the joke.

"Of, course you don't believe her," he said to the guy now fully recovered from the spiking. "You are not that stupid. You are a man of the world. You have been here before. Strange female voices on the phone asking you to send money by phone, threatening to call your wife to tell her where you were when you lied to her you were in in Eldoret buying potatoes.

You take a day off, just to be certain, and trek to City Mortuary to confirm your fears. You slip the mortuary attendant his customary kickback, for his bother and he takes you on a search through the body bags and the freezers, pulling out body after body, and they are all the wrong ones, and you begin to believe you have been telephone-fooled yet again, and then he comes to the last freezer and last body and, yes, it is that of your cousin Onyango Kona Kona, frozen solid and stone dead. So, who was it you sent money to bet on Man-U against Man-C? You cannot be sure, for Cousin Onyango Kona Kona has pulled crazy stunts before. How do you tell this time he is really dead?"

There was dead silence in the club. The band started drifting in. All eyes and ears were on stage. He had told the joke many times before, but never the same way. Even Mr Dave was intrigued.

"How do you tell?" he repeated. "I give you a hint," he said. "Ochieng is a Kuke."

"How?" asked the bored wallet inspector.

"Only his mother knows how."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because his father was out fishing," he said with rising impatience. "What does it matter who his real father was? The man is dead. How do you tell the man is dead, not faking it?"

"You ask him," she said.

"Well thought," he said, "for a wallet inspector. But the man is dead. He can't talk to you let alone hear you. Now concentrate on the wallets and leave the thinking to someone who is alive. Someone who came here to have fun."

"Boring," she said.

"Woman," he said, in his best nasty guy voice, "You would not recognize boring if it crawled up your ..."

He saw the look on Mr Dave's face and stopped. One day he would entice her to the back of the club and show her boring. He turned away from her.

"How do you tell the man is dead, not faking it?" he asked the audience.

Some men went back to sleep holding on to their wallets. The club lost interest in him.

"Mr Dave," he called out, "are there any stiffs left at the mortuary where you got this lot?"

A bottle landed at his feet. He turned startled, as the audience suddenly came to life and pelted him with everything from bottles to shoes to chairs. The band walked back on stage into a rain of missiles and started yelling for Mr Dave. The manager peeked round his office door, saw what was happening, shook his head and shut the door. The band grabbed the comedian and carried him off the stage and tossed him out of the club. A second later, he stuck his head through the door.

"I will be back," he yelled.

"Go die, Kasim," they yelled back.

The parking was nearly empty. He walked past Mr Dave's black Mercedes station wagon, parked in the space reserved for the manager, to the battered, orange Beetle parked beside it. He tossed his guitar inside and crawled after it. He reached under the seat for the key, inserted it, turned. Not a whimper came from the engine. He turned it again, and again, with the same result. He crawled back out, opened the engine compartment.

He tinkered with the wires, pulling, and pushing.

"Ero!" a voice said behind him.

He turned suddenly and banged his head on the bonnet. The security guard was standing behind him, *rungu* in hand and looking mean.

"I have no cigarettes today," Kasim said to him.

"I have cigarettes today," said the man.

He reached under his *shuka* and into the pocket of his shorts. He took out a packet and offered him one.

"Dunhill?" Kasim said was surprised. "Where did you get these?"

"Shop."

He reached under his *shuka* again and came up with a red and gold lighter. Kasim took it from his hands, lit both their cigarettes and examined the lighter.

"Dunhill? Ero, where do you get such things?"

"Shop?"

"You bought it?" He was impressed. "How much do they pay you here?"

"How much do they pay you?" asked the man.

"Not this much," he said admiring the lighter. "Would you like to swap jobs?"

The man snatched back his lighter.

"Why do you tell stupid jokes about Kikuyu?"

Kasim looked up startled. He could not imagine how a man guarding cars at the car park knew what he did inside the club. He had tried to explain to another parking guard at another club what went on inside comedy clubs.

"Standup?" said the man.

"Standup."

"Stand up how?"

Other educated men with stress-free jobs similar to watching parked cars, men with University degrees, and even men who claimed to have academic doctorates earned in a record time, had trouble understanding what Kasim did. Uncle Richard had been all over the world and brought home a sack full of academic degrees and a Scottish wife, and made Kasim explain exactly what he did for a living, then refused to understand, or accept, that people would pay money to have Kasim on a stage making them laugh. It warmed Kasim's heart that a car park security guard sneaked backstage, risked his stress-free job, to hear him perform.

"Ero," he said to the man he now considered kin, "Just as you watch cars for a living, I tell jokes."

"Why?"

"Apart from the money? I like to see people smile, hear people laugh."

"Laugh at Kikuyu people."

"I tell jokes about all people. Thin people, fat people, ugly people, short people, tall people. Kuyu, Kalenjin, Kamba, Luo people, Mzungu people, Chinese people ... Would you like to hear one about Martian people? There was this Martian man. A real Martian man from ..."

"Mars," said the guard. "I know Martian."

"Good," Kasim said. "No, he was not a car park security guard."

"What was he?"

"Let us say he was a big, fat, corrupt policeman. I tell jokes about big, fat, corrupt policemen too. Everyone loves a big, fat, corrupt policeman joke. Except a big, fat corrupt policeman, of course. You know how they are in real life. After official duty, they put on their civilian clothes and go freelance. They stop you at the corner, ask you stupid questions, turn you upside down and shake out all your money. Then they ... then they clobber you on the head with a baseball bat and threaten to shove it up yours and kick you in the ass if you don't give them your bank card and pin number. Worse than career muggers. You don't have a big, fat, corrupt policeman cousin, do you?"

The man hesitated.

"It is not your fault," Kasim said to him. "Not your fault at all. If you like I can change that to a joke about a big, fat politician. People like a good joke about big, fat corrupt politicians too. Big, fat, corrupt politicians. But I prefer big, fat, corrupt policemen jokes. So, this big, fat, corrupt, Martian traffic policeman is wandering in space, freelancing after work, looking for bribes. He loses directions, runs out of diesel for his rocket police car and crash-lands somewhere not on his gps man.

"Where am I," he asks the first creature to come along.

"Kibra," says the creature.

The Martian whips out his smart phone, snaps photos of everyone and everything in sight and sms'es them back to Mars.

"Planet Kibra?" asks Mars mission control. "Where in the universe is that?"

The Martian cop turns to the Kibran.

"Where is Kibra?" he asks.

"Here," says the creature.

"They are not very bright," he reports back.

"Drop us a pin then," says mission control. "Hang tight."

He drops them a pin and hangs tight. Shortly after he gets a call from Mars. They have Kibra on their telescopes.

"A giant slum in Nairobi," they tell him. "take care, they believe Martians are from Marmanet. Hang in there. We'll send help."

They will send a rescue ship right away, but it will take ten years to get to where you are. Stuck for things to do, the hungry and temporarily homeless Martian cop takes a job as a traffic policeman. As a big, fat, corrupt traffic policeman. So, this big, fat, corrupt, Martian policeman goes to a tea kiosk for lunch and orders the only thing he can afford with his earthling traffic policeman salary. Ugali and hot, black tea. The waiter, also a big, fat, off-duty policeman, Maasai not Martian, working to supplement his meagre policeman pay, asks him, "How hot?"

The big, fat Martian policeman turns to the customer sitting on his right, also a big, fat, underpaid policeman, Maasai not Martian, and dips a finger in his tea to see how hot it is ..."

"This hot, he says," the watchman finished the joke for him and walked away shaking his head.

"You should have told me you heard it before," Kasim called.

He finished tinkering with the engine, slammed the hood shut, slid behind the wheel, and turned the ignition. Not a sound. He thumped the wheel with his hand and got out. He was about to open the hood, when

he remembered he knew even less about engines than about guitars. A man who repaired cars under a tree by the roadside up Ngong Road had offered to sell him a new, used Beetle engine. Roadside mechanics understood such oxymorons. Another tree-shade mechanic, who also knew him and his old car, had offered to swap his engine with a stolen Toyota engine. He was also selling the transmission and the chassis that went with the engine. In the end Kasim would have a Toyota and a Beetle for the same low price. Yet another mechanic, the soberest so far, had recommended scrapping the Beetle and going for a real car.

"Why don't you sell me this crap and buy a car?" he suggested.

Kasim heard it every day from friendly *jua kali* mechanics who could not afford a bicycle. He loved *jua kali* mechanics for their simple approach to life. A lot of them knew him for his Beetle. It was the only saffron Beetle in town and every one of the *jua kali* mechanics knew exactly what ailed it and how to cure it. They were good boys, all of them well-educated, well-meaning souls, but they were always hard up, and their solutions required a down payment.

He could call his cousin, Salim, and ask to borrow money, but that would not go well. Salim had money issues of his own about money and kept calling to ask why Kasim had not paid him a cent for the Beetle as agreed. He did not want to hear how Kasim was not making much over food and petrol, how many months of unpaid rent he had accumulated, how hard he was working to polish his act, or how he was just about to hit the big times.

He was sitting on the Beetle's rear bumper fighting off dejection, when the band stormed out of the club loudly unhappy with the management and started loading their band equipment in their van. Sensing a bond of disaffection, he sidled up to them and let slip that he too was unhappy and thinking of quitting. And would they give him a lift to somewhere he could catch a bus to Kibra. They ignored him, finished loading their equipment in the van. They squeezed in the van and just as he tried to get in slammed the door shut. The van drove away, but not before the band leader, the one who told him to go home and die, showed him the middle finger.

The club manager found him asleep inside the car in the wee hours of the morning. He was about to pass the car when he saw the man slumped over the wheel.

"Kasim?" he banged on the window.

Kasim sat up startled.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just resting my eyes, Mr Dave," said Kasim.

"Go do that at home. Go now."

"Say, Mr Dave," Kasim asked, "how much do you pay your watchman?"

"Thinking of a different line of work?"

"I have a line of work. It is the money."

"You'd have to ask the accountant. Go home now, Kasim."

"I am homeless, Mr Dave. The landlord kicked me out."

"So, what are you going to do now? Move into this parking lot?"

"I will just sit here and work on my jokes until opening time."

"Your jokes need a lot of work."

"I'm on it, Mr Dave."

"I know you are on it, Kasim, but ... I worry about you."

"Don't worry, I'll get there."

"Get to a real job."

"Mr Dave, this job to me is as real rain," Kasim said. "rain makes you cold and miserable, but there is no fruit-picking without it."

"Kasim," Mr Dave said kindly. "You are not a comedian."

"I was born a comic."

"What sort of comic tries so hard to antagonize and drive away audiences from the only comedy club house that will have him?"

"Club Bombay loves me too."

"So much they are looking to hire a hitman to shoot you dead, live on stage, to improve attendance."

"Really?" Exciting news. "We could try that here."

"Of course not, Kasim, that would be a waste of money. Just go find another job, okay?"

"Are you trying to fire me?"

"I fired you months ago, Kasim. I don't understand why you are still here."

"You pay me."

"Just because you turn up," said Mr Dave, sadly. "And I can't find another comedian who does not think he is everything. Last week I auditioned a would-be comedian who ended up confessing he was not a real comedian but a male stripper, gigolo and all-round show man, cum businessman, and offered to help me re-invent the comedy club as a male strip club, with live shows and rooms at the back."

"Disgusting."

"Exactly."

"I love your club, Mr Dave," said Kasim. "Exactly as it is, complete with old and boring audience that does not know when to laugh. Do you think it would help if we hung a sign over the stage that lit up when they were supposed to laugh?"

"That is a stupid idea, Kasim."

"You are right Mr Dave. They have so many problems in real life that there is no room in it for laughter. Problems like Where to hide the blood money, the loot they get from selling their people to the world for slave labour, experimental drug guinea pigs and statistical cadavers for scientific proof. I wonder where they hid the corona billions."

"Bill's billions?" Mr Dave asked, with a cynic's smile.

"You can laugh Mr Dave, call it conspiracy theory, if you like, but then you have not lost your job, been kicked out of your house or lost your wife and family to an imaginary disease, or made tons of money trying to enforce compliance with inhuman kangaroo laws designed to make everyone believe in ghosts. You don't have sleepless nights plotting to take it all with you when you die. Kings, presidents, governors and other earthly gods and demons have been grappling with the problem for centuries, but not like here, not in recent times."

Mr Dave scrutinized him, while he turned it all in his mind, then patted him on the back.

"Have you considered applying for a job as a politician? As a law maker, you could pay yourself as much money as you liked with the tax-payers money. And it would be a real job and all legal."

"I have a real job, Mr Dave," Kasim said. "And it is also legal and essential to human existence, if only you people would see and let me do it."

"This is not a job for you, son," Said Mr Dave. "For you, this is suicide. I've been watching you break your nuts on stage and it just breaks my heart."

"I'm sorry for your heart, Mister Dave, but don't worry about my nuts. King'oo nuts can take any sort of beating. Comedy is my life. I will be a great comedian if it kills me."

"It does not have to be like that. Listen, I was not going to, but I will take a chance on you. I am looking for an assistant."

"Assistant what?"

"My assistant manager."

"I appreciate the offer, Mr Dave, but I can't even manage my own life."

"Do you even try?"

Kasim paused and thought about it. Between day clubs, afternoon clubs and night clubs, there was little left to his life for him to manage. He did not yet make enough money out of it to call it a profession, but he was working on it.

"It is the only thing I know."

"Now may be the time to know something else," Mr Dave said to him. "To start in a new direction. Learn something new."

Kasim thought for a second. He always wished he could read and write music. Learn to play guitar."

"Will I still entertain here?"

"Entertain?" Mr Dave gave a sad laugh. "My customers are deserting, because of you and your jokes, the band just quit, because my customers are deserting me, just because of you and your jokes, and you want to go on entertaining? Entertain whom? You really are a comedian."

He started off shaking his head.

"See you tonight, then," Kasim called after him.

"Tonight, is Monday," Mr Dave opened his car door.

"Tomorrow night then? The day after? Next week? Next year? You can't stop me, you know."

"I know, Kasim, I know."

"I was born to make people laugh!"

"So, you say."

Mr Dave shook his head and entered his Mercedes. Kasim crawled inside his Beetle and curled up in the driver's seat. The sun was up when the phone woke him.

"What's up, Salim?" he asked.

"I just got a call from Aunt Charity?" Salim said.

Kasim glanced at his watch.

"So late?"

"Caesar died."

"Again?"

Caesar had died before, when a tired Aunty Charity mistook his deep sleep for death and phoned relatives. This time Salim had called another aunt to confirm.

"This time for real. We are meeting at Uncle Sam's house."

"I don't like going to Uncle Richard's for his pickup?"

"Uncle Sam's house," Salim said and hang up."

Kasim stepped out of the car. The guards were smoking by the gate.

"Ero," he called.

The men glanced his way, continued talking.

"Give me a push," he said to them.

One said something to the other and they laughed.

"Ero," he called again.

They took their time finishing smoking their cigarettes and walking over. They found him messing with the engine.

"Ero," they said, "what is the problem?"

"My car died."

"We are not mechanics."

"Brain surgeons, I know," he said, "but could you give me a push? In just a moment."

He first had to figure out which wire of the ones he had disconnected went back where.

"Would you believe I wasted two years of my life at polytechnic learning to repair cars?" he said to the security guards.

"I tried to be an architect," said one of them.

"See what I mean?"

"I got my degree too," said the man.

"See what I mean?"

"Seriously," said the watchman. "I have a degree in architecture."

"I have a degree in something too," Kasim said. "Only no one recognises it. Give us a push."

They hesitated. They had pushed Kasim's car too many times already.

"Come on guys," he said, "I am one of you. A working man. I give you my cigarettes."

He entered the car. One of the watchmen came round the car inspecting it, leaned in at the window.

"Ero, why don't you buy a new car?" he asked.

"Ero, push," Kasim told him.

They put their shoulders to it. The car rolled forward leaving a trail of engine oil.

"Faster," Kasim yelled.

He released the clutch just before the gate. The engine coughed, spewing a cloud of thick, black smoke, hiccupped a couple of times then went silent. Kasim got out, raised the engine cover, touched the wires, twisted, and turned, tightened battery terminals, knocked on the distributor cup, then closed the cover.

"One more," he said.

He helped push the car all the way back to the top of the parking then hopped back inside.

"Ero, push," he yelled.

The watchmen put their hearts in it, sending the car hurtling down the drive to the gate. Kasim released the clutch and again the engine coughed dark smoke, let out an encouraging roar for a moment then went dead. Kasim tinkered with wires.

"One more time," he said.

Again, they pushed the car to the top of the drive, sent it scuttling back to the gate. This time the engine did not utter a sound when he released the clutch. The security guards walked away without a word, leaving him to get it out of the way of passing cars.