

GOING DOWN RIVER ROAD
Meja Mwangi

Yussuf emerged from the site chaos white from cement dust and his armpits and back wet with sweat. Finding Ben and Ocholla lazing about doing nothing, he admonished them in Hindi for a full two minutes before he remembered they did not understand a word of it. Then he reverted to Kiswahili and said the same thing all over again, so agitated they hardly understood him.

“Finished?” Ben asked him.

He hitched his trousers over his stomach. He was finished.

“We should be up there on the floors,” Ben informed him.

“And I should be in Mumbai singing in a film,” said Yussuf.

“Whose fault is it?” asked Ben.

“And don’t lie to us,” Ocholla warned.

“Not my fault,” Yussuf told them.

“It is never your fault, “ said Ben. “What’s next?”

“The steel bars are needed on the top floor.”

“Just the two of us?” wailed Ocholla.

“I will get you help.”

“Just one?”

“Ok, two,” Yussuf said helplessly. “We are short of hands, Ben,”

“Hands,” Ocholla spat in the dust. “Always blame hands. What about the *nyang’aus* in the air-conditioned office? What are they here for?”

“Big men,” said Yussuf.

A driver leaned out of the cab of his lorry and yelled.

“Yussuf!”

“Wait,” Yussuf yelled back.

“*Nyang’au*,” the driver cursed.

“*Nyangarika*,” Yussuf cursed back. “You don’t own this site?”

“Don’t forget the two hands,” Ocholla said, following Ben to the steel bars.

Ben tried to lift one end of a steel bar. They were thirty feet long and weighed the earth. Ocholla tried to help, failed to make any difference and sat down on the pile.

“*Nyang’aus*,” he yelled at the top of his voice.

“Who is that?” Ben sat by his side.

“Everyone,” said Ocholla.

“You should cut back on *karara*,” Ben advised.

He would starve to death. The way food prices were going, *karara* would soon be all he could afford. He was certain there was a *nyang’au* at the head office that did not like labourers.

“Yussuf is where?”

They turned up to find Khanji Bhai, self-declared first-class mason in East Africa standing behind them.

“I will eat your chicken curry today, Bhai?” said Ocholla.

“No chicken curry,” Bhai said to him “I want Yussuf.”

“Can I help?” Ben asked.

“Forty years,” he said. “Fort years first class mason. Mumbai, Mombasa, Kampala, Kisumu, Nanyuki, all East Africa. Forty years I come here big man in Dar es Salaam. Yussuf is ...”

“A very bad *nyang’au*,” Ocholla helped out.

“Bad, bad, bad.”

Bhai had requested two pairs of extra hands to work with him on the fourth floor and, instead, got a couple of half-drunk *nyang’aus* who couldn’t tell a metre from a foot, plumb line from pipeline. Khanji Bhai was looking to kill Yussuf for it, but, like everyone else, he had to find him first.

“He went that way,” Ben pointed.

Khanji Bhai rushed back into the dust cloud.

“Do you believe that forty years story?” Ocholla asked Ben.

"What does it matter?" said Ben. "He is one of them."

"How much do his uncles pay him?"

"A million times more."

Not even the cashier knew what the Indians earned. They were paid from the head office in a currency that made sense. Ocholla decided to calculate, scratching the figures on his arm.

A lorry reversed up to the mixer and dropped ten tons of sand. The crane lowered the bucket next to the metal bars. Ben gestured at the controller to wait and yelled for Yussuf. Ocholla continued his calculations. The crane driver whistled down at them.

"I hate ground duties," Ben said. "No one is where you want them and I should far away from here."

"What?" Ocholla exclaimed. "The *nyang'au* earns so much money?"

Ben glanced at the figures.

"More," he said. "When they toss in house allowance, dust allowance and inconvenience allowance for having to deal with the likes of you, it is much more than that."

Ocholla whipped off his cap, tortured his hair and slammed the cap back on.

"All that money for breathing garlic in my face?"

"And for being the boss's nephew, or whatever."

"It doesn't pay to be us, Ben," Ocholla observed.

Ben rolled up his trouser legs to look like Ocholla's. While his shoes were only white with dust, Ocholla's were so encrusted with cement dust they seemed cast in stone. The crane driver whistles impatiently. Ben cupped his hands and yelled an insult.

"How did you get in this business, Ben?" Ocholla asked him.

"Same as you, I ran out of options."

"I had to bribe a site clerk," Ocholla revealed.

"No wonder he is always drunk."

"The one before him," said Ocholla. "They fired him for stealing empty cement bags."

"What did you do before?"

"I can't tell you that, Ben."

A man had to hang on to his skeletons, or some troll from the past might come and take him away.

"I'll go find that Yussuf," Ben said.

He wandered off calling for the foreman in the dust raised by the trucks. The dust cleared for a moment and he found the cement mixture wrestling with the monster.

"Have you seen Yussuf?" Ben asked him.

"The fat Indian with bloodshot eyes?" asked one of the new drivers.

"That's him," Ben said.

"There are three of them shouting at one another by the gate," said another.

Ben took his time getting to the gate and found Yussuf in a heated exchange with Mr Singh, and the *nyang'au* from the site head office who was responsible for Ben's present woes. The way they gesticulated, they were working to a decision to tear down the building and start over. Ben waited to be noticed. Yussuf glanced at him, then went on explaining to his bosses why he was behind schedule, why he had not reached the tenth floor and why they had to get off his back or find themselves another foreman. From the look of it he blamed the *nyang'aus* at the site office for messing with his duty rosters. The man defended himself just as loudly, poking his finger in Yussuf's belly.

This could take long, Ben thought, leaning on Mr Singh's Mercedes. A truck roared by burying them in dust. Out of the site gate, the road was alive with its normal reckless traffic. Ben wondered what would happen if he sneaked out for a mug of porridge. They would probably blame him for the mess.

"Yussuf," he tried.

"Wait," Yussuf ordered.

"Your *chuma* is still on the ground," said Ben. "You have not sent the men you promised me."

"Who are you?" Mr Singh asked him.

"Ben."

"What do you do?"

Ben was tempted to say he was Yussuf's assistant, but the look on Yussuf's face dissuaded him. Yussuf waved him away.

"Go wait for me."

Ben started back to his workstation, keeping clear of the new drivers who seemed to enjoy frightening the hands with their reckless driving. He hugged the side of wall as another tipper approached. The tipper stopped. Ben approached. Then, all of a sudden the tipper charged forward. Ben dove to the right and the lorry, skidding on the dust, smashed into the site wall with a crash of breaking wood and ripping metal.

When the dust settled, he opened his eyes to find the truck reversing from the wall. The driver leaned out of the cab smiling at Ben.

"Sorry, *Affande*," he said.

Ben froze at the sound of the voice. He had hoped he would never hear that voice again.

"I see you remember me."

His mouth opened in a black hole, where the upper front teeth ought to have been. When he laughed, the rest of them were red from chewing tobacco.

"Onesmus?" Ben had to be sure.

"Sergeant Onesmus," he spat tobacco juice at Ben's feet. "But for you I'd be Colonel Onesmus."

"Why stop at colonel," said Ben. "Why not General Field Marshall King of the World?"

"I haven't forgotten, Lieutenant."

The bosses were approaching.

"Around here I am just Ben," Ben said to Onesmus.

"I will get you, Lieutenant."

"Onesmus," said Yussuf, "are you drunk again?"

"Keep out of this, Yussuf."

"You see what I have to deal with?" Yussuf turned to his bosses.

"Is it my fault if the lorry does not steer?" Onesmus asked them.

"I told you to take it for repair," Yussuf said.

He stepped examined the damage to the wall and the truck, shook his head sadly.

"Go before I fire you for this," he said.

Onesmus restarted the engine and eased the lorry forward. Ben scrambled out of the way.

"Next time, *Affande*," Onesmus said to him.

The tipper roared out of the site.

"You see?" Yussuf said to the bosses, and then turned to Ben. "What did you want?"

"The extra hands you promised me?"

"I will fire the *nyang'aus*," Yussuf swore.

He started off in a familiar rush that took place only in his head. After two fast paces, he reverted to his usual slouch-waddle that got him to the scene of any emergency long after it ceased to be. Ben tagged thoughtfully behind.

"That Onesmus," he asked Yussuf. "How did he get here?"

"From Nakuru," said Yussuf. "Always drunk, always insane."

He stopped and turned to Ben.

"Very dangerous," he lowered his voice, though it was unnecessary with all the racket going on around them. "He is a killer."

Ben tried not to let his fear show. He shuffled his feet in the dust, his hands shoved so deep in his pockets he could feel the holes at the bottom.

"*Nyang'au*," he said loudly.

Yussuf turned on him.

"Onesmus," he said.

Ocholla scrambled to his feet, when he saw the foreman approach. Yussuf tried to lift one steel bar, gave up and went for the extra hands.

Ocholla turned his pockets inside out searching for a cigarette.

"Last one," he said lighting it.

Ben lit one of his own. They sat and smoked, enjoyed the sun until Yussuf returned with a couple of weathered hands and turned them over to Ben.

"Get to work," Ben said to them. "I want these bars up top by lunchtime."

They got to work right away, while Ben and Ocholla finished their cigarettes. Then there was momentary confusion while they decided the best way to load the bucket. Then one of the hands had to go to the latrine and Ocholla volunteered to walk up to the fourth floor to wake the crane driver.

Ben sat down to smoke another cigarette and one of the hands started rolling some tobacco. It would take Ocholla at least fifteen minutes to get the fourth floor, another five to get the crane driver to start hauling and another ten minutes scrounging a cigarette each from everyone he met. Then would smoke one and descend in his own good time.

Presently the crane stirred to life and floated upwards. Ocholla returned minutes later looking angry.

"The *nyang'aus* up there," he said, shaking his head. "Three of them smoke *bhangji*, two chew tobacco and four of them are too *nyang'au* to do anything."

"What time is lunch?" one of the new hands asked.

"Far from lunchtime," Ocholla informed. "You *nyang'aus* do some work, or Ben will have you sent back to Busia."

"I'm from Nanyuki," said the man.

"Masinga," said the other.

"From now on, you do what Ben and I say, or we'll have you fired."

Ben confirmed it with a nod and rolled up his shirtsleeves. What he needed was something sleeveless. A T-shirt would absorb sweat and cement dust and turn to a suit of amour.

By lunchtime the sun rained down with a vengeance. Sweat swept dust into tired eyes and tempers grew shorter. The crane groaned and hauled building materials up the building, hands blistered from handling steel bars and lorries rode up with more work for tired hands.

At long last it was lunchtime. Hands dropped whatever they were doing and made for the kiosks across the road. One driver left his engine running, the tipper raised in the process of dumping its load, and Yussuf had to scramble to switch it off. The crane bucket swayed uncertainly half way up, where the driver abandoned it.

One forgot how many people laboured on Development House until you saw them scramble for lunch. Big ones, small ones, fat ones and starved ones, all ragged, cement dust from head to toe and as ravenous as Grogan Road cockroaches.

The food kiosks were spread under jacaranda and blue gum trees across the road from the construction site. Phase one of the labourers' lunch was getting safely across the avenue. The motorists proved they would stop at nothing to get to their own lunch by routinely knocking down pedestrians every now and then. Phase two of the labourers' lunch was persuading the kiosk owner to give lunch on credit. It involved promising one would not be killed crossing the avenue, or lose his job before paying all his debts. This was the hardest phase. Phases three and four include the eating and the subsequent diarrhea.

Ben dashed through a gap in the traffic and made it to Hillton kiosk, where the food was atrocious but where it did not take too much begging and scrapping to get credit. The place was always full as a consequence. Construction hands were not the only *nyang'aus* who could not pay cash for their lunch. Railway workers, Government Printers and clerks Jogoo House had recently taken to lunching under the trees after the Government suddenly closed their canteens to pay Parliament salaries.

Ben joined the line to the open-air kitchen. Mr Hillton's fifteen-years old kept the accounts while his mother served the food. Dressed in a once white coat that was black with soot, old Mr Hillton, walked about chatting with customers and collecting used utensils.

"*Ugali kwisha?*" he said to Ben. "Your favourite is finished."

There were too many hungry mouths to feed, he said. All the new customers from the Government offices were a strain on his business.

"What have you got?" Ben asked his wife.

"Maize and beans," she said.

The last time he ate her *githeri*, Ben spent the afternoon in the site latrine, while Yussuf ran about looking for him.

"*Chapati* and porridge," the son offered. It was too hot for that.

"And tea and bread," said his mother.

"Tea and bread," said Ben.

"Tea and bread," yelled Mr Hillton.

His son thumbed through the credit book until he found Ben's page. He made the total less than the full amount, winked at Ben and flipped the pages to confuse the old man. He made good at the end of the month, when he kept the difference. Not a bad beginning for the son of a former armed robber.

Ben received his tea in a tin that once contained motor oil and the bread wrapped in old newspapers, and cleared the way for the woman to dip a dirty tin in a bucket of dish water, slosh it around and refill it for another customer.

The trouble with the Government employees was they sneaked out of their offices before time and got to the shanty hotels early to take all the crates forcing builders to sit on the hard, bare ground.

"Ben," Ocholla called from under the trees.

Ben sat down and arranged his lunch in front of him. The grass under the trees was worn thin from the many bony bottoms that sat on it. He took a slice of bread, broke it and dipped it in his tea. Ocholla was deep in his *githeri*, chewing so hard his jaws made creaking sounds.

"Doesn't your stomach hurt from that stuff? Ben wondered.

"It also hurts when it's empty."

Ben flicked a fly from the edge of his mug. A low rumble emanated from the workers around him as jaws did what they were meant to do. Conversation was unnecessary. The workers were as enthusiastic about food as they would never be over work.

Ben held the other piece of bread longer in his tea.

"The whole of the treasury is here," said Ocholla. "The *nyang'aus* with Government pens and twisted ties, frowning at food as they shovel it down. Things were looking up for Mr Hillton."

First the messengers, then the clerks, and then the whole Government. Like it or not, old man Hillton would have to expand his business. He might get it in his head to raise the food prices too to take advantage of increased demand. It was the sort of economics even he would understand. If somebody wanted leftovers for their pigs, charge them for it.

Ocholla fished a dead fly out of his porridge.

"Why they strained your tea," he said to Ben. "Germs don't kill *nyang'aus*."

That was Ocholla's philosophy. If germs did kill *nyang'aus*, there would not be a single hand working on Development House. What with all the flies constantly visiting both the site latrine and the kiosks across the road? Germans did not kill hands, but hunger could and, therefore, they ate thoroughly and seriously. Their fear of starvation generated a sort of rage, which they then set loose on whatever food came their way. They ate fast and furiously, gulping down steaming tea and porridge hot enough to melt plastic mugs. It was as though the cement dust they inhaled at work created heatproof lining round their mouths and stomachs.

Ben drained his tea mug and stood up. The Hillton was a convenient eating-place. Lunchers dropped their plates and cups wherever they were for Mr Hillton to pick up. Very often too, street boys hung around to take care of the leftovers before cleaning the plates.

Ben and Ocholla joined the crowd waiting to cross the road back to work, while cars sped by at homicidal speeds, oblivious of the pedestrians. Drivers rarely gave way to pedestrians, for fear of losing forever their right of way. Once the rabble reclaimed a crossing, there was no telling when they would next let go of it.

Finally, a reckless student sacrificed himself by dashing across the road. Tyres shrieked, mothers closed their eyes and everyone else yelled, but the student made it across and turned to laugh at the drivers. Before the drivers could recover, the rest of pedestrian herd poured onto the road and dragged themselves across the road. Motorists honked.

"Hurry up, *nyang'aus*," they yelled.

"You think you are gods in stolen car?"

A driver tried to barge through.

"*Niue uone*," said a pedestrian. "Kill me and see."

"Hurry up, morons," said the driver.

Ben and Ocholla edged round a new car and did not utter a word until they were safely across.

"*Nyang'aus* with cars," said Ocholla, "think they are the only ones with cars."

Ben did not try to understand.

"We will get ours," Ocholla threatened the drivers.

"When?" Ben wondered.

"Don't be *nyang'au*," Ocholla said to him.

They kicked their shoes in the soft site dust, Ocholla scooping tons of it in his open-mouthed shoes. What he needed real bad, Ben thought, was a pair of shoes, not a car. But Ocholla was happy with his work shoes, which had cost him a mere two beers at Karara Center.