DENNIS BRUTUS

CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES

AFRICAN-SCANDINAVIAN WRITERS' CONFERENCE

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CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES

by Dennis Brutus

After my release from Robben Island prison in 1965 I got someone to drive me through Dowerville, the township of my childhood, in Port Elizabeth. It was possible for me to go there because, by one of those freaks of South African legislation, I had been banned among other things, from entering any Coloured, Indian or African township, but not from entering white areas. And Dowerville has since become white.

A little group of 100 "Council houses" in a housing scheme - the earliest in our province and, some said, the first in the country - it had, if anything, become worse. Fences sagged, gates hung askew, torn from their hinges, windows were broken, with rags stuffed in the holes, and lean dogs snuffed among the tufts of grass and debris on the pavements. Bare-arsed children with mucous pendants to their noses stood in doorways and shirtsleeved men sat stretched on the grass or sprawled in the sunlight from the doorsteps. Perhaps it seemed to me worse was because they were white - poor working-class whites (and there are not many of them any more in South Africa) who were capable of only the lowest forms of labour and so remained at the bottom of the scale of white privilege - men who worked on the railway tracks - where it was government policy that only whites could work, or did unskilled jobs (at skilled rates) in the nearby car, tyre and glass-factories, or simply supervised the gangs of Africans labouring in the street. But this was a group which as often didn't work as work.

It all seemed to me worse and sadder. Certainly the non-whites when they had lived there had been constantly threatened with eviction because their places were not sufficiently cared for - though the real reason had been that the government Group Areas Board had decided that this area was a "black spot" in the middle of what it wanted to be an all-white area and had spent years in forcing the removal of the people.

But in the Dowerville of my childhood I remember many people who had been extremely house-proud; in fact they were inclined to be "stuck up" and to regard themselves as superior to those who did not live in housing schemes - Korsten, where most of the "coloured" lived, was a hodge-podge of slum-dwellings and shacks, poorly provided; the taps were in the streets, the roads unmade and many houses without electricity, so that we were sure we were much better off than they were - and "a cut above them."

Of course, there were people in Korsten who owned their own houses, which made them superior to us in other ways - in the housing schemes, in spite of many promises, it was never possible for any non-whites in Port Elizabeth to buy houses.

To ride through the township; to see the streets, I had played in; the house I had grown up in; the houses in which my friends had lived; the houses of people who had been "names" of import to me when I was a small boy. This I had promised myself in the long empty hours when I had been in a prison cell. It had been possible for me to do it. But it had been many years since I had been there last - for some time before going to prison I had been confined to Johannesburg. But I had heard tales of how the people were stubbornly trying to resist being moved. They had been in the township for thirty years. Previous efforts to move them had failed. It might have reached the point where, as at Sophia-

town, the police and the army trucks had had to come, to force the people to move at the point of the bayonet. But at Dowerville people began to speak of the futility of resistance. At that point resistance broke. But many of the "names" had moved long before of course. Andmany of them had died. There was gentle Ben Jeptha, a pillar of our small community and a leading figure at the small school-cum-church which served most of the people in Dowerville. And big Bill Johnson, the American negro boxer and sailor who had settled with his coloured wife - they owned the first gramophone I ever saw, one of those enormous horn-things; years later, when I first heard the hoarse gritty voice of Ma Rainey - Mother of the blues - it was the image of Jim Johnsons huge horn-trumpet she evoked. And there was Nurse Courtiers, who had the only telephone in the area, and Mr. Ruiters who was a special person because he was the principal of the school. There was also the black sheep in our community - women whose lives, I gathered vaguely, were only to be talked about in undertones, and not in the presence of the children, and drunken Pappiegaan who rolled up the street at the weekends, and his no-good son Harry who popped in and out of reformatories.

But on the whole we were a respectable community, and tried hard to live respectably.

In this community my parents belonged and they fitted in with no more discomfort than others. They were both teachers, and my mother had also been prominent in sport and church activities. My father, who had taught at schools at the other end of town, and had spent some years in Rhodesia - where I and two others of our family of four had been born - did so with less ease. But they too tried, in their small house, in discomfort and with a constant battle against penury, to be genteel; I did not evaluate their efforts or their values then - it was simply the milieu in which we existed, nor do I want to try to do so now; it seems to me simply their way of expressing their desire for a richer more worthwhile existence. But they were not very successful. For periods my mother would try ways of supplementing the family income; she gave private lessons at home - always the aspirations towards education in these poorer groups - or gave music lessons, or took in washing and ironing. My father, who had studied French and bookkeeping, gave lessons in both and also did the books of small Indian and Portuguese fruiterers.

Ironically, it was probably the strain of trying to build a decent family that eventually broke the family apart. For many years my father was neither seen nor heard from. It was only after my own marriage, when he lived with us briefly, that my father again made contact with the family as a whole.

Of my childhood years I remember him as a stern and brilliant man, surrounded with books and papers, and much preoccupied with his work. We saw little of him, and when he spoke to me it was because he had to scold me, or to inquire with amused contempt what I had been up to lately.

I was regarded as not merely not bright, but definitely imbecilic. And from what I have been told of myself at this stage, - the years between five and ten - there seems to have been good reason. A boy who could be so abstracted that he could pause with a cup held to his lips and go on daydreaming until the cup fell and broke; or who could be so attracted to the sound of a name that he could sit on a pile of soiled linen chanting "Angelo" endlessly to his own made-up tune until he fell asleep seems to me to have deserved the disdain with which he was treated.

It was presumably this subnormality as well as a nose-injury which I suffered which prevented me from attending school regularly. For long periods I attended no school because of nosebleed - and I was not averse to making it

bleed whenever it suited me. This deprived me of playmates for most of the day - my fellows were all at school - and this led to more daydreaming no doubt. So a taste for solitude and fantasy grew early, but did not prevent me for taking part - enthusiastically but inefficiently - in sport. Football and cricket,both badly. And an occasional streetfight, which I engaged in more through ignorance than courage. On one occasion, having fought three boys successfully in turn, on my brother remarking with his usual disdain that "they were not my size", I undertook to take three of them on at the same time. A broken arm was what I got for my ignorance on that occasion.

But a great deal of my time was spent alone. Mostly in the sunlight in an open area at the lower end of the township. On the stretch of land below the township where the bus ran was an open patch of wild ground. It was full of holes and bumps and littered with builders rubble and refuse. Beyond this was a high fence and a row of trees. The fence was overgrown with creepers and climbing vines, so that one could not see through it. But beyond it, we knew was "KENSINGTON" - a township for white people. Occasionally we heard voices and for a short while I had even become friendly with a small boy of my own age on the other side of the fence. He called me "Darky", and so great was my simplicity that it was not until my brother pointed out that this was insult that I began to resent the word and no longer sought him out.

But though I no longer sought him out, I still spent a lot of time on parts of that waste ground. Because among the rubble and the litter there, wild tendrils of purple convolvulus curled in and out, showing up brilliantly against the white builders sand in morning sunlight.

Even now, when I think of my childhood as a whole and try to recapture its atmosphere and mood, the image that first leaps into my mind is of those tendrils of purple convolvulus, bright and wild, curled around the rubble and the debris in the bright morning air.

The time I am trying to recapture was between 1929 and 1934 when I was between 5 and 9 years old; from 1935 a new phase began. At this time Dowerville was a group of roughly a hundred families (more, since there was always sub-letting in the hundred houses, though this was forbidden by the Council) on the western outskirts of the small but growing town of Port Elizabeth.

The town itself was predominantly white, and became increasingly a white preserve; with white people we had little contact - except, of course that everybody worked daily for white employees, and what contact there was with whites who came to our township was chiefly with rent-collectors, instalment collectors and a few people from the Churches. West and north of us lay the large areas for non-whites; Kosten, on the far neglected edge of the town - a large mixture of half-African and African, with neither conscious of any marked difference; this was before the racial consciousness of the war years, before the energetic efforts to create separate ghettoes for Coloureds and Africans - led , oddly enough by a Jewish refugee from Eastern Europe, Adolph Schauder; before the elaboration and expansion of the vicious doctrine of apartheid.

But even then Dowerville was cut off from the community as a whole; and in this isolated community I was an isolated individual, even as a small boy roaming the streets alone during school hours.

But it is the growth of my literary interests that I should be examining just now.

When I was not roaming around, I was reading. Newspapers, Boys magazines - the Champion, Tiger, possibly Boy's Own Paper, though I do not remember this,

and even advertising handouts.

Probably it was escapism; or compensation. But much of my time was spent reading. I do not remember quite when I learnt to read, or how. Certainly, I do not remember being taught the letters of the alphabet; or being taught to put them together to make words; much of it must have come through a sort of intuitive process - of recognising words which were read to me and then going back to read them myself. This is what I think happened. It is possible because my mother, a teacher, and a parent ambitious for her children, and often lonely because of the late hours my father kept, spent a great deal of time reading stories to us, and getting us to read stories to her. This was chiefly the job of my older brother, Wilfred, but sometimes of my elder sister, Helèn. My brother was four years older, but I was often anxious to emulate him. Not, I think, out of jealousy, but because I was simply not aware that a gap must exist between the capabilities of say an 11-year old and a seven-year old. And so the stories he read at night to the assembled group, I pored over the following day, and partly by reading, partly by guessing, was able to follow. I also insisted on reading them, with numerous halts and irritating mispronunciations, to my mother. Her patience was enormous.

This then I think is how I learnt to read.

But another element was the fact that my mother loved poetry and enjoyed reciting it or reading it to us. And as Wilfred and Helen advanced at school and learnt poems - recitations - which they recited at home, and which she remembered and joined them in, so I found myself being drawn in as well. But she read many more; the Tennyson poems of Camelot and the Round Table, and the narrative poems of Wordsworth were among her favourites and I learnt to love them as well - and this must surely have been to my advantage when I came to the study of English literature at Matric and in University.

Cowboy and adventure stories I discovered largely because of an accident. The Jeptha boys were our close friends; and Mrs Jeptha did washing and ironing for a "Missus" whose sons got several English magazines - "Comics" each week. And when the sons of the Missus had done with the comics the Jeptha boys got them. And they lent them to us. So I got Beano and Rainbow and many others, and learnt about the English world of schoolboys and japes and dirt track riders and the R.A.F. and detectives like Colwyn Dane and Sexton Blake. And Pentonville and haunted Manor Houses. I remember especially one week with a sickly blue cover which carried scarifying ghost stories; in it too appeared a thrilling story of a mysterious Underground train that ran soundlessly through the tubes, manned by men in black cat-suits. It was thirty years before I rode in the London Underground, but the memory of that thrilling serial came back to me then.

In prison, going over the themes of my poetry with some bitterness in the empty hours there, I discovered something that linked my adult work with the beginnings of my literary knowledge; there recurs in my poetry certain images from the language of chivalry - the troubadour, in particular. The notion of a stubborn, even foolish knight-errantry in a quest, in the service of someone loved; this is an image which I use in my work because it seems to me a true kind of shorthand for something which is part of my life and my pursuit in justice in a menacing South Africa. But it only made sense to me when in prison another image came to me; of my mother, in the afternoon sunlight, reading of Sir Galahad's search for light and beauty, with the sunlight falling on the page, and on the glowing colours of a picture of a knight entering a dark forest.

"Romantic nonsense", I short, and resolve to make new starts and to dismiss this kind of romanticism - even to suppress it. But it helps to explain some things.

GEORGE AWOONOR-WILLIAMS

REMINISCENCES OF EARLIER DAYS

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REMINISCENCES OF EARLIER DAYS

George Awoonor-Williams

I cannot remember my birth, but my mother tells me by calculating her fingers and recollecting the prosperity of her father's farm, that I was not born in a season of famine but of abundance and into a household full of women and laughter, and a benevolent grandmother who received her first grandchild with the remarkable fussiness that all grandmothers possess.

It was always great fun when we went to collect firewood, the special thin long ones which blaze fiercely for the cooking of corn wine. And she would sit in the compound and welcome us with balls of bean cake.

I must have been four when my grandfather died, the one called the canoe upsetting hippo. For that was his name "Nyidevu". He was a very dark stocky man who lingers in my memory as my grandfather, who carried me frequently and one day vanished from us. I don't think I was there when he went away. My mother said she was not there when he went away.

Before he went away, I remember, I used to accompany my uncle, now an engine man in a fishing boat at Tema to the distant farm called Lave, which means the forest of animals, where we spent many days. There was a never-ending plot of pawpaw and we sat by the fire in the evening while my grandfather roasted cassava for us to eat.

I have not been there since. It was a wide land marshy at places and rich in grasscutters, squirrels and birds. My uncle Kwawu was my educator and protector. He was an adept and accurate handler of the catapult, and knew how to set traps for animals.

One day, on the way to Lave, he suddenly put his hand on my shoulders and asked me to stop. We were as usual far ahead of the older people. Then he crouched on the ground, and ordered me to do the same. I bent down crouching beside him my heart beating fast for I knew not what was happening.

Then he crawled into the bush, and lay still. I always carried his bag of stones for the catapult. He whispered that I should give him one of the stones. We used to spend many hours, preparing our ammunition, smooth clay from the river which we rolled into round balls to fit the size of the leather sling of the catapult and later dried in the sun. I gave him one and crouched beside him.

Slowly and steadily he put the stone in the sling and aimed. Then I saw the bird, a beautiful feathered type of dove larger than the doves we see everyday, serenely surveying the top of the foliage.

I was happy. My uncle was going to kill it. Then I heard the thud of the stones as it hit the bird on the left wing, and it fell like a ripe mango without a cry.

To me Lave was an extention of our life in the village. We missed only the drumming sessions and the

roving in the fetish groves after game. These were made up for by the wildness of life and its simplicity, and the potmarked benignity of grandfather's face in my infant eyes.

I have now forgotten the names of the children I played with, but they certainly were cousins, members of the same hilarious family, ever noisy, ever eating and ever crying and playing.

Then my sister was born. I must have been getting on for six for after my birth there was a quarrel between my parents. After the big palavers my mother put me on her back and went to her people. But the bitterness diminished, and my sister was the outcome of the reconciliation.

I do not know whether the old people did not realize that we were awake in the birth chamber, the same mud floor with the ikons of grandmother's gods and a corner for the chicken. We watched the birth of a tiny red crying thing, as my mother lay writhing on the mud floor in agony.

We were happy. I think we demanded the next day that she should come with us to bird hunting. Grandmother smiled at us and sent us off with bean cakes.

My mother was the third child of grandfather, he who was called the canoe upsetting hippo. I cannot recollect him fully. I must have been about four when he died. He was a petty chief, the leader of one section of the village Asiyo.

My grandfather kept a large house full of laughter and mirth. His arm was strong but neighbours said his god planted his grinding stone under shady trees. His barn was always full of corn.

He had several farms which were all hoed, sewed and harvested on communal basis. His wealth was not in money but in food and land; for our people care not much for riches that cannot be shared. By these things, he became a leader, not so much that his father had founded.

My grandmother Afedomeshi was a tall dark woman who hails from our royal town Anloga. I remember her vividly because she was always singing funeral dirges, her favourite one was that the day she would die, she would have pity on those who would bear her body to the grave.

She was soft-spoken and gentle, unhurried and had none of my father's quick mindedness and bustle. She bore my grandfather six children, three died leaving three. Two of them died during vicious outbreak of small pox round about 1940.

My grandmother cooked abobo which she sold in the morning to the children in the neighbourhood.

My grandfather had another wife who I do not remember well. I knew my mother's half brothers and sister because we all lived on a huge compound, banana trees grew where the bath water drained.

There was one Kundo who died when we were little boys. My mother always told his story. It seemed he loved his drinks, and having been warned of

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poisoning, he carried his own glass in his pocket at one Christmas, and drank from house to house. That night he came late, refused to eat his supper, put his arm chair on the compound and sang funeral songs until he went asleep.

At dawn when they went to wake him up to go into his room, he was dead. My mother still insists that on his previous night's round of drinks somebody gave him diluted shoe polish to drink.

I grew in this household, enjoying the period of the great celebrations of my grandfather's Yewe Cult, killing rams, and the long nights of medicine drums. There were occasions on which we sneaked among the grown-ups and watched rites that gave us nightmares afterwards.

The cult house was outside our fence. The seasons of celebrations always fell after the harvests, and the time of initiates were ripe to be outdoored. There were young boys and girls who were kept for a period of about one year.

They learn the language of the cult, and are trained in the rituals and observance of the god. They become virtually his children and celebrants, and bare his mark on their back in the form of a cross till their dying day. They are also given names which they bear thereafter, and it is a taboo to call them by their old names.

This is regarded a descreation of the god and the punishment can be swift and at times ruthless. They cannot be abused or insulted publicly, for an

insult to them is an insult to the god.

When the occasion came for these celebrations, my grandmother always worked harder than usual. Firewood would be collected in great heaps, and in this we the children always helped. Foodstuff needed be gathered and stored in readiness for the public feast.

Most of the ceremonies always took place in the fastness of the fetish compound and could go on as long as a week. Then the day of the outdooring would come and the sacred ram would be slaughtered. On this day drums would beat from dawn till dusk.

What interested us most was the day of the Public Feast, when two types of meats were cooked; one was palm soup and the other okro soup; and neither salt nor pepper was used. Then the fires would blaze publicly under huge pots, and the whole area would be filled with the aroma of cooking.

I remember the anxiety with which we anticipated the sharing of the meal. Children from every compound in the area would come and there would be feasting till sundown.

Another great event was the outdooring of the initiates. They passed in semi-circle, dancing to the slow beat of the Yewe drums. And then the beats would change fast. This is when one of the leaders would look round and see if any of the non-members of the cult had broken any taboos, like coming to the place in European clothes or wearing a hat or shoes.

The drums would beat faster and faster, and some of the devotees would go into a trance. The climax

is when the Thunder god makes his appearance briefly. There was wild and frenzied dancing and the god disappeared again into the fastness of the fetish house.

There were the drumming sessions which we never missed. My mother was in the Oleke group and when they had to drum anywhere I shed tears if I was going to be left at home. We would go with her to the neighbouring villages.

It was always the season of new moon. I wore my newly washed clothes smelling of camphor and joined the grown-ups in the circle, and the drums would beat till late. I would wake up and find myself in my bed at home. I had fallen asleep durin g the drumming and mother had carried me on her back.

We loved the rains when they came down and soaked the red earth, and the smell of cooking waxed stronger than ever. We would run into the rain naked and play until mother came with a cane. There were the sunny days when we would sneak away to the little stream and swim in its muddy water till sundown.

We were always warned about crocodiles that could devour us if some evil person put the curse on us, or getting drowned by the currents that rose during the rainy season. Yet these could not keep us away from our beloved stream.

I remember that funerals and deaths always frightened me; they would carry the dead person possessed by the deadman's spirit that refused to go to the cemetery. The firing of guns, the drunkeness, the wailing of women and the singing of dirges would go on

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interminably. Then I would start crying, wondering where the dead man was going to, and why should they put him in the ground and cover him with earth. Would he not suffocate, and become restless? Would he not be hungry and thirsty and howl? And if he howled nobody would hear him because they had covered him with earth.

They always put money and other valuable things in the coffin, for as my grandmother said, he would have to cross a great river, and Kutsiami, the ferryman cannot ferry him across if he could not pay his fare, then his spirit would linger on earth and torment people, and his ghost would haunt the living.

There was never any death without a cause. So when a person died, the elders would go to the spirit callers, who would ascertain from the departed what killed him.

Did he die his own death, or fetish was put on him? Then the departed would tell his story sometimes calling names of killers, how witchcraft was put on him and the witches ate his intestines gradually or how she quarrelled with so and so at the riverside and had been killed because of the quarrel, or because of the land case pending at the court in Keta, he had been given to fetish to be killed.

So, even as children, we heard some hair-raising stories of deaths. Then there were those who died the evil death, death by water or victims of gun shots on hunting expeditions, or those who died by accidents such as fire. They were those who had died the "death of blood".

Custom has it that their bodies should not be

brought into the house. A stage was erected outside the house with palm fronds and sticks, and the dead was laid in state there amidst a lot of gunfire and wailing. The ceremonies would then be performed and the dead man carried into the grave. I had no end of nightmares after witnessing these ceremonies against the expressed warnings of my mother.

It was around 1939, when my mother and I returned to my father's house. We walked eleven miles, with mother carrying my baby-sister at her back, my clothes tied in a neat bundle with mother's headkerchief. I carried them on my head singing merrily at the beginning of the journey. Soon my feet started to hurt and tears flowed before I made the sound of weeping. Then the journey would be long and weary for me.

That was the year when my eyes had begun to open upon the world. When simple innocence of childhood was passing away, to be replaced by that awareness, however hazy, of the world around me. I was five, and I was about to go to school. My nose was always running, and I had only one khaki short, and a sleeping cloth into which I rolled to sleep on my green mat every night.

DAN JACOBSON

BOYHOOD IN KIMBERLEY

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BOYHOOD IN KIMBERLEY

by Dan Jacobson

When people in Europe hear that Kimberley is my hometown they are often much impressed. "Ah, the Diamond City," they say, imagining for me an exotic and exciting background. When South Africans hear that I am from Kimberley, they are not in the least impressed. "That place?" they say. "What a dump. I bet you're glad you're out of it."

In South Africa, Kimberley has a thoroughly bad reputation. It is supposed to be unbearably hot, which it is, for a few months every year. It is supposed to be dry and dusty, which it is, for most of the year. It is, above all, supposed to be dead - which it was, for many years. Thirty years ago, when my family came to Kimberley, none of the diamond mines was being worked, and it was said that a man could take a deckchair into the middle of Dutoitspan Road, Kimberley's main street, and sit there for a morning without being disturbed. And somehow, elsewhere in South Africa, this picture of Kimberley as a kind of ghost-town has persisted, in spite of the fact that today the mines are working - working double-shift, as a matter of fact - and that in addition Kimberley has become a busy marketing and industrial centre. But the belief in Kimberley's total collapse after its years of fame and spectacular growth is clearly more dramatic, and hence more appealling, than the truth. I know that there is a part of myself which resists the changes in recent years which have made Kimberley so much more commonplace and conventional a town, by South African standards, than it used to be. There is a part of myself which still likes to think of the town as some kind of isolated, ironic monument to the hysterias of The past, a symbol of a defunct imperialism and an exhausted money-greed, in the middle of the silence and indifference of the veld which lies around it.

About seventy miles south of Kimberley, where the road and rails cross the Orange River, you leave the truly desertlike Karroo and come to the grassveld of the Northern Cape. Instead of a sparse, broun scrub, the veld is covered with pale grass, barely knee-high, and dotted with the dark tufts of camelthorn trees. Instead of rising only to abrupt, stony *koppies*, each one reared up by itself on the flat, unending plateau, the veld begins to roll, to lift and fall away in great swells. In the early days of the diamond field it was said that you could see the dust of the mine-workings from twenty miles away: now, as you approach Kimberley you could be coming to any South African town of medium size. Only, as you draw nearer, you see around it what looks like an unusually large collection of *koppies* ; when you come closer still, you see that these aren't *koppies* at all, but mine-dumps, which surround the town like a miniature range of mountains. They are all the same blue-grey

in colour. The newest are so smooth and so bald they might be made of stretched cloth; the oldest are so haggard, wrinkled and fissured it is difficult to belive that men had anything to do with the making of them.

Among these dumps, and around the immense open holes from which the dumps were excavated, the town straggles. In spite of all the rebuilding and replanning which has taken place recently, it is still the most irregular and confusing of places, with suburbs pushed apart from one another by the mines and all their debris; with a commercial and shopping centre whose streets don't so much run into one another as lie tilted against each other.People mined in Kimberley before they built; and they built before they had planned how they were going to join their buildings together in streets. So, haphazardly, Kimberley continued to grow. The suburbs were given names like Belgravia and Beaconsfield; its streets were named after people like Gladstone, Lord Milner, the British High Commissioner in South Africa at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, and Lord Lyndhurst, a Colonial Secretary in late-Victorian times. The name of the town itself honoured yet another Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Kimberley, who had complained that he could neither spell nor pronounce "Vooruitzicht", the original Boer name of the farm which Johannes de Beer had owned and on which the diamonds had been found. Monuments and statues were erected within the town, as it grew: a statue of Queen Victoria appeared in a dismal, sandy park named after her; Cecil John Rhodes was eventually cast in metal, facing north, towards the territories that carried his name, and the charter for which he had secured with the money he had made from Kimberley's diamonds. The original canvas of which the town had been built had long since disappeared; but much corrugated iron remained. And more ambitious business establishments, hotels and private houses stood two storeys high, with great gauzed verandahs, lacy ironwork, decorative stucco, fancy gables, fretted wood. Then, abruptly, there came a slump in the diamond trade, and the town simply stopped growing and changing; stopped dead, for a generation and more.

It was toward the end of this long period of utter stagnation that my family came to Kimberley. My father, after thirty years in South Africa - during which he had been everything from a milk-roundsman to a peddler, a farmer to the editor of a short-lived Zionist monthly - had just bought a bankrupt butter-factory in the town. It was then barely four years old; and it's from the moment of our arrival in Kimberley, when my mother lifted me through the window of the train and passed me to my father, who was waiting of the platform below,that my memories become clear and coherent, fall into a consecutive pattern. Before then, all is darkness and doubt; thereafter it is as if the sun had risen on my own consciousness. The image of the sunrise is a peculiarly appropriate one, by the way, for I can remember vividly the impression made upon me by the brightness of the light which fell upon the town. For the first few months im Kimberley I seem to have looked at it through eyes half-closed to escape from the sudden, surprising glare of the place. Everything glared: the sky, the iron roofs, the sand on which so much of the town sprawled.

We went from the station to an hotel nearby, grandiloquently called the Savoy, where we lived until my parents managed to rent a house in Milner Street. Of the house in Milner Street I remember chiefly the days when my brothers and I set on fire the hedge which grew in front of the house, and the fire-brigade came to put it out.

From Milner Street we went to a house in Rendlesham Road (who, I wonder, was Rendlesham?) - this house being one of those immense, double-storied affairs I mentioned earlier, with great wooden verandahs running right around it, both on the ground and first floors. From there we moved to the house which I thought of as home until I finally left South Africa at the age of twenty-four.

The contrast between the feverishness of the past and the stillness of the town as I knew it as a child; the contrast between the energy and ambition which had dug the big holes of the mines, and the air of utter abandonment and uselessness which they had when I saw them; the contrast between the forlorn self-assertion of so many of the town's buildings and monuments, and the emptiness of the veld around it: all these contrasts made a deep and ironic impression on me. Andmy feeling is, when I look back, that I became aware of the contrasts and ironies at a very early age. It was impossible to avoid developing a sense of the tenuousness of the human settlement around me, of its dislocation, of the fortuitousness of its birth, early growth, and sudden decline, of the unpredictability of what would happen to it in the future. And all for diamonds. - which could not be eaten, burned for fuel, worn for warmth.

The sense of tenuousness and dislocation I've spoken of was, I am sure, heightened for me by the fact that I was the child of parents who had not been born in South Africa, but had come from another world - the world of the small Jewish <u>shtetl</u> of the Baltic States thousands of miles away. But if I was half-alien to this scatter of buildings thrown down apparently at random on the veld, so was almost everyone else in the town: alien to it, and alien, also, to one another. They shared no language, no sulture, no colour: they seemed to have been pushed arbitrarily together, and their relations with one another were characterised as much by prejudice, suspicion and resentment as they were by any acknowledgement of a common humanity. The Africans lived in their parts of town; the Cape Coloured in another; the whites in yet others. Interspersed among these groups were smaller communities: Indian and Chinese shopkeepers among the non-whites; Jews and Greeks among the whites. There were comparatively few Afrikaners in Kimberley when I was a boy; but there were enough of them to be felt as a threat by the "English", most of whom were in fact South African-born, and who were then the dominant group culturally. All these people met in the streets and shops, they did business with one another, and the Coloureds and Africans came into the houses of the whites as aservants; but their social life was severely segregated. The Afrikaner children went to Afrikaans schools; the English-speaking to English-medium schools: the Cape Coloureds went to Coloured schools; the African children ...well, most of them, at that time, did not go to school at all, but wandered around the streets in ragged bands. They hung about the Market Square, trying to earn pennies by carrying the parcels of the white housewives; they stood in little groups and watched us, in our "English" schoolcaps and blazers as we cycled or walked home from school; beyond the fences around our school grounds they were the spectators of our games of cricket and rugby. One was always aware of being under the scrutiny of these excluded groups that one could never finally exclude from one's own consciousness.

In the meantime - my parents from one world, another half-formed, half- abandoned, incoherent world around me - I read, and read, in book after book, comic after comic, of a third world: of England, of Britain, to whose empire Kimberley had once belonged, and

because of whose empire I was growing up speaking English and attending a school which modelled itself as much as it dared to on some vague notion of an English public school. The England I read about had an existence in my mind which was quite as real as the country around me; in a way even more real. If I doubted anything, it wasn't the reality the books spoke about, but that of Kimberley, of South Africa - this country where summer came at the wrong time of year, and where winter brought no snow of fog; where there were no villages, only <u>dorps</u> at distances of thirty or forty miles away from one another, along dusty, corrugated roads; where there were no dells, no thatched cottages, no streams, no lords, no ladies,no "conkers", no Cockneys. Instead, we had heat, sand, drought, occasional savage thunderstorms, iron roofs, defunct mines.

How was one to make sense of it all? How was one to reconcile the books one read with the country around one? To reconcile what one's parents told of their childhood with one's own? To reconcile the hours spent playing with the servants in the garden or listening to them talk in the kitchen with the strangeness that severed them from us when they went into their own quarters in the back yard of our house, or disappeared into the dusty, swarming shantytowns of the African "locations"? How was one to reconcile what one read of Kimberley's past with what one saw to be its present: its drabness with its fame; its suppositions wealth with its forlornness; the imperial pretensions that had been nourished inside it with its meagre realities?

In school, our headmaster, an Ulster Irishman, exhorted us to sing "There'll Always be an England", "Hearts of Oak", and "Rule Britannia". In the synagogue bent men wearing prayershawls swayed in their devotions, praying to a God that I seemed always to have known I did not really believein. At my father's place of business gumbooted Africans who towered above me were equally ready to do anything I asked of them or to laugh contemptuosly at my clothes or haircut ormy curiosity about the work they did. A boy in my class was tormented because it was rumoured that his mother "had Coloured blood"; but other boys, far more Coloured in appearance, were left alone because they were good at sport or spent money freely. And the kind of persecution that boy was subjected to could be turned against myself and others, because we were Jewish; it could be turned against boys with Afrikaans names because they "Dutchies"; it could be turned against the African children in the streets. In all this, what was there that was certain or secure or self-justifying; what could be trusted, relied upon to present to one a single, simple face?

The best answer to that question were the physical satisfactions that a place like Kimberley offered, where the sun shone unbrokenly through entire seasons, and the veld began practically at our doorstep. At school, most of the energies of the staff were expended on the sports fields: we were expected to take part in tennis, cricket, rugby, athletics and swimming; and I joined in some of these sports with a passion that was equalled only by my passion for reading. Outside school, on foot and on bicycles, by day and by night, we explored the town and the veld around it, in long, pointless searches and rambles. After my father had bought a cattle ranch thirty miles away from town, we went there over weekends and during the school holidays, and camped in the empty farmhouse, swam and fished in the river, rode across the veld on horseback. We indulged in much minor delinquency around the town, stealing fruit from trees,goldfish

from ponds, plaster dwarfs from gardens, soft drinks from lorries. Several times we were taken down to the local police station; each time we were merely lectured at before being sent home. In many ways, this was the best of Kimberley - not the delinquency, such as it was, but the freedom of those long afternoons the sun gave us, and of those evening "warm as another country's noons," to use the words of the South African poet, F.T. Prince, who was himself born in Kimberley.

But irony returns. We were free to enjoy ourselves, to do what we did, partly because we were white and because we came from respectable homes. We were well-fed and well-clothed; we were always protected, even from the police, by our white skins. And we knew it even then. There was no escaping the doubleness, the social and moral incoherence of our life. And if there was to be no escape from it, and if I was to be a writer, as I knew from a relatively early age I wanted to be, then eventually I would come to realise that I had try and relate my experience of Kimberley to the larger incoherences both of South Africa as a whole, and of the world beyond I had far so long read about, and was so eager to visit.

JAMES NGUGI

LIFE IN A VILLAGE: MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

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LIFE IN A VILLAGE: MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

by James Ngugi

My village on Thabai Ridge sloped gently from the high ground on the west into a small plain on which Rung'ei Trading Centre stood. The centre was a collection of tinroofed buildings that faced one another in two straight rows. The space enclosed served as a market where women from various ridges congregated to sell and buy food and exchange gossip. Indian traders from Nairobi had also discovered this market, where they often came, haggled over prices with the women, let slip one or two dirty words which sent the women into fits of laughter, and then took the vegetables and other wares to Nairobi where they disposed of them to the city people at a much higher price. Other Indians had settled in the area; a few minutes walk from the African shops brought you to the Indian place, where buildings, also in two straight rows, were made of corrugated-iron sheets. These Indians also bought potatoes, peas, beans, and maize grains from Rung'ei Market during the harvest, stored them at the back of the shops, and later sold them during the hard times.

The African shops, though often roofed with rotting tin, had the unsurpassed virtue of having stone or brick walls. People claimed that Rung'ei was the first centre with such buildings in all Gikuyu country. Rung'ei had other virtues, too. The iron snake had first crawled along this plain before climbing up the escarpment on its way to Kisumu and Kampala; for a long time Thabai was the envy of many ridges not so graced with a railway line. Even people from ridges bordering the Masai land paid visits once in a while just to see the train coughing and vomiting smoke as it rattled along. Thabai was proud of Rung'ei. They felt the centre belonged to the ridge, that even the railway line and the train had a mystical union with Thabai; were they not the first to welcome the rail and the train into the heart of the country? Of the story, current to this day in other ridges, which told how men and women and children deserted Thabai for a whole week when the iron snake, foreseen by the Gikuyu seer, first appeared on the land, they kept discreet silence. They ran for refuge to the neighbouring ridges, so the story goes, and only trickled back, and that coutiously, after the warrior spies, armed with spears and simis, brought news that the snake was harmless, that the red strangers themselves were touching it.

Later, the railway platform became the meeting place for the young. They talked in groups at home, they went for walks in the country, some even went to church; but in their minds was always the train on Sunday. On Sunday afternoon, the passenger train to Kampala and the one to Mombasa met at Rung'ei station. People did not go there, as it might be thought, to meet friends arriving from Mombasa, Kisumu or Kampala - they just went there to meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh.

Love-affairs were often hatched there;many marriages with their attendant cry of woe or joy had their origin at the station platform.
"Will you go to the train today?"
"Oh, yes."
"Leave me not behind, friend."
"Then you must be ready on time. It takes you a whole day to just put on your clothes."
"That's a lie in clear daylight."
Girls normally went to the river on Saturday to wash their clothes. Sunday morning was the time for pressing the clothes and also making hair. By lunch-time, they were ready to walk or run to the station. Men had no such rituals. They were ready all the time, and in any case, most of them spent their time at the Rung'ei shops, only a short distance from the station.

The train became an obsession: if you missed it, sorrow seized your heart for the rest of the week; you longed for the next train. Then Sunday came, you went there on time, and immediately you were healed.

From the station they normally went to dance in Kinenie Forest overlooking the Rift Valley. Guitar players occupied a place of honour in this community; beautiful girls surrounded them and paid tribute with their eyes. Men bought dances. When a person bought a dance, the guitarist played for him alone praising his name, always the son of a woman. The man danced to the rhythm alone or invited his friends to join him while others only watched. Nobody else could come in. The conventions governing the dances in the wood were well understood.

Often the dances ended in fights. Again this was well understood and men came prepared, at times courting danger with provocative words and insulting songs. The men organized themselves in groups according to the ridges of origin. Thabai was famous because men from there successfully beat other groups and took away their women. Girls loved men from Thabai, anyway so that taking them captive was never exactingly a very difficult feat.

At the platform things were different. Nobody thought of starting a fight. There, the man who beat you the previous Sunday and took away your woman, was a friend. You talked and laughed together. But he knew later in the wood you would look for a chance to stab him and take away his woman.

"I rarely missed the train", Gikonyo now remembered, years later, when this was only a myth. "I loved to rub shoulders with the men and the women.

"Yet the day I missed the train was the happiest in my life," he told Mugo.

Then Gikonyo worked as a carpenter in Thabai. Though an immigrant into the ridge, he and his mother had become absorbed into the community and its daily rituals. He came to Thabai, a child strapped on the mother's back, from Elburgon area in the Rift Valley province where his father, Waruhiu,worked as a squatter on European farms. Being a hard-working man, it was not long before Waruhiu found himself a centre of attraction to many women.

He got new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not yield warmth any more. He beat her, hoping that this would drive her away. Wangari stuck on. Eventually, Waruhiu ordered her to leave his home and cursed mother and son to a life of ever-wandering on God's earth. But Wangari did not wander for long; surely she could find welcome in the Gikuyu land? "Waruhiu thinks I will die because I am poor and have nothing to eat," she one day said to herself sitting on a stone near Elburgon station. "But there is no home with a boy-child where the head of a he-goat shall not cook," she patted the child to her breast and hauled an unspoken challenge to Waruhiu by boarding a train which took her to Thabai.

Wangari sent her son to school. But Gikonyo did not stay there for long because the woman had not enough money for fees. Fortunately at school he had learnt a little carpentry, and this he determined to use and make a living.

He loved carpentry.

Holding a plane, smoothing a piece of wood, all this sent a thrill of fear and wonder to the young man. The smell of wood fascinated him. Soon his senses developed sharp discrimination, so that he could tell any type of wood by a mere sniff. Not that the young carpenter made it appear so easy. In fact, Gikonyo acted a small ritual and the performance varied depending on who was present. The drama went like this:

A woman has brought a piece of wood - she wants to know what type of wood it is. The carpenter takes it, gives it a casual glance, and then carelessly flings it into a pile of the other pieces. He continues with the job in progress. The woman stands there admiring the movement of his muscles. After a while he lifts the piece of wood, its far end resting on the table. He shuts the left eye and peers at the wood with his half-open right eye. Then he closes his right eye and repeats the performance with the other eye. This finished, he knocks at it swiftly, rhythmically, with the knuckle of the right front finger as if he is exorcising spirits from the wood. Next he takes the hammer; strike, listen, strike, listen. Then he sniffs the wood carefully (that is, professionally), and gives it back to the woman. He resumes the other job.

"What is the wood? It is Podo - ?" the woman ventures to ask, overwhelmed by the professional sniffs and pauses.

"Podo? Hmm. Bring it." He sniffs at it again, slowly turns the wood round and round, nodding his head knowingly. Then he spends a few minutes explainingwhy the piece of wood is not podo.

"It's Camphor. Have you ever heard of it? Grows mostly in the high ground in the Aberdares and around Mount Kenya. Very good timber. Why else do you think the white people appropriated that land to themselves?" the carpenter pronounces with quiet wisdom.

The workshop was a small table set against the wall of Gikonyo's hut. Towards sunset, Wangari always came to the workshop, rummaged through the wood shavings, hoping to collect one or two unwanted pieces for the fire.

"Do you need this?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, leave that, mother. You never see a piece of wood but you think of burning it. They cost money you know. But that is what a woman will never understand.

"What about this?" Wangari was not easily daunted. She loved to hear the voice of the son admonishing her.

"All right. But don't come again."

On the following day, at about the same time, she would be there. She picked a saw or a hammer and examined it carefully as if it was a mysterious object, Gikonyo would be forced to laugh.

"I believe you would have made a good carpenter, mother."

"Whatever we say, these people are truly clever. How did they think of such tools which can cut anything?" Wangari always referred to white men as these people.

"Go and cook. These things are beyond women."

"Do you need this piece here?"

"O, mother."

Gikonyo's secret ambition was to own a piece of land where he could settle his mother. This needed money. As he grew up, this ambition to acquire wealth increased whenever he saw or thought of Mumbi, a girl whose voice and face caused an anguished throb in him. But he thought his heart was beating in the wilderness. Surely Mumbi, the most beautiful girl on the ridge, would never deign to bring him a calabash filled with cool water and say: drink this for me. Nevertheless, he waited and groped his way slowly. He saw Mumbi moving in the country paths among the pea-flowers, and green beans and maize plants, and he braced himself to make his desires known. But courage failed him. He greeted her and passed on.

Mumbi's father, Mbugua, was a well-known elder in the ridge. His home consisted of three huts and two granaries where crops were stored after harvests. A bush - a dense mass of creepers,brambles, thorn trees, nettles and other stinging plants - formed a natural hedge around the home. Old Thabai, in fact, was a village of such grass-thatched huts thinly scattered along the ridge. The hedges were hardly ever trimmed and a few wild animals made their lairs there. Mbugua had earned his standing in the village through his own achievements as a warrior and a farmer. His name alone, so it is said, sent fear quivering among the enemy tribes. Those were the days before the whiteman ended the tribal wars, But Mbugua's reputation survived the peace. His word, in disputes brought to the council of elders for settlement, always carried weight. Wanjiku, his only wife, always called him her young warrior. She was a small woman, a striking contrast to her big-limbed warrior. Her voice was vibrant with warmth and kindness. It was her voice (she used to sing at dance gatherings in her day) that first captured Mbugua's heart. Of their two sons, Kihika and Kariuki, Wangari liked Kariuki mainly because he was younger and the last born. Mbugua secretly admired Kihika as the one most likely to take after him in courage and a wellregulated arrogance.

Kariuki also admired and looked up to Kihika. The boy longed for the time when he would join the ranks of men and be free to touch the sharp breasts of the initiated girls who often came to their house at night. Kariuki attended school at Manguo, one of the earliest Gikuyu Independent schools in the country. He loved books and in the evening read by the light from the wood fire. But how could he concentrate when all the young men and women of his brother's rika played and told wicked jokes and stories? He was not supposed to see or hear anything. "You will be thrown out of this house, you Kihii," the men would warn him when they caught him laughing. Gikonyo often brought him sweets and things. For this, Kariuki liked the carpenter. Gikonyo used to tell funny stories which Kariuki really enjoyed. But as months and years went on, Gikonyo became increasingly quiet and rarely spoke if Mumbi was present. It was Karanja, in fact, who took the stage and always sent women into fits of ribald laughter. Karanja had a way of telling stories and episodes so that even without saying so he emerged the hero. As a result Kariuki had come to admire him for bravery, wisdom, and versatility.

Homes, like Mumbi's, with beautiful girls, were popular with young men and women. Wanjiku had to keep a regular supply of food. A home full of children is never lonely, she always said. When men arrived she excused herself and discreetly left the hut. "Give them food", she would tell Mumbi.

Mumbi often went to the station platform on Sundays. The rattling train always thrilled her. At times she longed to be the train itself. But she never went to the dances in the forest. She always came back home, after the train, and with one or two other girls, would cook, or undo and re-do their hair. Her dark eyes had a dreamy look that longed for something the village could not give. She lay in the sun and ardently yearned for a life in which love and heroism suffering, and martyrdom were possible. She was young. She had fed on stories in which Gikuyu women braved the terrors of the forest to save people, of beautiful girls given to the gods as sacrifice before the rains. In the Old Testament she often saw herself as Esther: so she revelled in that moment when Esther finally answers King Ahasuera's question and dramatically points at Haman, saying: The adversary and enemy is the wicked Haman.

She enjoyed the admiration she excited in men's eyes. When she laughed, she threw back her head and her neck would gleam in the firelight. At such a time, Gikonyo would not trust himself to speak. It was said that Richard, son of Rev. Jackson, had proposed to Mumbi. Jackson was a leading clergyman in Kihingo. It was also rumoured that Richard, who was then in his last year at Siriana Secondary School, would later go to Uganda or England to complete his learning. Anyway, Mumbi declined the offer without hurting his pride. So that they remained good friends. Richard often stole from home at night to go and see Mumbi at Thabai. So Gikonyo asked himself: if she had refused such a man, what chance had he?

He threw himself into work. He made chairs for Thabai people; he repaired their broken cupboards; he fixed new doors and windows to their huts. A woman brought him a broken chair: she wanted a new leg fixed. He looked at it carefully, whistling a popular tune.

"Three shillings," he said.

"What, three shillings, my son?"

"We cannot make it for nothing, you know."

"My son. I am your mother. Let me give you a shilling."

"All right," he said, knowing that she probably would not pay him, even a shilling.

And the woman would go away knowing that he would eventually repair the chair (it might take him two months or more) and she would probably only pay him half the amount quoted. If she paid him at all, she would spread out the paying over a number of months.

"At this rate, I shall die poor," he would complain to his mother.

"It's nothing," Wangari often told him. "You know if they had money, they would pay you."

Feeling tired, he one day brought out his guitar and started to play. He had spent all the morning and afternoon making furniture for a couple recently married. The man had promised to pay at the end of the month. Gikonyo liked his guitar. It was an old one, but he had paid quite a lot of money to the Indian trader.

He played softly, singing to himself, trying a new tune. Soon he was absorbed in his voice and playing, and the hardness began to leave his muscles. The sun was settling, the lengthened shadows of trees and houses were slowly merging.

Then the shavings rustled. Gikonyo started, and was a little embarrassed and exited at seeing Mumbi. She held an unfinished pullover against her breast.

"Why did you stop?" she smiled.

"Oh, I didn't want you to hear my carpenter's voice and see my hands destroying both the song and the strings."

"Is that why you never speak when you come to our place?" There was a malicious twinkle in her eyes.

"Don't I?"

"You should know... Anyway, I stood there all the time and heard you sing and play.It was good."

"My voice or hands?"

"Both."

"How do you know whether my playing is good or bad? You never come to the dances on Sunday."

"Aah, true I never do. But do you think all other men are as mean as you? Karanja often plays to me alone at home. I sit, I knit my pullover, he plays. He is a good player."

"He is a good player," Gikonyo agreed curtly. Mumbi did not notice Gikonyo swallowing something in his throat. For at that time her mood had changed from playfulness to seriousness.

"But you also played - I never knew you could play so - and it was moving perhaps because you were playing to yourself." She said with a frankness that touched Gikonyo, in fact it pleased him.

"Maybe sometimes I can play to you."

"Play now, please play it to me," she said eagerly. And Gikonyo took this for a challenge, he feared strength would desert him.

"Then you must sing as I play. Your voice is so nice," he said, and took the instrument.

But he found his hands were shaking. He strummed the strings a little, desperately trying to steady himself. Mumbi waited for him to play the tune. As his confidence rose, Gikonyo suddenly felt as if Thabai had suspended all activities, the vibration surely went into the heart of the land. Mumbi's voice sent a shudder down his back. His fingers and heart were full. So he groped, slowly, surely, in the dark, towards Mumbi. He struck, he appealed, he knew his heart fed power to his fingers. He was light inside, almost gay.

And Mumbi's voice trembled with passion as she weaved it round the vibrating strings. She felt the workshop, Thabai, earth, heaven, felt their unity. Then suddenly her heart was whipped up, she now rode on strange waves: alone defying the wind and the rain; alone, fighting hunger and thirst in the desert; alone, struggling with strange glad tidings to her people.

The song ended. Gikonyo could almost touch the solid twilight calm.

"How is it the country is so quiet and peaceful now," she asked.

"It is always so before darkness falls."

"You know, I felt like Ruth gathering sheaves to herself in the field."

"I believe you'll go to heaven. You always talk the biblie."

"Don't mock," she went on seriously. "Do you think it will always be like this, I mean the land?"

"I don't know, Mumbi," he answered, catching the solemnity from her. "Haven't you heard the new song?"

"Which? Sing it."

"You know it too. I believe it is Kihika who introduced it here. I only remember the words of the chorus:

Gikuyu na Mumbi
Gikuyu na Mumbi
Gikuyu na Mumbi
Nikihiu ngwatiro.

It was Mumbi who now broke the solemnity. She was laughing quietly.

"What is it?"

"Oh, Carpenter, Carpenter. So you know why I came?"

"I don't,"he said, puzzled.

"But you sing to me and Gikuyu telling us it is burnt at the handle."

At that point Wangari, who had gone to fetch water from the river appeared on the scene. She was pleased to see Mumbi.

"You should have born a girl instead of having a lazy male," Mumbi teased her.

"It's my misfortune," Wangari answered back, laughing.

"But it's nothing. The needs of an old woman are few. And that man is so lazy that he never wastes water in washing himself or his cloths."

"You are unfair to me, mother. You'll make all the girls run away from me."

"Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"No," Mumbi said quickly. "I must be home before darkness falls."

She turned to a small basket she was carrying and took out a panga.

"You see this panga needs a wooden handle. The old one was burnt in the fire by mistake. My mother wants it quickly because it is the only oneshe has got for cultivating."

Gikonyo took the panga and examined it critically.

"How much?" Mumbi asked.

"Don't break your heart over that. This is nothing."

"But you cannot work for nothing?"

"I am not an Indian shopkeeper," he said irritably.

Karanja, Kihika and Gitogo and one other man came. Gikonyo's workshop was another place where young men used to gather for gossip. Karanja called out to Wangari.

"Mother of men, we have come, Make us tea."

"Wait a little," Wangari's voice reached them from the hut."Water is already on the fire."

Mumbi, who chatting with Gitogo, using hand signs, said she was going home. The men protested in chorus. But she insisted on getting away.

"All right. I will see you off," Karanja offered gallantly.

"Come, my faithful," Mumbi sang out to him. Soon Karanja and Mumbi were lost in the gathering darkness.

"Let us go into the hut," Gikonyo told the others, his voice unusually low.He was envious of Karanjaś ease and general assurance

"Sit down," she said, rising to give him her seat. Then she saw the panga. She rushed forward and took it from his hands. For a moment, she stood there, admiring the new handle. Suddenly she pranced towards the hut shouting, "Mother! Mother! come and see."

Sweet warmth swelled up in Gikonyo. Joy pained him in the bowels. His work was done. For Mumbi's smile, for that look of appreciation he would go on making chairs, tables, cupboard; restore leaking roofs and falling houses; repair doors and windows in all Thabai without a cent in return. He would never make money, he would remain poor, but he would have her.

He was still standing, revelling in the vague resolutions, when Mumbi came out with another chair and again invited him to sit.

"I am in great hurry," he protested without conviction.

"Are you going to a wedding?"

"No, not unless yours." he laughed, but remembering Karanja, he stopped and sat down without another word.

"Why all the hurry? We are not going to eat you," she said, vainly attempting to summon anger to her voice, which pleased Gikonyo.

He watched Mumbi make her hair: how he longed to touch it, and at the thought blood rushed to his finger-tips. A small mirror was propped between Mumbi's knees; her hands, bent at the elbows, met over her head and the fingers played with the hair. Occasionally she gave Gikonyo a quick under-glance and a smile. Gikonyo drank all.

Then Kihika and Karanja arrived at the scene, and Gikonyo hated them for challenging his monopoly over Mumbi's attentions: why did they have to appear at that moment? Resigning himself to the inevitable, Gikonyo joined in the talk which unerringly led to politics and the gathering storm in the land.