

A Mercedes Funeral

(1976)

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Socialist Stories***

If you ever find yourself in Ilmorog, don't fail to visit Ilmorog Bar & Restaurant: there you're likely to meet somebody you were once at school with and you can reminisce over old days and learn news of missing friends and acquaintances. The big shots of Chiri District frequent the place, especially on Saturday and Sunday evenings after a game of golf and tennis on the lawn grounds of the once FOR EUROPEANS ONLY Sonia Club a few miles away. But for a litre or two of Tusker or Pilsner they all drive to the more relaxed low-class parts of Ilmorog. Mark you, it is not much of a restaurant; don't go there for chickens-in-baskets and steak cooked in wine; it is famous only for charcoal roasted goat meat and nicely dressed barmaids. And of course, gossip. You sit in a U-shaped formation of red-cushioned sofa seats you'll find in public bars all over Kenya. You talk or you listen. No neutrality of poise and bearing, unless of course you pretend: there's no privacy, unless of course you hire a separate room.

It was there one Saturday evening that I sat through an amusing story. Ever heard of a Mercedes Benz Funeral? The narrator, one of those of our dark-suited brothers with a public opinion just protruding, was talking to a group, presumably his visitors, but loudly for all to hear. A little tipsy he probably was; but his voice at times sounded serious and slightly wrought with emotion. I sipped my frothy beer, I am a city man if you want to know, I cocked my ears and soon I was able to gather the few scattered threads; he was talking of someone who had once or recently worked in a Bar:

... not much . . . not much I must confess, he was saying. The

truth of the matter, gentlemen, is that I too had forgotten him. I would not even have offered to tell you about him except . . . well . . . except that his name surfaced into sudden importance in that ridiculous affair – but, gentlemen, you must have read about it . . . no? Is that so? . . . Anyway the affair was there all right and it really shook us in Ilmorog. It even got a few inch columns in the national dailies. And that's something, you know, especially with so many bigger scandals competing for attention. Big men fighting it out with fists and wrestling one another to the ground . . . candidates beaten up by hired thugs . . . others arrested on nomination day for mysterious reasons and released the day after, again for mysterious reasons. A record year, gentlemen, a record year, that one. With such events competing for attention, why should any one have taken an interest in a rather silly story of an unknown corpse deciding the outcome of an election in a remote village town? And yet fact number one . . . not, gentlemen, that I want to theorize . . . yet the truth is that his death or rather his funeral would never have aroused so much heat had it not come during an election year.

Now, let me see, count rather: there was that seat in parliament: the most Hon. John Joe James . . . would you believe it, used to be known as John Karanja but dropped his African name on first being elected . . . standard, efficiency and international dignity demanded it of him you know . . . anyway he wanted to be returned unopposed. There was also the leadership of the party's branch: the chairman . . . wait, his name was Ruoro but he had been the leader of the branch for so long – no meetings, no elections, ran the whole thing himself – that people simply called him the chairman . . . he too wanted a fresh, unopposed mandate. There were vacancies in the County Council and in other small bodies, too numerous to mention. But all the previous occupants wanted to be returned with increased majorities, unopposed. Why, when you come to think of it, why do a few out of jobs they had done for six years and more? Specialists . . . experience . . . all that and more. And why add to unemploy-

ment? Unfortunately there were numerous upstarts who had different ideas and wanted a foot and a hand in running the very same jobs. Dynamism . . . fresh blood . . . all that and more. Naturally gentlemen, and I am sure this was also true in your area, the job which most thought they could execute with unique skill and efficiency was that of The Hon. M.P. for Ilmorog. See what I mean? More Tusker beer gentlemen? Hey sister . . . sister . . . these barmaids! . . . baada ya kazi jiburudishe na Tusker.

Well, after the first round of trial runs and feelers through a whispering campaign, the field was left to the incumbent and three challengers. There was the university student . . . you know the sort you find these days . . . a Lumumba goatee . . . weather-beaten American shirts and jeans . . . they dress only in foreign clothes . . . foreign fashions . . . foreign ideas . . . you remember our time in Makerere under De Bunsen? Worsted woollen suits, starched white shirts and ties to match . . . now that's what I call proper dressing . . . anyway, our student challenger claimed to be an intellectual worker and as such could fully understand the aspirations of all workers. There was also an aspiring businessman. An interesting case this one. Had just acquired a loan to build a huge self-service supermarket here in Ilmorog shopping centre. It was whispered that he had diverted a bit of that loan into his campaign. He would tell his audience that man was born to make money: if he went to parliament, he would ensure that everybody had a democratic chance to make a little pile. He himself would set an example: a leader must lead. Also in the arena was a Government Chief, or rather ex-Chief, who had resigned his job to enter the race. He claimed that he would make a very good chief in parliament. Sweat and sacrifice, he used to say, were ever his watchwords. As an example of S and S, he had not only given up a very promising career in the civil service to offer himself as a complete servant of the people, but had also sold three of his five grade cows to finance his campaign. His wife protested of course, but

... sister, I asked you for some beer ... we all have our weaknesses, eh?

Each challenger denounced the other two accusing them of splitting the votes. If they, the other two that is, were sincere, would they not do the honourable thing, stand down in favour of one opponent? The three were however united in denouncing the sitting member: what had he done for the area? He had only enriched himself and his relatives. They pointed to his business interests, his numerous buildings in the area, and his many shares in even the smallest Petrol Station in the Constituency. From what forgotten corner had he suddenly acquired all that wealth, including a thousand-acre farm, asked the aspiring businessman? Why had he not given others a democratic chance to dip a hand in the common pool? The student demanded: what has he done for we Wafanyi Kazi? The ex-Chief accused him of never once visiting his constituency. His election had been a one-way ticket to the city. They all chorused: let the record speak, let the record speak for itself. Funnily enough gentlemen, the incumbent replied with the same words - yes, let the record speak - but managed to give them a tone of great achievement. First he pointed out what the government had done ... the roads ... hospitals ... factories ... tourist hotels and resorts ... Hilton, the Intercontinental and all that. Anybody who said the government had done nothing for Wananchi was demagogic and indulging in cheap politics. To the charge that he was not a Minister and hence was not in government, he would laugh and flywhisk away such ignorance. From where did the government derive its strength and power? From among whom was the Cabinet chosen? To the charge that he had made it, he answered by accusing the others of raging with envy and congenital idleness ... a national cake on the table ... some people too lazy or too fat to lift a finger and take a piece ... waited to have it put into their mouths and chewed for them, even. To the ex-Chief he said: didn't this would-be-M.P. ... a man without any experience ... didn't he know that the job of an M.P. was to

attend parliament and make good laws that hanged thieves, repatriated vagabonds and prostitutes back to the rural areas? You don't make laws by sitting in your home drinking Chang'aa and playing draughts. For the student he had only scornful laughter: intellectual workers . . . he means intellectuals whose one speciality is stoning other people's cars and property! Gentlemen . . . there was nothing in the campaign, no issues, no ideas . . . just promises. People were bored. They did not know whom to choose although the non-arguments of the aspiring businessman held more sway. You, your bottle is still empty . . . you want a change to something stronger? Vat 69? No? . . . oh . . . oh . . . Chang'aa, did you say? Ha! ha! ha! . . . Chang'aa for power . . . Kill-me-Quick . . . no, that is never in stock here . . . sister, hey sister . . . another round . . . the same.

You mention Chang'aa. Actually it was Chang'aa, you might say, that saved the campaign. Put it this way. If Wahinya, the other watchman in Ilmorog Bar and Restaurant, had not suddenly died of alcoholic poisoning, our village, our town would never have been mentioned in any daily. Wahinya dead became the most deadly factor in the election. It was during a rather diminished public meeting addressed by the candidates that the student shouted something about 'We Workers'. The others took up the challenge. They too were workers. Everybody, said the incumbent, everybody was a worker except the idle, the crippled, prostitutes and students. A man from the audience stood up. By now people had lost their original awe and curiosity and respect for the candidates. Anyway this man stands up. He was a habitual drunk - and that day he must have broken a can or two. Who cares about the poor worker, he asked, imitating in turn the oratorical gestures of each speaker. These days the poor die and don't even have a hole in which to be put, leave alone a burial in a decent coffin. People laughed, applauding. They could well understand this man's concern for he himself, skin and bones only, looked on the verge of the grave. But he stood his ground and mentioned the case of Wahinya. His words had an electric effect.

That night all the candidates singly and secretly went to the wife of the deceased and offered to arrange for Wahinya's funeral.

Now I don't know if this be true in your area, but in our village funerals had become a society affair, our version of cocktail parties. I mean since Independence. Before 1952, you know before the Emergency, the body would be put away in puzzled silence and tears. People, you see, were awed by death. But they confronted it because they loved life. They asked: what's death? because they wanted to know what was life! They came to offer sympathy and solidarity to the living and helped in the burial. A pit. People took turns to dig it in ritual silence. Then the naked body was lowered into the earth. A little soil was first sprinkled over it. The body, the earth, the soil: what was the difference? Then came the Emergency. Guns on every side. Fathers, mothers, children, cattle, donkeys – all killed, and bodies left in the open for vultures and hyenas. Or mass burial. People became cynical about death: they were really indifferent to life. You today: me tomorrow. Why cry my Lord? Why mourn the dead? There was only one cry: for the victory of the struggle. The rest was silence. What do you think, gentlemen? Shall we ever capture that genuine respect for death in an age where money is more important than life? Today what is left? A showbiz. Status. Even poor people will run into debts to have the death of a relative announced on the radio and funeral arrangements advertised in the newspapers. And gossip, gentlemen, the gossip. How many attended the funeral? How much money was collected? What of the coffin? Was the pit cemented? Plastic flowers: plastic tears. And after a year, every year there is an Ad. addressed to the dead.

IN LOVING MEMORY. A YEAR HAS PASSED BUT TO US IT IS JUST LIKE TODAY WHEN YOU SUDDENLY DEPARTED FROM YOUR LOVED ONES WITHOUT LETTING THEM KNOW OF YOUR LAST WISH. DEAR, YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A GUIDING STAR, A STAR THAT WILL ALWAYS SHINE, etc., etc.

You see, our man was right. It was a disgrace to die poor: even the Church will not receive the poor in state, though the priest will rush to the death-bed to despatch the wretch quickly on a heaven-bound journey, and claim another victim for Christ. So you see where Wahinya's death, a poor worker's death, comes in!

I don't know how far this is true, but it is said that each candidate would offer the wife money if she would leave all the funeral arrangements and oration in their sole hands . . . You say, she should have auctioned the rights? Probably . . . probably. But those were only rumours. What I do know for a fact, well, a public fact, was that the wife and her husband's body suddenly vanished. Stolen, you say? In a way, yes. It was rumoured that J.J.J. had had a hand in it. The others called a public meeting to denounce the act. How could anybody steal a dead body? How dare a leader show so little respect for the dead and the feelings of the public? The crowd must also have felt cheated of a funeral drama. They shouted: Produce the body: produce the body! The meeting became so hot and near-riotous that the police had to be called. But even then the tempers could not be cooled. The body, the body, they shouted. J.J.J., normally the very picture of calmness, wiped his face once or twice. It was the student who saved the day: he suggested setting up a committee not only to investigate the actual disappearance but to go into the whole question of poor men's funerals. All the contestants were elected members of the committee. Well, and a few neutrals. There was a dispute as to who would chair the committee's meetings. The burden fell on the chairman of the branch. Thereafter all the candidates tried to please him. Rumours became even more rife. Gangs of supporters followed the committee and roamed through the villages. And now the miracle of miracles. As suddenly as she had disappeared, Wahinya's wife now surfaced and would not disclose where she had been. More, the body had found its way to the City Mortuary. This started even more rumours. No beer-party was complete without a story relating to

the affair. Verbal bulletins on the deliberations of the committee were daily released and became the talking points in all the bars. People, through the chairman, were kept informed of every detail about the funeral arrangements. Overnight, so to speak, Wahinya had, so to speak, risen from the dead to be the most powerful factor in the elections. People whispered: who is this Wahinya? Details of his life were unearthed: numerous people claimed special acquaintance and told alluring stories about him. Dead, he was larger than life. Dead, he was everybody's closest friend.

Me? Yes, gentlemen, me too. I had actually met him on three different occasions: when he was a porter, then as a turn-boy and more recently as a watchman. And I can say this: Wahinya's progress from hope to a drinking despair is the story of our time. But what is the matter, gentlemen? You are not drinking? Sister, hey, sister . . . see to these gentlemen . . . well, never mind . . . as soon as they finish this round . . . Yes, gentlemen . . . to drink, to be merry . . . Life is – but no theories I promised you . . . no sermons, although I will say this again: Wahinya's rather rapid progress towards the grave is really the story of our troubled times!

There was a long pause in the small hall. I tried to sip my beer, but half-way I put the glass back on the table. I was not alone. Half-full glasses of stale beer stood untouched all round. Everybody must have been listening to the story. The narrator, a glass of beer in his hand, stared pensively at the ground, and somehow in that subdued atmosphere his public opinion seemed less offensive. He put the glass down and his voice when it came seemed to have been affected by the attentive silence:

I first came to know him fairly well in the 1960s, he started. Those, if you remember, were the years when dreams like garden perfume in the wind wafted through the air of our villages. The years, gentlemen, when rumours of Uhuru made

people's hearts palpitate with fearful joy of what would happen tomorrow: if something should -- ? But no -- nothing untoward would possibly bar the coming of that day, the opening of the gate. Imagine: to elect our sons spokesmen of black power, after so much blood . . . so much blood . . . !

He too, you can guess, used to dream. Beautiful dreams about the future. I imagine that even while sagging under the weight of sacks of sugar, sacks of maize flour, sacks of magadi salt and soda, he would be in a world all his own. Flower fields of green peas and beans. Gay children chasing nectar-seeking bees and butterflies. A world to visit, a world to conquer. Wait till tomorrow, my Lord, till tomorrow. He was tall and frail-looking but strong with clear dark eyes that lit up with hope. And you can imagine that at such times the sack of sugar would feel light on his back, his limbs would acquire renewed strength, he was the giant in the story who could pull mountains by the roots or blow trees into the sky with his rancid breath. Trees, roots, branches and all flew into the sky high, high, no longer trees but feathers carried by the wind. Fly away, bird, little one of the courtyard and come again to gather millet grains in the sand. He would lay down the sack to watch the bird fly into the unknown and no doubt his dreams would also soar even beyond the present sky, his soul's eye would scan hazier and hazier horizons hiding away knowledge of tomorrow. But from somewhere in the shop a shout from his Indian employer would haul him back to this earth. Hurry up with that load, you lazy boy. Money you want, work no! You think money coming from dust or fall from sky. Kumanyoko. No doubt Wahinya would sigh. He was after all only a porter in Shukla and Shukla Stores, an object like that very load against which he had been leaning.

Shukla and Shukla: that's where I used to meet him. I was then a student in Siriana boarding school. A missionary affair it was in those days, I mean the school and its numerous rules and restrictions. For instance, we were never allowed out of the school compound except on Saturday afternoons and even then not

beyond a three-mile radius. Chura township, a collection of a dozen Indian-owned shops and a post office, was the only centre within our limits, both physical and financial. With ten cents, fifty cents or a shilling in our pockets, we used to walk there with determination as if on a very important mission. An unhurried stroll around the shops . . . then a Fanta soda, or a few madhvani gummy sweets from Shukla and Shukla . . . and, our day was over. Well, I used never to have more than two shillings pocket money for a whole term. So I would often go to Chura without a hope of crowning my Saturday afternoon outing with Fantas, madazis or madhvanis. A sweet, a soft drink was then a world. You laugh. But do you know how I envied those who strode that world with showy impunity and suggestions of even greater well-being at their homes? As soon as I reached the stores, friends and foes had to be avoided. I lied and I knew they knew I lied when I pretended having important business further on. Still, can you imagine the terror in case I was found out and exposed?

Wahinya must have seen through me. I can't remember how we first met or who first spoke to whom. I remember, though, my initial embarrassment at his ragged clothes and his grimy face. It seemed he might pull me down to his level. What would the other boys think of me? How quickly school could separate people! At home in order to preserve my school uniform I wore similarly ragged clothes and often went to bed hungry. From our conversations I soon found that we shared a common background. We came from Ilmorog. We were both without fathers: mine had died of Chang'aa poisoning: his had died whilst fighting in the forest. So we were brought up by mothers who had to scratch the dry earth for a daily can of unga and for fees. We attended similar types of Primary Schools: Karing's Independent. But while mine came under the Colonial District Education Board, his was closed and the building burnt down by the British. All African-run schools were suspected of aiding in the freedom struggle.

Thus blind chance had put Wahinya and me on different paths. And yet with all our shared past, I felt slightly above him, superior. Deep in my stomach was the terror that he might besmirch my standing in school. But occasionally he would slip twenty cents or fifty cents into my hands. For this I was grateful and it of course softened my initial repugnance. So I, the recipient of his hard-earned cents that helped me hide my humiliation of lies and pretence and put me on an equal footing with the other boarders, became the recipient of his dreams, ambitions and plans for the future.

'You are very lucky,' Wahinya would always start, his eyes lit. He would then tell me how he loved school and what positions he had held in the various classes. 'From Kiai to Standard 4, I was never below No. 3. Especially English . . . aah, nobody could beat me in that . . . and in history . . . you remember that African king we learnt about? What was his name . . . Chaka, and Moshoeshoe . . . and how they fought the British with stones, spears and bare hands . . . and Waiyaki, the Laibon, Mwanga, the Nandi struggle against the British army . . .' He would become excited. He would reel off name after name of the early African heroes. But for me now educated at Siriana this was not history. I pitied him really. I wanted to tell him about the true and correct history: the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes and Vikings, William the Conqueror, Drake, Hawkins, Wilberforce, Nelson, Napoleon, and all these real heroes of history. But then I thought he would not understand secondary school history and Siriana was reputed to have the best and toughest education. He would not, in any case, let me slip in a word. For he was now back with his heroes gazing at today and tomorrow: 'Do they teach you that kind of history in Siriana? Only it must be harder to understand . . . I used to draw sketches of all the battles . . . the teacher liked them . . . he made me take charge of the black-board . . . you know, duster, chalk and the big ruler in the shape of a T. You know it?' He would question me about Siriana: what subject, what kind of teachers . . . 'Europeans, eh?'

Do they beat you? Is it difficult learning under whitemen who speak English through the nose?' Often as he spoke he would be eyeing my jacket and green tie: he would touch the badge with the school motto in Latin and I often had the feeling that he enjoyed Siriana through me. I was the symbol of what he would soon become, especially with the rumoured departure of whitemen.

And that, gentlemen, was how I would always like to remember Wahinya: a boy who had never lost his dreams for higher education. His eyes would often acquire a distant look, misty even, and he seemed impatient with his present Shukla surroundings and the slow finger of time. 'This work . . . only for a time now . . . a few more days . . . a little bit more money . . . aah, school again . . . you think I will be able to do it? . . . Our teacher . . . he was a good one . . . used to make us sing songs . . . I had a good voice . . . you should hear it one day . . . he used to tell us: boys don't gaze in wonder at the things the whiteman has made: pins, guns, bombs, aeroplanes . . . what one man can do, another one can . . . what one race can do, another one can, and more . . . One day . . . but never mind!' He always cut short the reference to his teacher, his eyes would become even more misty and for a few seconds he would not speak to me. Then as if defying fate itself, he would re-affirm his teacher's maxim: what one man can do, another one can. Newspapers, well, printed words fascinated him. He always carried in his pockets an old edition of *The Standard* and in between one job and the next he would struggle to spell out words and meanings. 'You think one day I'll be able to read this? I want to be able to read it blindfolded, even. Read it through the nose, eh? Now you see me stumbling over all these words. But one day I will read it . . . easy . . . like swallowing water . . . Here tell me the meaning of this word . . . de . . . de . . . deadlo . . . ck . . . deadlock . . . how can a lock die?' I must say I could not help being affected by his enthusiasm and his unbounded faith especially in those days of lean pockets and occasional gunsmoke in the sky.

Gentlemen, you are no longer touching your drinks. What's left to us but to drink? Drinking dulls ones fear and terror and memories . . . and yet I cannot forget the last time I saw him in Chura. Same kind of Saturday afternoon. He was waiting for me by the railway crossing. I was embarrassed by this and I affected a casual approach and cool words. He was excited. He walked beside me, tried the customary pleasantries, then whipped out something from his pocket. An old edition of *The Standard*. 'See this . . . see this,' he said opening a page . . . 'Read it, read it,' he said thrusting the whole thing into my hands. But still he tried to read over my shoulder as we walked towards Shukla and Shukla stores.

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It was the days of those airlifts to America and Europe, you remember. Wahinya was capering around me. He fired many questions at me. But I knew nothing about correspondence schools. I dared not show him my ignorance though. I tried to make disparaging comments about learning through the post. But he was not really interested in my defeatist answers. His dream of higher education would soon be realized. 'I can manage it . . . I will manage it . . . Uhuru is coming, you see, . . . Uhuru . . . more and better jobs . . . more money . . . might even own part of Shukla and Shukla . . . for these Indians are going to go, you know . . . money . . . but what I want is this thing: I must one day read *The Standard* through the nose . . .' I left him

standing by Shukla and Shukla, peering at *The Standard*, his eyes probably blazing a trail that led to a future with dignity. Nothing, it seemed, would ever break his faith, his hopes, his dreams, and that in a land that had yet to recover from guns, concentration camps and broken homes.

I went back to my studies and prepared for the coming exams. Most of us got through and were accepted in Makerere, then the only University College in East Africa . . . no – not quite true . . . there was Dar es Salaam . . . but then it had only started. No more fees. No more rules and restrictions. We wore worsted gaberdines and smoked and danced. We even had pocket money. Uhuru also came to our countries. We sang and danced and wept. Tomorrow. Cha. Cha. Cha. Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. We streamed into the streets of Kampala. We linked hands and chanted: Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. It was a kind of collective madness, I remember, and those women with whom we linked our loins knew it and gave themselves true. The story was the same for each of us. But none of us I am quite sure that night fully realized the full import of what had happened. This we knew in the coming years and perhaps Wahinya had been right. And what years, my Lord! Strange things we heard and saw: most of those who had finished Makerere were now being trained as District Officers, Labour Officers, Diplomats, Foreign Service – all European jobs. Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. Others were now on the boards of Shell, Caltex, Esso, and other oil companies. We could hardly wait for our turn. Uhuru. Cha. Cha. Cha. Some came for the delayed graduation ceremonies. They came in their dark suits, their cars and red-lipped ladies in heels. They talked of their jobs, of their cars, of their employees; of their mahogany-furnished offices and of course their European and Asian secretaries. So this was true. No longer the rumours, no longer the unbelievable stories. And we were next in the queue.

We now dreamt not of sweets, Fanta and ginger-ale. The car was now our world. We compared names: VW, DKW, Ford

Prefects, Peugeot, Flying A's. Mercedes Benzes were then beyond the reach of our imagination. Nevertheless, it all seemed a wonder that we would soon be living in European mansions, eat in European hotels, holiday in European resorts at the coast and play golf. And with such prospects before my eyes, how could I remember Wahinya?

Travelling in a bus to the city one Saturday during my last holidays before graduation, I was dreaming of a world that would soon be mine. With a degree in Economics and Commerce, any job in most firms was within my grasp. Houses . . . cars . . . shares . . . land in the settled area . . . these whirled through my mind when suddenly I noticed my bus was no longer alone. It was racing with another called *Believe In God No. 1*, at a reckless pace. I held my stomach in both hands, as we would say. The two buses were now running parallel making on-coming vehicles rush to a sudden stop by the roadside. It seemed my future was being interfered with by this reckless race to death. And the turn-boys: they banged the body of the bus, urging their driver to accelerate – has the bus caught tuberculosis? – at the same time jeering and hurling curses at the turn-boys of the enemy bus. They would climb to the luggage rack at the top and then swing down, monkey-fashion, to the side. They were playing, toying with death, like the death-riders I once saw in a visiting circus from India. You could touch the high-voltage tension in the bus. At one stage a woman screamed in an orgasm of fear and this seemed to act like a spur on the turn-boys and the driver. Suddenly *Believe in God No. 1* managed to pull past and you could now see the dejected look on the turn-boys in our bus, while relief was registered on the faces of the passengers. It was then, when I dared to look, that I saw one of the turn-boys was no other than Wahinya.

He came into the bus, shaking his head from side to side as if in utter unbelief. He was now even more frail looking but his face had matured with hard lines all over. I slunk even further into my seat instinctively avoiding contact. But he must have seen me

because suddenly his eyes were lit up, he rushed towards me shouting my name for all in the bus to hear. 'My friend, my friend,' he called, clasping my hands in his and sitting beside me, slapped me hard on the shoulders. He was much less reserved than before and despite an attempt to keep the conversation low his voice rose above the others. 'Still at Makerere? You are lucky, eh! But remember our days in Chura? Those Indians . . . they never left . . . dismissed me just like that . . . But it's good our people are rising . . . like the owner of these buses . . . the other day he was a Matatu driver . . . now see him, a fleet of ten buses . . . In one day he can count over 100,000 shillings . . . Not bad, eh? You better finish school soon, man. Educated people like you can get loans. You start a business . . . like the owner of these buses . . . do you know him? The M.P. for the area . . . John Joe James, or J.J.J. . . . To tell you the truth, this is what I want to do . . . a little money . . . I buy an old Peugeot . . . start a Matatu . . . I tell you no other business can beat transport business for quick money . . . except buying and renting houses . . . Driver, more oil,' and suddenly, to my relief I must say, he stood up and rushed along the unpeopled isle. He had spied another bus. The race for passengers would start all over.

I went away slightly sad. What had happened to the boy with hopes for an education abroad while at home? I soon dismissed this sudden jolt at my own dreams, and tried to re-experience that sweetness in the soul at the prospect of eating a tasty meal. But the death-race had dampened my spirits.

Eh? A glass to recover my breath? Welcome, sweet wine . . . Sweet eloquence . . . but what's the matter, gentlemen? Drink also . . . I say a good drink, in a way, is the blood of life.

You should have seen us a week after graduation. We drank ourselves silly. Gates of heaven were now open, because we had the key . . . the key . . . open sesame into the world. Mark you it was not as rosy as it had seemed once we started working. I worked with a commercial firm and all the important ranks were filled with whites . . . experts, you know . . . and one stayed for so

long in training, it tried one's patience . . . especially four years after independence . . . Is it still the same? In a way yes . . . experts who are technically under you and still are paid more . . . and make real decisions . . . still I can't say I have been disappointed . . . If you work hard you can get somewhere . . . and with government and bank loans . . . the other day I got myself a little shamba . . . a thousand acres . . . a few hundred cows . . . and with a European manager . . . the 'garden' is doing all right. And that's how I get a few cents to drink . . . now and then . . . my favourite bar has always been this one . . . gives me a sense of homecoming . . . and I can observe things you know . . . homeboy . . . after all man has ambitions . . . And occasionally they employ beautiful juicy barmaids . . . man must live . . . mustn't he? There was one here . . . huge behind . . . Mercedes they used to call her . . . I prefer them big . . . anyway one day I wanted her so bad. I winked at the watchman. I bent down to scribble a note on the back of the bill: would she be free tonight? Then I raised my head. The watchman stood in front of me. He had on a huge kabuti, with a kofia and a bokora-club clutched firmly in his hands. This was a new one I thought. Then our eyes met. Lo! It was Wahinya.

He hesitated that one second. A momentary indecision. 'Wahinya?' It was I who called out, automatically stretching my hand. He took my hand and replied rather formally, 'Yes, Sir,' but I did detect the suggestion of an ironic smile at the edges of his mouth. 'Don't you remember me?' 'I do,' but there was no recognition in his voice or in his manner. 'What did you want?' he asked, politely. My heart fell. I was now embarrassed. 'Have a drink on me?' 'I will have the bill sent to you. But if you don't mind, we are not allowed to drink while customers are in, so I will take it later.' And he went back to his post. I had not the courage to give him the note. I went home, driving my Mercedes 220S furiously through the dark. What could I do for the man? What had happened to his dreams? . . . broken and there was not the slightest sparkle in his eyes. And yet the next weekend I was

back there. That barmaid. Her whole body looked like the juicy thing itself crying: do it to me, do it to me. But whom could I send? I again called out for the watchman. I argued; he was after all employed for little services like that. And he was taking messages for others, wasn't he? I gave him the note and nodded in the direction of the fat barmaid. He smiled, no light in his eyes, with that mechanical studied understanding of his job and what was required of him. He came back with a note: 'YES: Room 14. CASH.' I gave him twenty shillings and well, how could I help it, a tip . . . a tip of two shillings . . . which he accepted with the same mechanical precision. Wahinya! Reduced to a carrier of secrets between men and women!

Occasionally he would come to work drunk and you could tell this by the feverish look in his eyes. He would talk and even boast of all the women he had had, of the amount of drink he could hold. Then he would crawl with his voice and ask for a few coins to buy a cigarette. I soon came to learn how he lost his job of a turn-boy. His bus and another collided while racing for a cargo of passengers. A number of people died including the driver. He himself was severely injured. When he came back from the hospital, there was no job for him. J.J.J. would not even give him a little compensation . . . he would talk on like that as in a delirium. And yet when he had not taken a drop, he was very quiet and very withdrawn into his kofia and kabuti. But as weeks and months passed, the sober moments became rarer and rarer. He became a familiar figure in the bar. At times he would drink all his salary in credit so that at the end of the month he was forced to beg for a glass or fifty cents. He had already started on Kiruru and Chang'aa. At such moments, he would be full of drunken dreams and impossible schemes. 'Don't worry . . . I will die in a Mercedes Benz . . . don't laugh . . . I will save, go into business, and then buy one . . . easy . . . the moment I buy one, I will stop working. I will live and die like Lord Delamare.' People baptized him Wahinya Benji. Often, I wondered if he ever remembered the old days in Chura.

One Saturday night he came and sat beside me. This boldness surprised me because he was very sober. I offered him a drink. He refused. His voice was level, subdued, but a bit of the old sparkle was in his eyes.

'You now see me a wreck. But I often ask myself: could it have been different? With a chance – an education, like yours. You remember our days in Chura? Aah, a long time ago . . . another world . . . that correspondence school, do you remember it? Well, I never got the money. And it was harder later saddled with a wife and a child. Mark you, it was a comfort. Aah, but a little money . . . a little more education . . . school . . . our teacher . . . you remember him? I used to talk to you about him. What for instance he used to tell us? What one man can do, another one can: What one race can do, another one can . . . Do you think this true? You have an education: you have got Makerere: you might even go to England to get a degree like the son of Koinange. Tell me this: is that really true? Is it true for us ordinary folk who can't speak a word of English? Put it this way: I am not afraid of hard work; I am not scared of sweating. He used to tell us: after Uhuru, we must work hard: Europeans are where they are because they work hard: and what one man can do, another one can. He was a good man, all the same, used to tell us about great Africans. Then one day . . . one day . . . you see, we were all in school . . . and then some whitemen came, Johnnies, and took him out of our classroom. We climbed the mud-walls in fear. A few yards away they roughly pushed him forward and shot him dead.'

Wahinya's drinking became so bad that he was dismissed from his job. And I never really saw him in that ruined state because my duties with the Progress Bank International took me outside the country. But even now as I talk, I feel his presence around me, his boasts, his dreams, his drinking and well, that last encounter.

The narrator swallowed one or two glasses in quick succession.

I followed his example. It was as if we all had witnessed a nasty scene and we wanted to drown the memory of it. The narrator after a time tried to break the sombre atmosphere with exaggerated unconcern and cynicism: 'You see the twists of fate, gentlemen, Wahinya dead had become prominent, even J.J.J. his former employer was fighting for him,' but he could not deceive anybody. He could not quite recapture the original tone of light entertainment. There was after all the Chura episode behind us. Wahinya, whom I had never met but whom I felt I knew, had come back to haunt our drinking peace. Somebody said: 'It's a pity he never got his Mercedes Benz - at least a ride.'

You are wrong, said the narrator. In a way, he got that too. You shake your heads, gentlemen? Give us a drink, sister, give us another one.

It was all thanks to the rivalry among the candidates. Although they were all members of the committee charged with burial arrangements, they would not agree to a joint effort. Each you see wanted only his own plan adopted. Each wanted his name mentioned as the sole donor of something. After one or two riotous sessions, the committee finally decided on a broad policy.

Item No. 1. Money. It was decided that the amount each would give would be disclosed and announced on the actual day of the funeral.

Item No. 2. Transport. J.J.J. had offered what he described as his wife's shopping basket, a brand-new, light-green Cortina G.T., to carry the body from the city mortuary, but the others objected. So it was decided that the four would contribute equal amounts towards the hire of a neutral car - a Peugeot family saloon.

Item No. 3. The Pit. Again the four would share the expenses of digging and cementing it.

Item No. 4. The coffin and the cross. On this they would not agree to a joint contribution. Each wanted to be the sole donor of

the coffin and the cross. Mark you, none of them was a known believer. A compromise: they were to contribute to a neutral coffin to transport the body from the mortuary, to the church and to the cemetery. But each would bring his own coffin and cross and the crowd would choose the best. Participatory democracy, you see.

Item No. 5. Funeral Oration. Five minutes for each candidate before presenting his coffin and the cross.

Item No. 6. Day. Even on this, there was quite a haggling. But a Sunday was thought the most appropriate day.

That was a week that was, gentlemen. Every night, every bar was full to capacity with people who had come to gather gossip and rumours. Market-days burst with people. In buses there was no other talk; the turn-boys had field-days regaling passengers with tales of Wahinya. No longer the merits and demerits of the various candidates: issues in any case there had been none. Now only Wahinya and the funeral.

On the Sunday in question, believers and non-believers, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and one or two recent converts to Radha Krishnan flocked to Ilmorog Presbyterian Church. For the first time in Ilmorog, all the bars, even those that specialized in illegal Chang'aa, were empty. A ghost town Ilmorog was that one Sunday morning. Additional groups came from villages near and far. Some from very distant places had hired buses and lorries. Even the priest, Rev. Bwana Solomon, who normally would not receive bodies of non-active members into the holy building unless of course they were rich and prominent, this time arrived early in resplendent dark robes laced with silver and gold. A truly memorable service, especially the beautifully trembling voice of Rev. Solomon as he intoned: 'Blessed are the meek and poor for they shall inherit the earth: blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.' After the service, we trooped on foot, in cars, on lorries, in buses to the graveyard where we found even more people seated. Fortunately loudspeakers had been fixed through the thoughtful kindness of the District

Officer so that even those at the far outer edges could clearly hear the speeches and funeral orations. After the prayers, again Rev. Solomon with his beautifully trembling voice captured many hearts, the amount of money each candidate had donated was announced.

The businessman had given seven hundred and fifty shillings. The farmer had given two hundred and fifty. J.J.J. had given one thousand. Oh hearing this the businessman rushed back to the microphone to announce an additional three hundred. A murmur of general approval greeted the businessman's additional gift. Lastly the student. He had given only twenty shillings.

What we all waited for with bated breath was the gift of coffins and crosses. There was a little dispute as to who would open the act. Each wanted to have the last word. Lots were cast. The student, the farmer, the businessman and J.J.J. followed in that order.

The student tugged at his Lumumba goatee. He lashed at wealth and ostentatious living. He talked about workers. Simplicity and hard work. That should be our national motto. And in keeping with that motto, he had arranged for a simple wooden coffin and wooden cross. After all Jesus had been a carpenter. A few people jeered as the student stepped down.

Then came the farmer. He too believed in simplicity and hard work. He believed in the soil. As a government chief he had always encouraged Wananchi in their patriotic efforts at farming. His was also a simple wooden affair but with a slight variation. He had already hired the services of one of the popular artists who painted murals or mermaids in our bars, to paint a picture of a green cow with udders and teats ripeful with milk. There was amused laughter from the crowd.

What would the businessman bring us? He, in his dark suit with a protruding belly, rose to the occasion and the heightened expectations. People were not to be bothered that a few had never had it so good. What was needed was a democratic chance for all the Wahinyas of this world. A chance to make a

little pile so that on dying they might leave their widows and orphans decent shelters. He called out his followers. They unfolded the coffin. It was truly an elaborate affair. It was built in the shape of a Hilton hotel complete with stories and glass windows. Whistles of admiration and satisfaction at the new turn in the drama came from the crowd. His followers unfolded the cloth: an immaculate white sheet that elicited more whistling of amused approval. The businessman then stepped down with the air of a sportsman who has broken a long-standing record and set a new one that could not possibly be ever equalled.

Now everyone waited for J.J.J. His six years in parliament had made him an accomplished actor. He took his time. His leather briefcase with bulging papers was there: he collected his ivory walking stick and flywhisk. His belly though big was right for his height. He talked about his long service and experience. People did not in the old days send an uncircumcised boy to lead a national army, he said slightly glancing at the opponents . . . He had always fought for the poor. But he would not bore people with a long talk on such a sad occasion. He did not want to bring politics into what was a human loss. All he wanted was not only to pay his respects to the dead but also to respect the wishes of the dead. Now before Wahinya died, he was often heard to say . . . but wait! This was the right cue for his followers. The coffin was wrapped in a brilliantly red cloth. Slowly they unfolded it. People in the crowd were now climbing the backs of others in order to see, to catch a glimpse of this thing. Suddenly there was an instinctive gasp from the crowd when at last they saw the coffin raised high. It was not a coffin at all, but really an immaculate model of a black Mercedes Benz 660S complete with doors and glasses and maroon curtains and blinds.

He let the impact made by this revelation run its full course. Only the respect for the dead, he continued as if nothing had happened. Before Brother Wahinya had died, he had spoken of a wish of dying in a Benz. His last wish: I say let's respect the

wishes of the dead. He raised his flywhisk to greet the expected applause while holding a white handkerchief to his eyes.

But somehow no applause came; not even a murmur of approval. Something had gone wrong, and we all felt it. It was like an elaborate joke that had suddenly misfired. Or as if we had all been witnesses of an indecent act on a public place. The people stood and started moving away as if they did not want to be identified with the indecency. J.J.J., his challengers and a few of their hired followers were left standing by the pit, no doubt wondering what had gone wrong. Suddenly J.J.J. returned to his own car and drove off. The others quickly left.

Wahinya was buried by relatives and friends in a simple coffin which, of course, had been blessed by Rev. Solomon.

About the elections, the outcome I mean, there is little to tell. You know that J.J.J. is still in Parliament. There were the usual rumours of rigging, etc., etc. The student got a hundred votes and returned to school. I believe he graduated, a degree in commerce, and like me joined a bank. He got a loan, bought houses from non-citizen Indians and he is now a very important landlord in the city. A European-owned estate agency takes care of the houses.

The businessman was ruined. He had dug too deep a pit into the loan money. His shop and a three-acre plot were sold in an auction. J.J.J. bought it and sold it immediately afterwards for a profit. The farmer-chief was also ruined. He had sold his grade-cows — all Friesians — in expectation of plenty as an M.P. J.J.J. saw to it that he never got back his old job of a location chief.

You go to Makueni Chang'aa Bar where Wahinya used to drink in his last days and you'll find the ruined two, now best friends, waiting for anybody who might buy them a can or two of KMK — Kill me Quick. It costs fifty only, they'll tell you.

J.J.J. still rides in a Mercedes Benz – this time 660S – just like mine – and looks at me with, well, suspicion! Four years from now . . . you never know.

Gentlemen . . . how about one for the road?