

barracks and the Prime Minister had surrendered and they had beaten the fuck out of him. They said the day had come and all the Arabs would get theirs. They said the sultan had already run away to the ship off the harbour and if they were to get hold of him they would whip his kikoi off and fuck his arse before stuffing it full of dynamite. They said I deserved to die for being an Arab, they said anybody who was no good must be an Arab. They said where did you get those cuts if you weren't at the barracks? They said it was all over and what was I shaking like that about. They said this fellow is a weakling; shall we fuck him first before we put a bullet in him? They said we have not time and they said kill him now before the others get to the rich houses. They said if we don't hurry all the best stuff will be gone and all the good women will be ruined. They said don't waste a bullet on him, here let me show him my steel. Here they said, hold this . . . but I was too tired and weak and they beat me and urinated on me and left me lying senseless on the beach.

You missed the worst, Bossy.

The Spider's Web

Leonard Kibera

Inside the coffin, his body had become rigid. He tried to turn and only felt the prick of the nail. It had been hammered carelessly through the lid, just falling short of his shoulder. There was no pain but he felt irretrievable and alone, hemmed within the mean, stuffy box, knowing that outside was air. As *dust to dust . . .* the pious preacher intoned out there, not without an edge of triumph. *This suicide, brethren . . .!* They had no right, these people had no right at all. They sang so mournfully over him, almost as if it would disappoint them to see him come back. But he would jump out yet, he would send the rusty nails flying back at them and teach that cheap-jack of an undertaker how to convert old trunks. He was not a third class citizen. *Let me out!* But he could not find the energy to cry out or even turn a little from the nail on his shoulder, as the people out there hastened to cash in another tune, for the padre might at any moment cry *Amen!* and commit the flesh deep into the belly of the earth whence it came. Somebody was weeping righteously in between the pauses. He thought it was Mrs Njogu. Then in the dead silence that followed he was being posted into the hole and felt himself burning up already as his mean little trunk creaked at the joints and nudged its darkness in on him like a load of sins. *Careful, careful, he is not a heap of rubbish. . .* That was Mr Njogu. Down, slowly down, the careless rope issued in snappy mean measures like a spider's web and knocked his little trunk against the sides to warn the loud gates that he was coming to whoever would receive him. It caved in slowly, the earth, he could feel, and for the first time he felt important. He seemed to matter now, as all eyes no doubt narrowed into the dark hole at this moment, with everybody hissing *poor soul; gently, gently*. Then *snap!* The rope gave way—one portion of the dangling thing preferring

to recoil into the tight-fisted hands out there—and he felt shot towards the bottom head-downwards, exploding into the gates of hell with a loud, unceremonious *Bang!*

Ngotho woke up with a jump. He mopped the sweat on the tail of his sheet. This kind of thing would bring him no good. Before, he had been dreaming of beer parties or women or fights with bees as he tried to smoke them out for honey. Now, lately, it seemed that when he wasn't being smoked out of this city where he so very much belonged and yet never belonged, he was either pleading his case at the White Gates or being condemned to hell in cheap coffins. *This kind of thing just isn't healthy.* . . .

But he was in top form. He flung the blanket away. He bent his arms at the elbow for exercise. He shot them up and held them there like a surrender. *No that will not do.* He bent them again and pressed his fingers on his shoulders. They gathered strength, knitting into a ball so that his knuckles sharpened. Then he shot a dangerous fist to the left and held it there, tightly, not yielding a step, until he felt all stiff and blood pumped at his forehead. Dizziness overpowered him and his hand fell dead on the bed. Then a spasm uncoiled his right which came heavily on the wall and, pained, cowered. Was he still a stranger to the small dimensions of his only room even after eight years?

But it wasn't the first time anyhow. So, undaunted, he sprang twice on the bed for more exercise. Avoiding the spring that had fetched his thigh yesterday morning between the bulges in the old mattress, he hummed *Africa nchi yetu* and shot his leg down the bed. Swa—ah! That would be three shillings for another sheet through the back doors of the Koya Mosque. Ngotho dragged himself out of bed.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. He had nothing to worry about so long as he did not make the mistake of going to church. Churches depressed him. But that dream still bothered him. (*At least they could have used a less precipitate rope.*) And those nails, didn't he have enough things pricking him since Mrs Knight gave him a five-pound handshake saying Meet you in England and Mrs Njogu came buzzing in as his new memsahib borrowing two shillings from him?

Ngotho folded his arms at his chest and yawned. He took his

moustache thoughtfully between his fingers and curled it sharp like horns. At least she could have returned it. It was not as if the cost of living had risen the way employers took things for granted these days. He stood at the door of the two-room house which he shared with the other servant who, unlike him, didn't cook for memsahib. Instead, Kago went on errands, trimmed the grass and swept the compound, taking care to trace well the dog's mess for the night. Already Ngotho could see the early riser as good as sniffing and scanning the compound after the erratic manner of Wambui last night. (Wambui was the brown Alsatian dragged from the village and surprised into civilisation, a dog-collar and tinned bones by Mrs Njogu. A friend of hers, Elsie Bloom, kept one and they took their bitches for a walk together.) Ngotho cleared his throat.

'Hei, Kago!'

Kago who was getting frostbite rubbed his thumb between the toes and turned round.

'How is the dog's breakfast?'

'Nyukwa!'

Ngotho laughed.

'You don't have to insult my mother,' he said. 'Tinned bones for Wambui and cornflakes for memsahib are the same thing. We both hang if we don't get them.'

Kago leant on his broom, scratched the top of his head dull-wittedly, and at last saw that Ngotho had a point there.

He was a good soul, Kago was, and subservient as a child. There was no doubt about his ready aggressiveness where men of his class were concerned it was true, but when it came to Mrs Njogu he wound tail between his legs and stammered. This morning he was feeling at peace with the world.

'Perhaps you are right,' he said, to Ngotho. Then diving his thumb between the toes he asked if there was a small thing going on that afternoon—like a beer party.

'The Queen!'

At the mention of the name, Kago forgot everything about drinking, swerved round and felt a thousand confused things beat into his head simultaneously. Should he go on sweeping and sniffing or should he get the Bob's Tinned? Should he un-tin the Bob's Tinned or should he run for the Sunday

paper? Mrs Njogu, alias queen, wasn't she more likely to want Wambui brushed behind the ear? Or was she now coming to ask him why the rope lay at the door while Wambui ran about untied?

With his bottom towards memsahib's door, Kago assumed a busy pose and peeped through his legs. But memsahib wasn't bothered about him. At least not yet. She stood at the door legs askew and admonished Ngotho about the corn-flakes.

Kago breathed a sigh of relief and took a wild sweep at the broom. He saw Ngotho back against the wall of their servant's-quarters and suppressed a laugh. After taking a torrent of English words, Ngotho seemed to tread carefully the fifty violent paces between the two doors, the irreconcilable gap between the classes. As he approached Mrs Njogu, he seemed to sweep a tactful curve off the path, as if to move up the wall first and then try to back in slowly towards the master's door and hope memsahib would make way. For her part, the queen flapped her wings and spread herself luxuriously, as good as saying, You will have to kneel and dive in through my legs. Then she stuck out her tongue twice, heaved her breasts, spat milk and honey onto the path, and disappeared into the hive. Ngotho followed her.

Kago scratched his big toe and sat down to laugh.

Breakfast for memsahib was over. Ngotho came out of the house to cut out the painful corn in his toe with the kitchen knife. He could take the risk and it pleased him. But he had to move to the other end of the wall. Mr Njogu was flushing the toilet and he might chance to open the small blurred window and see the otherwise clean kitchen knife glittering in the sun on dirty toe nails.

Breakfast. Couldn't memsahib trust him with the sugar or milk even after four years? Must she buzz around him as he measured breakfast-for-two? He had nothing against corn flakes. In fact ever since she became suspicious, he had found himself eating more of her meals whenever she was not in sight, also taking some sugar in his breast pocket. But he had come to hate himself for it and felt it was a coward's way out. Still, what was he to do? Mrs Njogu had become more and more of a stranger and he had even caught himself looking at

her from an angle where formerly he had stared her straight in the face. He had wanted to talk to her, to assure her that he was still her trusted servant, but everything had become more entangled and sensitive. She would only say he was criticising, and if he wasn't happy what was he waiting for? But if he left, where was he to go? Unemployment had turned loose upon the country as it had never done before. Housewives around would receive the news of his impertinence blown high and wide over Mrs Njogu's telephone before he approached them for a job, and set their dogs on him.

Ngotho scratched at his grey hair and knew that respect for age had completely bereft his people. Was this the girl he once knew as Lois back in his home village? She had even been friends with his own daughter. A shy, young thing with pimples and thin legs. Lois had taught at the village school and was everybody's good example. She preferred to wear cheap skirts than see her aging parents starve for lack of money.

'Be like Lois,' mothers warned their daughters and even spanked them to press the point. What they meant in fact was that their daughters should, like Lois, stay unmarried longer and not simply run off with some young man in a neat tie who refused to pay the dowry. Matters soon became worse for such girls when suddenly Lois became heroine of the village. She went to jail.

It was a General Knowledge class. Lois put the problem word squarely on the blackboard. The lady supervisor who went round the schools stood squarely at the other end, looking down the class. Lois swung her stick up and down the class and said,

'What is the Commonwealth, children? Don't be shy, what does this word mean?'

The girls chewed their thumbs.

'Come on! All right. We shall start from the *beginning*. Who rules England?'

Slowly, the girls turned their heads round and faced the white supervisor. Elizabeth, they knew they should say. But how could Lois bring them to this? England sounded venerable enough. Must they go further now and let the white lady there at the back hear the Queen of England mispronounced, or even uttered by these tender things with the stain of last

night's onions in their breath? Who would be the first? They knitted their knuckles under the desks, looked into their exercise books, and one by one said they didn't know. One or two brave ones threw their heads back again, met with a strange look in the white queen's eye which spelt disaster, immediately swung their eyes onto the blackboard, and catching sight of Lois's stick, began to cry.

'It is as if you have never heard of it.' Lois was losing patience. 'All right, I'll give you another start. Last start. What is our country?'

Simultaneously, a flash of hands shot up from under the desks and thirty-four breaths of maize and onions clamoured.

'A colony!'

Slowly, the lady supervisor measured out light taps down the class and having eliminated the gap that came between master and servant, stood face to face with Lois.

The children chewed at their rubbers.

Then the white queen slapped Lois across the mouth and started for the door. But Lois caught her by the hair, slapped her back once, twice, and spat into her face. Then she gave her a football kick and swept her out with a right.

When at last Lois looked back into the class, she only saw torn exercise books flung on the floor. Thirty-four pairs of legs had fled home through the window, partly to be comforted from the queen's government which was certain to come, and partly to spread the formidable news of their new queen and heroine.

Queen, she certainly was, Ngotho thought as he sat by the wall and backed against it. Cornflakes in bed; expensive skirts; cigarettes. Was this her? Mr Njogu had come straight from the University College in time to secure a shining job occupied for years by a *mzungu*. Then a neat car was seen to park by Lois's house. In due course these visits became more frequent and alarming, but no villager was surprised when eventually Njogu succeeded in dragging Lois away from decent society. He said paying the dowry was for people in the mountains.

As luck would have it for Ngotho, Mr and Mrs Knight left and Mr and Mrs Njogu came to occupy the house. He was glad to cook and wash a black man's towels for a change. And, for a short time at any rate, he was indeed happy. Everybody had

sworn that they were going to build something together, something challenging and responsible, something that would make a black man respectable in his own country. He had been willing to serve, to keep up the fire that had eventually smoked out the white man. From now on there would be no more revenge, and no more exploitation. Beyond this, he didn't expect much for himself; he knew that there would always be masters and servants.

Ngotho scratched himself between the legs and sunk against the wall. He stared at the spider that slowly built its web meticulously under the verandah roof. He threw a light stone at it and only alerted the spider.

Had his heart not throbbed with thousands of others that day as each time he closed his eyes he saw a vision of something exciting, a legacy of responsibilities that demanded a warrior's spirit? Had he not prayed for oneness deep from the heart? But it seemed to him now that a common goal had been lost sight of and he lamented it. He could not help but feel that the warriors had laid down their arrows and had parted different ways to fend for themselves. And as he thought of their households, he saw only the image of Lois who he dared call nothing but *memsahib* now. She swam big and muscular in his mind.

Ngotho wondered whether this was the compound he used to know. Was this part connecting master and servant the one that had been so straight during Mrs Knight?

Certainly he would never want her back. He had been kicked several times by Mr Knight and had felt what it was like to be hit with a frying pan by Mrs Knight as she reminded him to be grateful. But it had all been so direct, no ceremonies: they didn't like his broad nose. They said so. They thought there were rats under his bed. There were. They teased that he hated everything white and yet his hair was going white on his head like snow, a cool white protector while below the black animal simmered and plotted: wouldn't he want it cut? No, he wouldn't. Occasionally, they would be impressed by a well-turned turkey or chicken and say so over talk of the white man's responsibility in Africa. If they were not in the mood they just dismissed him and told him not to forget the coffee. Ngotho knew that all this was because they were becoming

uneasy and frightened, and that perhaps they had to point the gun at all black men now at a time when even the church had taken sides. But whatever the situation in the house, there was nevertheless a frankness about the black-and-white relationship where no ceremonies or apologies were necessary in a world of mutual distrust and hate. And if Mrs Knight scolded him all over the house, it was Mr Knight who seemed to eventually lock the bedroom door and come heavily on top of her and everybody else although, Ngotho thought, they were all ruled by a woman in England.

Ngotho walked heavily to the young tree planted three years ago by Mrs Njogu and wondered why he should have swept a curve off the path that morning, as memsahib filled the door. He knew it wasn't the first time he had done that. Everything had become crooked, subtle, and he had to watch his step. His monthly vernacular paper said so. He felt cornered. He gripped the young tree by the scruff of the neck and shook it furiously. What the hell was wrong with some men anyway? Had Mr Njogu become a male weakling in a fat queen bee's hive, slowly being milked dry and sapless, dying? Where was the old warrior who at the end of the battle would go home to his wife and make her moan under his heavy sweat? All he could see now as he shook the tree was a line of neat houses. There, the warriors had come to their battle's end and parted, to forget other warriors and to be mothered to sleep without even knowing it, meeting only occasionally to drink beer and sing traditional songs. And where previously the bow and arrow lay by the bed-post, Ngotho now only saw a conspiracy of round tablets while a *Handbook of Novel Techniques* lay by the pillow.

He had tried to understand. But as he looked at their pregnant wives he could foresee nothing but a new generation of innocent snobs, who would be chauffeured off to school in neat caps hooded over their eyes so as to obstruct vision. There they would learn that the other side of the city was dirty. Ngotho spat right under the tree. Once or twice he would have liked to kick Mr Njogu. He looked all so sensibly handsome and clean as he buzzed after his wife on a broken wing and—a spot of jam on his tie—said he wanted the key to the car.

He had also become very sensitive and self-conscious.

Ngotho couldn't complain a little or even make a joke about the taxes without somebody detecting a subtler intention behind the smile, where the servant was supposed to be on a full-scale plotting. And there was behind the master and the queen now a bigger design, a kind of pattern meticulously fenced above the hive; a subtle web, at the centre of which lurked the spider which protected, watched and jailed. Ngotho knew only too well that the web had been slowly, quietly in the making and a pebble thrown at it would at best alert and fall back impotent on the ground.

He took a look at the other end of the compound. Kago had fallen asleep, while Wambui ran about untied, the rope still lying at the door. Kago wore an indifferent grin. Ngotho felt overpowered, trapped, alone. He spat in Kago's direction and plucked a twig off one of the branches on the tree. The tree began to bleed. He tightened his grip and shed the reluctant leaves down. Just what had gone wrong with God?

The old one had faithfully done his job when that fig tree near Ngotho's village withered away as predicted by the tribal seer. It had been the local news and lately, it was rumoured, some businessman would honour the old god by erecting a hotel on the spot. Ngotho hardly believed in any god at all. The one lived in corrupted blood, the other in pulpits of hypocrisy. But at least while they kept neat themselves they could have honoured the old in a cleaner way. How could this new saviour part the warriors different ways into isolated compartments, to flush their uneasy hotel toilets all over the old one?

Ngotho passed a reverent hand over his wrinkled forehead and up his white hair. He plucked another twig off the dangerous tree. Something was droning above his ear.

'What are you doing to my tree?'

The buzzing had turned into a scream.

'I—I want to pick my teeth,' Ngotho unwrapped a row of defiant molars.

The queen flapped her wings and landed squarely on the ground. Then she was heaving heavily, staring at him out of small eyes. He tried to back away from her eyes. Beyond her, in the background, he caught sight of Mr Njogu through the bedroom window polishing his spectacles on his pyjama sleeve, trying desperately to focus—clearly—on the situation

outside. A flap of the wing and Ngotho felt hit right across the mouth, by the hand that had once hit the white lady. Then the queen wobbled in midflight, settled at the door, and screamed at Mr Njogu to come out and prove he was a man.

Mr Njogu didn't like what he saw. He threw his glasses away and preferred to see things blurred.

'These women,' he muttered, and waved them away with a neat pyjama sleeve. Then he buried his head under the blanket and snored. It was ten o'clock.

Ngotho stood paralysed. He had never been hit by a woman before, outside of his mother's hut. Involuntarily, he felt his eyes snap shut and his eyelids burn red, violently, in the sun. Then out of the spider's web in his mind, policemen, magistrates and third class undertakers flew in profusion. He opened up, sweating, and the kitchen knife in his hand fell down, stabbing the base of the tree where it vibrated once, twice, and fell flat on its side, dead.

Then with a cry, he grabbed it and rushed into the house. But Mr Njogu saw him coming as the knife glittered nearer and clearer in his direction, and leapt out of bed.

Suddenly the horror of what he had done caught Ngotho. He could hear the queen at least crying hysterically into the telephone, while Mr Njogu locked himself in the toilet and began weeping. Ngotho looked at the kitchen knife in his hand. He had only succeeded in stabbing Mr Njogu in the thigh, and the knife had now turned red on him. Soon the sticky web would stretch a thread. And he would be caught as he never thought he would when first he felt glad to work for Lois.

He saw Wambui's rope still lying in a noose. Then he went into his room and locked the door.

Minutes of Glory

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Her name was Wanjiru. But she liked better her Christian one, Beatrice. It sounded more pure and more beautiful. Not that she was ugly; but she could not be called beautiful either. Her body, dark and full fleshed, had the form, yes, but it was as if it waited to be filled by the spirit. She worked in beer-halls where sons of women came to drown their inner lives in beer cans and froth. Nobody seemed to notice her. Except, perhaps, when a proprietor or an impatient customer called out her name, Beatrice; then other customers would raise their heads briefly, a few seconds, as if to behold the bearer of such a beautiful name, but not finding anybody there, they would resume their drinking, their ribald jokes, their laughter and play with the other serving girls. She was like a wounded bird in flight: a forced landing now and then but nevertheless wobbling from place to place so that she would variously be found in Alaska, Paradise, The Modern, Thome and other beer-halls all over Limuru. Sometimes it was because an irate proprietor found she was not attracting enough customers; he would sack her without notice and without a salary. She would wobble to the next bar. But sometimes she was simply tired of nesting in one place, a daily witness of familiar scenes; girls even more decidedly ugly than she were fought over by numerous claimants at closing hours. What do they have that I don't have? she would ask herself, depressed. She longed for a bar-kingdom where she would be at least one of the rulers, where petitioners would bring their gifts of beer, frustrated smiles and often curses that hid more lust and love than hate.

She left Limuru town proper and tried the mushrooming townlets around. She worked at Ngariga, Kamiritho, Rironi and even Tiekunu and everywhere the story was the same. Oh, yes, occasionally she would get a client; but none cared for