The Land of Nod

by Mike Resnick

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Once, many years ago, there was a Kikuyu warrior who left his village and wandered off in search of adventure. Armed only with a spear, he slew the mighty lion and the cunning leopard. Then one day he came upon an elephant. He realized that his spear was useless against such a beast, but before he could back away or find cover, the elephant charged.

His only hope was divine intervention, and he begged Ngai, who rules the universe from His throne atop Kirinyaga, the holy mountain that men now call Mount Kenya, to find him and pluck him from the path of the elephant.

But Ngai did not respond, and the elephant picked the warrior up with its trunk and hurled him high into the air, and he landed in a distant thorn tree. His skin was badly torn by the thorns, but at least he was safe, since he was on a branch some twenty feet above the ground.

After he was sure the elephant had left the area, the warrior climbed down. Then he returned home and ascended the holy mountain to confront Ngai.

"What is it that you want of me?" asked Ngai, when the warrior had reached the summit.

"I want to know why you did not come," said the warrior angrily. "All my life I have worshiped you and paid tribute to you. Did you not hear me ask for your help?"

"I heard you," answered Ngai.

"Then why did you not come to my aid?" demanded the warrior. "Are you so lacking in godly powers that you could not find me?"

"After all these years you still do not understand," said
Ngai sternly. "It is _you_ who must search for _me_."
* * *
My son Edward picked me up at the police station on Biashara
Street just after midnight. The sleek British vehicle hovered a
few inches above the ground while I got in, and then his chauffeur
began taking us back to his house in the Ngong Hills.
"This is becoming tedious," he said, activating the
shimmering privacy barrier so that we could not be overheard.
He tried to present a judicial calm, but I knew he was furious.
"You would think they would tire of it," I agreed.
"We must have a serious talk," he said. "You have been back
only two months, and this is the fourth time I have had to bail
you out of jail."
"I have broken no Kikuyu laws," I said calmly, as we raced
through the dark, ominous slums of Nairobi on our way to the
affluent suburbs.
"You have broken the laws of Kenya," he said. "And like it or
not, that is where you now live. I'm an official in the
government, and I will not have you constantly embarrassing me!"
He paused, struggling with his temper. "Look at you! I have
offered to buy you a new wardrobe. Why must you wear that ugly old
kikoi? It smells even worse than it looks."
"Is there now a law against dressing like a Kikuyu?" I asked
him.
"No," he said, as he commanded the miniature bar to appear
from beneath the floor and poured himself a drink. "But there _is_
a law against creating a disturbance in a restaurant."
"I paid for my meal," I noted, as we turned onto Langata Road

and headed out for the suburbs. "In the Kenya shillings that you gave me."

"That does not give you the right to hurl your food against the wall, simply because it is not cooked to your taste." He glared at me, barely able to contain his anger. "You're getting worse with each offense. If I had been anyone else, you'd have spent the night in jail. As it is, I had to agree to pay for the damage you caused."

"It was eland," I explained. "The Kikuyu do not eat game animals."

"It was _not_ eland," he said, setting his glass down and lighting a smokeless cigarette. "The last eland died in a German zoo a year after you left for Kirinyaga. It was a modified soybean product, genetically enhanced to _taste_ like eland." He paused, then sighed deeply. "If you thought it was eland, why did you order it?"

"The server said it was steak. I assumed he meant the meat of a cow or an ox."

"This has got to stop," said Edward. "We are two grown men. Why can't we reach an accomodation?" He stared at me for a long time. "I can deal with rational men who disagree with me. I do it at Government House every day. But I cannot deal with a fanatic."

"I am a rational man," I said.

"Are you?" he demanded. "Yesterday you showed my wife's nephew how to apply the _githani_ test for truthfulness, and he practically burned his brother's tongue off."

"His brother was lying," I said calmly. "He who lies faces the red-hot blade with a dry mouth, whereas he who has nothing to fear has enough moisture on his tongue so that he cannot be

burned."
"Try telling a seven-year-old boy that he has nothing to fear
when he's being approached by a sadistic older brother who is
brandishing a red-hot knife!" snapped my son.
A uniformed watchman waved us through to the private road
where my son lived, and when we reached our driveway the chauffeur
pulled our British vehicle up to the edge of the force field. It
identified us and vanished long enough for us to pass through, and
soon we came to the front door.
Edward got out of the vehicle and approached his residence
as I followed him. He clenched his fists in a physical effort to
restrain his anger. "I agreed to let you live with us, because you
are an old man who was thrown off his world-- "
"I left Kirinyaga of my own volition," I interrupted calmly.
"It makes no difference why or how you left," said my son.
"What matters is that you are _here_ now. You are a very old man.
It has been many years since you have lived on Earth. All of your
friends are dead. My mother is dead. I am your son, and I will
accept my responsibilities, but you _must_ meet me halfway."
"I am trying to," I said.
"I doubt it."
"I am," I repeated. "You own son understands that, even if
you do not."
"My own son has had quite enough to cope with since my
divorce and remarriage. The last thing he needs is a grandfather
filling his head with wild tales of some Kikuyu Utopia."
"It is a failed Utopia," I corrected him. "They would not
listen to me, and so they are doomed to become another Kenya."
"What is so wrong with that?" said Edward. "Kenya is my home,

and I am proud of it." He paused and stared at me. "And now it is
your home again. You must speak of it with more respect."
"I lived in Kenya for many years before I emigrated to
Kirinyaga," I said. "I can live here again. Nothing has changed."
"That is not so," said my son. "We have built a transport
system beneath Nairobi, and there is now a spaceport at Watamu on
the coast. We have closed down the nuclear plants; our power is
now entirely thermal, drawn from beneath the floor of the Rift
Valley. In fact," he added with the pride that always accompanied
the descriptions of his new wife's attainments, "Susan was
instrumental in the changeover."
"You misunderstood me, Edward," I replied. "Kenya remains
unchanged in that it continues to ape the Europeans rather than
remain true to its own traditions."
The security system identified us and opened his house to us.
We walked through the foyer, past the broad winding staircase the
led to the bedroom wing. The servants were waiting for us, and the
butler took Edward's coat from him. Then we passed the doorways
the lounge and drawing room, both of which were filled with Roman
statues and French paintings and rows of beautifully-bound British
books. Finally we came to Edward's study, where he turned and
spoke in a low tone to the butler.
"We wish to be alone."
The servants vanished as if they had been nothing but
holograms.
"Where is Susan?" I asked, for my daughter-in-law was nowhere
to be seen.
"We were at a party at the Cameroon ambassador's new home
when the call came through that you had been arrested again," he

answered. "You broke up a very enjoyable bridge game. My guess is that she's in the tub or in bed, cursing your name."

I was about to mention that cursing my name to the god of the Europeans would not prove effective, but I decided that my son would not like to hear that at this moment, so I was silent. As I looked at my surroundings, I reflected that not only had all of Edward's belongings come from the Europeans, but that even his house had been taken from them, for it consisted of many rectangular rooms, and all Kikuyu knew -- or should have known -- that demons dwell in corners and the only proper shape for a home is round.

Edward walked briskly to his desk, activated his computer and read his messages, and then turned to me.

"There is another message from the government," he announced. "They want to see you next Tuesday at noon."

"I have already told them I will not accept their money," I said. "I have performed no service for them."

He put on his Lecture Face. "We are no longer a poor country," he said. "We pride ourselves that none of our infirm or elderly goes hungry."

"I will not go hungry, if the restaurants will stop trying to feed me unclean animals."

"The government is just making sure that you do not become a financial burden to me," said Edward, refusing to let me change the subject.

"You are my son," I said. "I raised you and fed you and protected you when you were young. Now I am old and you will do the same for me. That is our tradition."

"Well, it is our government's tradition to provide a

financial safety net to families who are supporting elderly members," he said, and I could tell that the last trace of Kikuyu within him had vanished, that he was entirely a Kenyan.

"You are a wealthy man," I pointed out. "You do not need their money."

"I pay my taxes," he said, lighting another smokeless cigarette to hide his defensiveness. "It would be foolish not to accept the benefits that accrue to us. You may live a very long time. We have every right to that money."

"It is dishonorable to accept what you do not need," I replied. "Tell them to leave us alone."

He leaned back, half sitting on his desk. "They wouldn't, even if I asked them to."

"They must be Wakamba or Maasai," I said, making no effort to hide my contempt.

"They are Kenyans," he answered. "Just as you and I are."

"Yes," I said, suddenly feeling the weight of my years. "Yes, I must work very hard at remembering that."

"You will save me more trips to the police station if you can," said my son.

I nodded and went off to my room. He had supplied me with a bed and mattress, but after so many years of living in my hut on Kirinyaga, I found the bed uncomfortable, so every night I removed the blanket and placed it on the floor, then lay down and slept on it.

But tonight sleep would not come, for I kept reliving the past two months in my mind. Everything I saw, everything I heard, made me remember why I had left Kenya in the first place, why I had fought so long and so hard to obtain Kirinyaga's charter.

I rolled onto my side, propped my head on my hand, and looked
out the window. Hundreds of stars were twinkling brightly in the
clear, cloudless sky. I tried to imagine which of them was
Kirinyaga. I had been the _mundumugu_ -- the witch doctor -- who
was charged with establishing our Kikuyu Utopia.
"I served you more selflessly than any other," I whispered,
staring at a flickering, verdant star, "and you betrayed me.
Worse, you have betrayed Ngai. Neither He nor I shall ever seek
you out again."
I lay my head back down, turned away from the window, and
closed my eyes, determined to look into the skies no more.
* * *
In the morning, my son stopped by my room.
"You have slept on the floor again," he noted.
"Have they passed a law against that now?" I demanded.
He sighed deeply. "Sleep any way you want."
I stared at him. "You look very impressive..." I began.
"Thank you."
"...in your European clothes," I concluded.
"I have an important meeting with the Finance Minister
today." He looked at his timepiece. "In fact, I must leave now or
I will be late." He paused uneasily. "Have you considered what we
spoke about yesterday?"
"We spoke of many things," I said.
"I am referring to the Kikuyu retirement village."
"I have lived in a village," I said. "And that is not one. It
is a twenty-story tower of steel and glass, built to imprison the
elderly."
"We have been through all this before," said my son. "It

would be a place for you to make new friends."

"I have a new friend," I said. "I shall be visiting him this evening."

"Good!" he said. "Maybe he'll keep you out of trouble."

* * *

I arrived at the huge titanium-and-glass laboratory complex just before midnight. The night had turned cool, and a breeze was blowing gently from the south. The moon had passed behind a cloud, and it was difficult to find the side gate in the darkness.

Eventually I did find it, though, and Kamau was waiting for me. He deactivated a small section of the electronic barrier long enough for me to step through.

"_Jambo, mzee,_" he said. _Hello, wise old man._

"_Jambo, mzee,_" I replied, for he was almost as old as I myself was. "I have come to see with my own eyes if you were telling the truth."

He nodded and turned, and I followed him between the tall, angular buildings that hovered over us, casting eerie shadows along the narrow walkways and channeling all the noises of the city in our direction. Our path was lined with Whistling Thorn and Yellow Fever trees, cloned from the few remaining specimens, rather than the usual introduced European shrubbery. Here and there were ornamental displays of grasses from the vanished savannahs.

"It is strange to see so much true African vegetation here in Kenya," I remarked. "Since I have returned from Kirinyaga, my eyes have hungered for it."

"You have seen a whole world of it," he replied with unconcealed envy.

"There is more to a world than greenery," I said. "When all
is said and done, there is little difference between Kirinyaga and
Kenya. Both have turned their backs on Ngai."
Kamau came to a halt, and gestured around him at the looming
metal and glass and concrete buildings that totally covered the
cool swamps from which Nairobi took its name. "I do not know how
you can prefer _this_ to Kirinyaga."
"I did not say I preferred it," I replied, suddenly aware
that the ever-present noises of the city had been overshadowed by
the droning hum of machines.
"Then you _do_ miss Kirinyaga."
"I miss what Kirinyaga might have been. As for these," I
said, indicating the immense structures, "they are just
buildings."
"They are European buildings," he said bitterly. "They were
built by men who are no longer Kikuyu or Luo or Embu, but merely
Kenyans. They are filled with corners." He paused, and I thought,
approvingly, _How much you sound like me! No wonder you sought me
out when I returned to Kenya._ "Nairobi is home to eleven million
people," he continued. "It stinks of sewage. The air is so
polluted there are days when you can actually see it. The people
wear European clothes and worship the Europeans' god. How could
you turn your back on Utopia for this?"
I held up my hands. "I have only ten fingers."
He frowned. "I do not understand."
"Do you remember the story of the little Dutch boy who put
his finger in the dike?"
Kamau shook his head and spat contemptuously on the ground.
"I do not listen to European stories."

"Perhaps you are wise not to," I acknowledged. "At any rate, the dike of tradition with which I had surrounded Kirinyaga began to spring leaks. They were few and easily plugged at first, but as the society kept evolving and growing they became many, and soon I did not have enough fingers to plug them all." I shrugged. "So I left before I was washed away."

"Have they another _mundumugu_ to replace you?" he asked.

"I am told that they have a doctor to cure the sick, and a Christian minister to tell them how to worship the god of the Europeans, and a computer to tell them how to react to any situation that might arise," I said. "They no longer need a _mundumugu_."

"Then Ngai has forsaken them," he stated.

"No," I corrected him. "_They_ have forsaken Ngai."

"I apologize, _mundumugu_," he said with deference. "You are right, of course."

He began walking again, and soon a strong, pungent odor came to my nostrils, a scent I had never encountered before, but which stirred some memory deep within my soul.

"We are almost there," said Kamau.

I heard a low rumbling sound, not like a predator growling, but rather like a vast machine purring with power.

"He is very nervous," continued Kamau, speaking in a soft monotone. "Make no sudden movements. He has already tried to kill two of his daytime attendants."

And then we were there, just as the moon emerged from its cloud cover and shone down on the awesome creature that stood facing us.

"He is magnificent!" I whispered.

"A perfect replication," agreed Kamau. "Height, ten feet eight inches at the shoulder, weight seven tons -- and each tusk is exactly 148 pounds."

The huge animal stared at me through the flickering force field that surrounded it and tested the cool night breeze, striving to pick up my scent.

"Remarkable!" I said.

"You understand the cloning process, do you not?" asked Kamau.

"I understand what cloning _is_," I answered. "I know nothing of the exact process."

"In this case, they took some cells from his tusks, which have been on display in the museum for more than two centuries, created the proper nutrient solution, and this is the result: Ahmed of Marsabit, the only elephant ever protected by Presidential Decree, lives again."

"I read that he was always accompanied by two guards no matter where he roamed on Mount Marsabit," I said. "Have they also ignored tradition? I see no one but you. Where is the other guard?"

"There are no guards. The entire complex is protected by a sophisticated electronic security system."

"Are you not a guard?" I asked.

He kept the shame from his voice, but he could not banish it from his face: even in the moonlight I could see it. "I am a paid companion."

"Of the elephant?"

"Of Ahmed."

"I am sorry," I said.

"We cannot all be _mundumugus_," he answered. "When you are
my age in a culture that worships youth, you take what is offered
to you."
"True," I said. I looked back at the elephant. "I wonder if
he has any memories of his former life? Of the days when he was
the greatest of all living creatures, and Mount Marsabit was his
kingdom."
"He knows nothing of Marasbit," answered Kamau. "But he knows
something is wrong. He knows he was not born to spend his life in
a tiny yard, surrounded by a glowing force field." He paused.
"Sometimes, late at night, he faces the north and lifts his trunk
and cries out his loneliness and misery. To the technicians it is
just an annoyance. Usually they tell me to feed him, as if food
will assuage his sorrow. It is not even _real_ food, but something
they have concocted in their laboratories."
"He does not belong here," I agreed.
"I know," said Kamau. "But then, neither do you, _mzee_. You
should be back on Kirinyaga, living as the Kikuyu were meant to
live."
I frowned. "No one on Kirinyaga is living as the Kikuyu were
meant to live." I sighed deeply. "I think perhaps the time for
mundumugus is past."
"This cannot be true," he protested. "Who else can be the
repository of our traditions, the interpretor of our laws?"
"Our traditions are as dead as _his_," I said, gesturing
toward Ahmed. Then I turned back to Kamau. "Do you mind if I ask
you a question?"
"Certainly not, _mundumugu_."
"I am glad you sought me out, and I have enjoyed our

conversations since I returned to Kenya," I told him. "But
something puzzles me: since you feel so strongly about the Kikuyu,
why did I not know you during our struggle to find a homeland? Why
did you remain behind when we emigrated to Kirinyaga?"
I could see him wrestling with himself to produce an answer.
Finally the battle was over, and the old man seemed to shrink an
inch or two.
"I was terrified," he admitted.
"Of the spaceship?" I asked.
"No."
"Then what frightened you?"
Another internal struggle, and then an answer: "_You_ did,
mzee."
"Me?" I repeated, surprised.
"You were always so sure of yourself," he said. "Always such
a perfect Kikuyu. You made me afraid that I wasn't good enough."
"That was ridiculous," I said firmly.
"Was it?" he countered. "My wife was a Catholic. My son and
daughter bore Christian names. And I myself had grown used to
European clothes and European conveniences." He paused. "I was
afraid if I went with you -- and I wanted to; I have been cursing
myself for my cowardice ever since -- that soon I would complain
about missing the technology and comfort I had left behind, and
that you would banish me." He would not meet my gaze, but stared
at the ground. "I did not wish to become an outcast on the world
that was the last hope of my people."
You are wiser than I suspected, I thought. Aloud I uttered
a compassionate lie: "You would not have been an outcast."
"You are sure?"

"I am sure," I said, laying a comforting hand on his bony
shoulder. "In fact, I wish you had been there to support me when
the end came."
"What good would the support of an old man have been?"
"You are not just _any_ old man," I answered. "The word of a
descendant of Johnstone Kamau would have carried much weight among
the Council of Elders."
"That was another reason I was afraid to come," he replied,
the words flowing a little more easily this time. "How could I
live up to my name -- for everyone knows that Johnstone Kamau
became Jomo Kenyatta, the great Burning Spear of the Kikuyu. How
could I possibly compare to such a man as that?"
"You compare more favorably than you think," I said
reassuringly. "I could have used the passion of your belief."
"Surely you had support from the people," he said.
I shook my head. "Even my own apprentice, who I was preparing
to succeed me, abandoned me; in fact, I believe he is at the
university just down the road even as we speak. In the end, the
people rejected the discipline of our traditions and the teachings
of Ngai for the miracles and comforts of the Europeans. I suppose
I should not be surprised, considering how many times it has
happened here in Africa." I looked thoughtfully at the elephant.
"I am as much an anachronism as Ahmed. Time has forgotten us
both."
"But Ngai has not."
"Ngai, too, my friend," I said. "Our day has passed. There is
no place left for us, not in Kenya, not on Kirinyaga, not
anywhere."
Perhaps it was something in the tone of my voice, or perhaps

in some mystic way Ahmed understood what I was saying. Whatever the reason, the elephant stepped forward to the edge of the force field and stared directly at me.

"It is lucky we have the field for protection," remarked Kamau.

"He would not hurt me," I said confidently.

"He has hurt men whom he had less reason to attack."

"But not me," I said. "Lower the field to a height of five feet."

"But..."

"Do as I say," I ordered him.

"Yes, _mundumugu_," he replied unhappily, going to a small control box and punching in a code.

Suddenly the mild visual distortion vanished at eye level. I reached out a reassuring hand, and a moment later Ahmed ran the tip of his trunk gently across my face and body, then sighed deeply and stood there, swaying gently as he transferred his weight from one foot to the other.

"I would not have believed it if I had not seen it!" said Kamau almost reverently.

"Are we not all Ngai's creations?" I said.

"Even Ahmed?" asked Kamau.

"Who do _you_ think created him?"

He shrugged again, and did not answer.

I remained for a few more minutes, watching the magnificent creature, while Kamau returned the force field to its former position. Then the night air became uncomfortably cold, as so often happened at this altitude, and I turned to Kamau.

"I must leave now," I said. "I thank you for inviting me

here. I would not have believed this miracle had I not seen it
with my own eyes."
"The scientists think it is _their_ miracle," he said.
"You and I know better," I replied.
He frowned. "But why do you think Ngai has allowed Ahmed to
live again, at this time and in this place?"
I paused for a long moment, trying to formulate an answer,
and found that I couldn't.
"There was a time when I knew with absolute certainty why
Ngai did what He did," I said at last. "Now I am not so sure."
"What kind of talk is that from a _mundumugu_?" demanded
Kamau.
"It was not long ago that I would wake up to the song of
birds," I said as we left Ahmed's enclosure and walked to the side
gate through which I had entered. "And I would look across the
river that wound by my village on Kirinyaga and see impala and
zebra grazing on the savannah. Now I wake up to the sound and
smell of modern Nairobi and then I look out and see a featureless
grey wall that separates my son's house from that of his
neighbor." I paused. "I think this must be my punishment for
failing to bring Ngai's word to my people."
"Will I see you again?" he asked as we reached the gate and
he deactivated a small section long enough for me to pass through.
"If it will not be an imposition," I said.
"The great Koriba an imposition?" he said with a smile.
"My son finds me so," I replied. "He gives me a room in his
house, but he would prefer I lived elsewhere. And his wife is
ashamed of my bare feet and my _kikoi_; she is constantly buying
European shoes and clothing for me to wear."

"_My_ son works inside the laboratory," said Kamau, pointing
to his son's third-floor office with some pride. "He has seventeen
men working for him. Seventeen!"
I must not have looked impressed, for he continued, less
enthusiastically, "It is he who got me this job, so that I
wouldn't have to live with him."
"The job of paid companion," I said.
A bittersweet expression crossed his face. "I love my son,
Koriba, and I know that he loves me -- but I think that he is also
a little bit ashamed of me."
"There is a thin line between shame and embarrassment," I
said. "My son glides between one and the other like the pendulum
of a clock."
Kamau seemed grateful to hear that his situation was not
unique. "You are welcome to live with me, _mundumugu_," he said,
and I could tell that it was an earnest offer, not just a polite
lie that he hoped I would reject. "We would have much to talk
about."
"That is very considerate of you," I said. "But it will be
enough if I may visit you from time to time, on those days when I
find Kenyans unbearable and must speak to another Kikuyu."
"As often as you wish," he said. _"Kwaheri, mzee."_
"Kwaheri," I responded. _Farewell._
I took the slidewalk down the noisy, crowded streets and
boulevards that had once been the sprawling Athi Plains, an area
that had swarmed with a different kind of life, and got off when I
came to the airbus platform. An airbus glided up a few minutes
later, almost empty at this late hour, and began going north,
floating perhaps ten inches above the ground.

The trees that lined the migration route had been replaced by a dense angular forest of steel and glass and tightly-bonded alloys. As I peered through a window into the night, it seemed for a few moments that I was also peering into the past. Here, where the titanium-and-glass courthouse stood, was the very spot where the Burning Spear had first been arrested for having the temerity to suggest that his country did not belong to the British. Over there, by the new eight-story post office building, was where the last lion had died. Over there, by the water recycling plant, my people had vanquished the Wakamba in glorious and bloody battle some 300 years ago.

"We have arrived, _mzee_," said the driver, and the bus hovered a few inches above the ground while I made my way to the door. "Aren't you chilly, dressed in just a blanket like that?"

I did not deign to answer him, but stepped out to the sidewalk, which did not move here in the suburbs as did the slidewalks of the city. I prefered it, for man was meant to walk, not be transported effortlessly by miles-long beltways.

I approached my son's enclave and greeted the guards, who all knew me, for I often wandered through the area at night. They passed me through with no difficulty, and as I walked I tried to look across the centuries once more, to see the mud-and-grass huts, the _bomas_ and _shambas_ of my people, but the vision was blotted out by enormous mock-Tudor and mock-Victorian and mock-Colonial and mock-contemporary houses, interspersed with needle-like apartment buildings that reached up to stab the clouds.

I had no desire to speak to Edward or Susan, for they would question me endlessly about where I had been. My son would once again warn me about the thieves and muggers who prey on old men

after dark in Nairobi, and my daughter-in-law would try to subtly suggest that I would be warmer in a coat and pants. So I went past their house and walked aimlessly through the enclave until all the lights in the house had gone out. When I was sure they were asleep, I went to a side door and waited for the security system to identify my retina and skeletal structure, as it had on so many similar nights. Then I quietly made my way to my room.

Usually I dreamed of Kirinyaga, but this night the image of Ahmed haunted my dreams. Ahmed, eternally confined by a force field; Ahmed, trying to imagine what lay beyond his tiny enclosure; Ahmed, who would live and die without ever seeing another of his own kind.

And gradually, my dream shifted to myself: to Koriba, attached by invisible chains to a Nairobi he could no longer recognize; Koriba, trying futilely to mold Kirinyaga into what it might have been; Koriba, who once led a brave exodus of the Kikuyu until one day he looked around and found that he was the only Kikuyu remaining.

* * *

In the morning I went to visit my daughter on Kirinyaga -- not the terraformed world, but the _real_ Kirinyaga, which is now called Mount Kenya. It was here that Ngai gave the digging-stick to Gikuyu, the first man, and told him to work the earth. It was here that Gikuyu's nine daughters became the mothers of the nine tribes of the Kikuyu, here that the sacred fig tree blossomed. It was here, millennia later, that Jomo Kenyatta, the great Burning Spear of the Kikuyu, would invoke Ngai's power and send the Mau Mau out to drive the white man back to Europe.

And it was here that a steel-and-glass city of five million

inhabitants sprawled up the side of the holy mountain. Nairobi's overstrained water and sewer system simply could not accomodate any more people, so the government offered enormous tax incentives to any business that would move to Kirinyaga, in the hope that the people would follow them -- and the people accomodated them. Vehicles spewed pollution into the atmosphere, and the noise of the city at work was deafening. I walked to the spot where the fig tree had once stood; it was now covered by a lead foundry. The slopes where the bongo and the rhinoceros once lived were hidden beneath the housing projects. The winding mountain streams had all been diverted and redirected. The tree beneath which Deedan Kimathi had been killed by the British was only a memory, its place taken by a fast food restaurant. The summit had been turned into a park, with tram service leading to a score of souvenir shops.

And now I realized why Kenya had become intolerable. Ngai no longer ruled the world from His throne atop the mountain, for there was no longer any room for Him there. Like the leopard and the golden sunbird, like I myself many years ago, He too had fled before this onslaught of black Europeans.

Possibly my discovery influenced my mood, for the visit with my daughter did not go well. But then, they never did: she was too much like her mother.

* * *

I entered my son's study late that same afternoon.

"One of the servants said you wished to see me," I said.

"Yes, I do," said my son as he looked up from his computer. Behind him were paintings of two great leaders, Martin Luthor King and Julius Nyerere, black men both, but neither one a Kikuyu.

"Please sit down."

I did as he asked.

"On a chair, my father," he said.

"The floor is satisfactory."

He sighed heavily. "I am too tired to argue with you. I have been brushing up on my French." He grimaced. "It is a difficult language."

"Why are you studying French?" I asked.

"As you know, the ambassador from Cameroon has bought a house in the enclave. I thought it would be advantageous to be able to speak to him in his own tongue."

"That would be Bamileke or Ewondo, not French," I noted.

"He does not speak either of those," answered Edward. "His family is ruling class. They only spoke French in his family compound, and he was educated in Paris."

"Since he is the ambassador to our country, why are you learning _his_ language?" I asked. "Why does he not learn Swahili?"

"Swahili is a street language," said my son. "English and French are the languages of diplomacy and business. His English is poor, so I will speak to him in French instead." He smiled smugly. "_That_ ought to impress him!"

"I see," I said.

"You look disapproving," he observed.

"I am not ashamed of being a Kikuyu," I said. "Why are you ashamed of being a Kenyan?"

"I am not ashamed of anything!" he snapped. "I am proud of being able to speak to him in his own tongue."

"More proud than he, a visitor to Kenya, is to speak to you

in _your_ tongue," I noted.

"You do not understand!" he said.

"Evidently," I agreed.

He stared at me silently for a moment, then sighed deeply.

"You drive me crazy," he said. "I don't even know how we came to be discussing this. I wanted to see you for a different reason."

He lit a smokeless cigarette, took one puff, and threw it into the atomizer. "I had a visit from Father Ngoma this morning."

"I do not know him."

"You know his parishoners, though," said my son. "A number of them have come to you for advice."

"That is possible," I admitted.

"Damn it!" said Edward. "I have to live in this neighborhood, and he is the parish priest. He resents you telling his flock how to live, especially since what you tell them is in contradiction to Catholic dogma."

"Am I to lie to them, then?" I asked.

"Can't you just refer them to Father Ngona?"

"I am a _mundumugu_," I said. "It is my duty to advise those who come to me for guidance."

"You have not been a _mundumugu_ since they made you leave Kirinyaga!" he said irritably.

"I left of my own volition," I replied calmly.

"We are getting off the subject again," said Edward. "Look -- if you want to stay in the _mundumugu_ business, I'll rent you an office, or" -- he added contemptuously --"buy you a patch of dirt on which to sit and make pronouncements. But you cannot practice in my house."

"Father Ngoma's parishoners must not like what he has to

say," I observed, "or they would not seek advice elsewhere."

"I do not want you speaking to them again. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I said. "It is clear that you do not want me to speak to them again."

"You know exactly what I mean!" he exploded. "No more verbal games! Maybe they worked on Kirinyaga, but they won't work here! I know you too well!"

He went back to staring at his computer.

"It is most interesting," I said.

"What is?" he asked suspiciously, glaring at me.

"Here you are, surrounded by English books, studying French, and arguing on behalf of the priest of an Italian religion. Not only are you not Kikuyu, I think perhaps you are no longer even Kenyan."

He glared at me across his desk. "You drive me crazy," he repeated.

* * *

After I left my son's study I left the house and took an airbus to the park in Muthaiga, miles from my son and the neighbors who were interchangeable with him. Once lions had stalked this terrain. Leopards had clung to overhanging limbs, waiting for the opportunity to pounce upon their prey. Wildebeest and zebra and gazelles had rubbed shoulders, grazing on the tall grasses. Giraffes had nibbled the tops of acacia trees, while warthogs rooted in the earth for tubers. Rhinos had nibbled on thornbushes, and charged furiously at any sound or sight they could not immediately identify.

Then the Kikuyu had come and cleared the land, bringing with them their cattle and their oxen and their goats. They had dwelt

in huts of mud and grass, and lived the life that we aspired to
on Kirinyaga.
But all that was in the past. Today the park contained
nothing but a few squirrels racing across the imported Kentucky
Blue Grass and a pair of hornbills that had nested in the one of
the transplanted European trees. Old Kikuyu men, dressed in shoes
and pants and jackets, sat on the benches that ran along the
perimeter. One man was tossing crumbs to an exceptionally bold
starling, but most of them simply sat and stared aimlessly.
I found an empty bench, but decided not to sit on it. I
didn't want to be like these men, who saw nothing but the
squirrels and the birds, when I could see the lions and the
impala, the war-painted Kikuyu and the red-clad Maasai, who had
once stalked across this same land.
I continued walking, suddenly restless, and despite the heat
of the day and the frailty of my ancient body, I walked until
twilight. I decided could not endure dinner with my son and his
wife, their talk of their boring jobs, their continual veiled
suggestions about the retirement home, their inability to
comprehend either why I went to Kirinyaga or why I returned -- so
instead of going home I began walking aimlessly through the
crowded city.
Finally I looked up at the sky. _Ngai_, I said silently, _I_
still do not understand. I was a good mundumugu. I obeyed Your
law. I honored Your rituals. There must have come a day, a moment,
a second, when together we could have saved Kirinyaga if You had
just manifested Yourself. Why did You abandon it when it needed
You so desperately?_
I spoke to Ngai for minutes that turned into hours, but He

did not answer.
* * *
When it was ten o'clock at night, I decided it was time to
start making my way to the laboratory complex, for it would take
me more than an hour to get there, and Kamau began working at
eleven.
As before, he deactivated the electronic barrier to let me
in, then escorted me to the small grassy area where Ahmed was
kept.
"I did not expect to see you back so soon, _mzee_," he said.
"I have no place else to go," I answered, and he nodded, as
if this made perfect sense to him.
Ahmed seemed nervous until the breeze brought my scent to
him. Then he turned to face the north, extending his trunk every
few moments.
"It is as if he seeks some sign from Mount Marsabit," I
remarked, for the great creature's former home was hundreds of
miles north of Nairobi, a solitary green mountain rising out of
the blazing desert.
"He would not be pleased with what he found," said Kamau.
"Why do you say that?" I asked, for no animal in our history
was ever more identified with a location than the mighty Ahmed
with Marsabit.
"Do you not read the papers, or watch the news on the holo?"
I shook my head. "What happens to black Europeans is of no
concern to me."
"The government has evacuated the town of Marsabit, which
sits next to the mountain. They have closed the Singing Wells, and
have ordered everyone to leave the area."

"Leave Marsabit? Why?"

"They have been burying nuclear waste at the base of the mountain for many years," he said. "It was just revealed that some of the containers broke open almost six years ago. The government hid the fact from the people, and then failed to properly clean up the leak."

"How could such a thing happen?" I asked, though of course I knew the answer. After all, how does _anything_ happen in Kenya?

"Politics. Payoffs. Corruption."

"A third of Kenya is desert," I said. "Why did they not bury it there, where no one lives or even thinks to travel, so when this kind of disaster occurs, as it always does, no one is harmed?"

He shrugged. "Politics. Payoffs. Corruption," he repeated. "It is our way of life."

"Ah, well, it is nothing to me anyway," I said. "What happens to a mountain 500 kilometers away does not interest me, any more than I am interested in what happens to a world named after a different mountain."

"It interests _me_," said Kamau. "Innocent people have been exposed to radiation."

"If they live near Marsabit, they are Pokot and Rendille," I pointed out. "What does that matter to the Kikuyu?"

"They are _people_, and my heart goes out to them," said Kamau.

"You are a good man," I said. "I knew that from the moment we first met." I pulled some peanuts from the pouch that hung around my neck, the same pouch in which I used to keep charms and magical tokens. "I bought these for Ahmed this afternoon," I said. "May I...?"

"Certainly," answered Kamau. "He has few enough pleasures.
Even a peanut will be appreciated. Just toss them at his feet."
"No," I said, walking forward. "Lower the barrier."
He lowered the force field until Ahmed was able to reach his
trunk out over the top. When I got close enough, the huge beast
gently took the peanuts from my hand.
"I am amazed!" said Kamau when I had rejoined him. "Even I
cannot approach Ahmed with impunity, yet you actually fed him by
hand, as if he were a family pet."
"We are each the last of our kind, living on borrowed time,"
I said. "He senses a kinship."
I remained a few more minutes, then went home to another
night of troubled sleep. I felt Ngai was trying to tell me
something, trying to impart some message through my dreams, but
though I had spent years interpreting the omens in other people's
dreams, I was ignorant of my own.
Edward was standing on the beautifully rolled lawn, staring
at the blackened embers of my fire.
"I have a beautiful fire pit on the terrace," he said, trying
unsuccessfully to hide his anger. "Why on earth did you build a
fire in the middle of the garden?"
"That is where a fire belongs," I answered.
"Not in _this_ house, it doesn't!"
"I shall try to remember."
"Do you know what the landscaper will charge me to repair the
damage you caused?" A look of concern suddenly crossed his face.
"You haven't sacrificed any animals, have you?"
"No."
"You're sure none of the neighbors is missing a dog or a

cat?" he persisted.

"I know the law," I said. And indeed, Kikuyu law required the sacrifice of goats and cattle, not dogs and cats. "I am trying to obey it."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"But _you_ are not obeying it, Edward," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

I looked at Susan, who was staring at us from a second-story window.

"You have two wives," I pointed out. "The younger one lives with you, but the older one lives many kilometers away, and sees you only when you take your children away from her on weekends. This is unnatural: a man's wives should all live together with him, sharing the household duties."

"Linda is no longer my wife," he said. "You know that. We were divorced many years ago."

"You can afford both," I said. "You should have kept both."

"In this society, a man may have only one wife," said Edward. "What kind of talk is this? You have lived in England and America. You know that."

"That is their law, not ours," I said. "This is Kenya."

"It is the same thing."

"The Moslems have more than one wife," I replied.

"I am not a Moslem," he said.

"A Kikuyu man may have as many wives as he can afford," I said. "It is obvious that you are also not a Kikuyu."

"I've had it with this smug superiority of yours!" he exploded. "You deserted my mother because she was not a true Kikuyu," he continued bitterly. "You turned your back on my sister

because she was not a true Kikuyu. Since I was a child, every time you were displeased with me you have told me that I am not a true Kikuyu. Now you have even proclaimed that none of the thousands who followed you to Kirinyaga are true Kikuyus." He glared furiously at me. "Your standards are higher than Kirinyaga itself! Can there possibly be a true Kikuyu anywhere in the universe?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"Where can such a paragon be found?" he demanded.

"Right here," I said, tapping myself on the chest. "You are looking at him."

* * *

My days faded one into another, the dullness and drudgery of them broken only by occasional nocturnal visits to the laboratory complex. Then one night, as I met Kamau at the gate, I could see that his entire demeanor had changed.

"Something is wrong," I said promptly. "Are you ill?"

"No, _mzee_, it is nothing like that."

"Then what is the matter?" I persisted.

"It is Ahmed," said Kamau, unable to stop tears from rolling down his withered cheeks. "They have decided to put him to death the day after tomorrow."

"Why?" I asked, surprised. "Has he attacked another keeper?"

"No," said Kamau bitterly. "The experiment was a success. They know they can clone an elephant, so why continue to pay for his upkeep when they can line their pockets with the remaining funds of the grant?"

"Is there no one you can appeal to?" I demanded.

"Look at me," said Kamau. "I am an 86-year-old man who was given his job as an act of charity. Who will listen to me?"

"We must do something," I said.
He shook his head sadly. "They are _kehees_," he said.
"Uncircumcised boys. They do not even know what a _mundumugu_ is.
Do not humiliate yourself by pleading with them."
"If I did not plead with the Kikuyu on Kirinyaga," I replied,
"you may be sure I will not plead with the Kenyans in Nairobi." I
tried to ignore the ceaseless hummings of the laboratory machines
as I considered my options. Finally I looked up at the night sky:
the moon glowed a hazy orange through the pollution. "I will need
your help," I said at last.
"You can depend on me."
"Good. I shall return tomorrow night."
I turned on my heel and left, without even stopping at
Ahmed's enclosure.
All that night I thought and planned. In the morning, I
waited until my son and his wife had left the house, then called
Kamau on the vidphone to tell him what I intended to do and how he
could help. Next, I had the computer contact the bank and withdraw
my money, for though I disdained shillings and refused to cash my
government checks, my son had found it easier to shower me with
money than respect.
I spent the rest of the morning shopping at vehicle rental
agencies, until I found exactly what I wanted. I had the
saleswoman show me how to manipulate it, practiced until
nightfall, hovered opposite the laboratory until I saw Kamau enter
the grounds, and then maneuvered up to the side gate.
"Jambo, mundumugu!" whispered Kamau as he deactivated
enough of the electronic barrier to accomodate the vehicle, which
he scrutinized carefully. I backed up to Ahmed's enclosure, then

opened the back and ordered the ramp to descend. The elephant
watched with an uneasy curiosity as Kamau deactivated a ten-foot
section of the force field and allowed the bottom of the ramp
through.
"Njoo, Tembo," I said. _Come, elephant._
He took a tentative step toward me, then another and another.
When he reached the edge of his enclosure he stopped, for always
he had received an electrical "correction" when he tried to move
beyond this point. It took almost twenty minutes of tempting him
with peanuts before he finally crossed the barrier and then
clambered awkwardly up the ramp, which slid in after him.
I sealed him into the hovering vehicle, and he instantly trumpeted
in panic.
"Keep him quiet until we get out of here," said a nervous
Kamau as I joined him at the controls, "or he'll wake up the whole
city."
I opened a panel to the back of the vehicle and spoke
soothingly, and strangely enough the trumpeting ceased and the
scuffling did stop. As I continued to calm the frightened beast,
Kamau piloted the vehicle out of the laboratory complex. We passed
through the Ngong Hills twenty minutes later, and circled around
Thika in another hour. When we passed Kirinyaga -- the true, snow-
capped Kirinyaga, from which Ngai once ruled the world -- 90
minutes after that, I did not give it so much as a glance.
We must have been quite a sight to anyone we passed: two
seemingly crazy old men, racing through the night in an unmarked
cargo vehicle carrying a six-ton monster that had been extinct for
more than two centuries.
"Have you considered what effect the radiation will have on

him?" asked Kamau as we passed through Isiolo and continued north.
"I questioned my son about it," I answered. "He is aware of
the incident, and says that the contamination is confined to the
lower levels of the mountain." I paused. "He also tells me it will
soon be cleaned up, but I do not think I believe him."
"But Ahmed must pass through the radiation zone to ascend the
mountain," said Kamau.
I shrugged. "Then he will pass through it. Every day he
lives is a day more than he would have lived in Nairobi. For as
much time as Ngai sees fit to give him, he will be free to graze
on the mountain's greenery and drink deep of its cool waters."
"I hope he lives many years," he said. "If I am to be jailed
for breaking the law, I would at least like to know that some
lasting good came of it."
"No one is going to jail you," I assured him. "All that will
happen is that you will be fired from a job that no longer
exists."
"That job supported me," he said unhappily.
The Burning Spear would have no use for you, I decided.
_You bring no honor to his name. It is as I have always known: I
am the last true Kikuyu._
I pulled my remaining money out of my pouch and held it out
to him. "Here," I said.
"But what about yourself, _mzee_?" he said, forcing himself
not to grab for it.
"Take it," I said. "I have no use for it."
"Asante sana, mzee," he said, taking it from my hand and
stuffing it into a pocket. _Thank you, mzee._
We fell silent then, each occupied with our own thoughts. As

Nairobi receded further and further behind us, I compared my feelings with those I had experienced when I had left Kenya behind for Kirinyaga. I had been filled with optimism then, certain that we would create the Utopia I could envision so clearly in my mind. The thing I had not realized is that a society can be a Utopia for only an instant -- once it reaches a state of perfection it cannot change and still be a Utopia, and it is the nature of societies to grow and evolve. I do not know when Kirinyaga became a Utopia; the instant came and went without my noticing it.

Now I was seeking Utopia again, but this time of a more limited, more realizable nature: a Utopia for one man, a man who knew his own mind and would die before compromising. I had been misled in the past, so I was not as elated as the day we had left for Kirinyaga; being older and wiser, I felt a calm, quiet certitude rather than more vivid emotions.

An hour after sunrise, we came to a huge, green, fog-enshrouded mountain, set in the middle of a bleached desert. A single swirling dust devil was visible against the horizon.

We stopped, then unsealed the elephant's compartment. We stood back as Ahmed stepped cautiously down the ramp, his every movement tense with apprehension. He took a few steps, as if to convince himself that he was truly on solid ground again, then raised his trunk to examine the scents of his new -- and ancient -- home.

Slowly the great beast turned toward Marsabit, and suddenly his whole demeanor changed. No longer cautious, no longer fearful, he spent almost a full minute eagerly examining the smells that wafted down to him. Then, without a backward glance, he strode

confidently to the foothills and vanished into the foliage. A
moment later we heard him trumpet, and then he was climbing the
mountain to claim his kingdom.
I turned to Kamau. "You had better take the vehicle back
before they come looking for it."
"Are you not coming with me?" he asked, surprised.
"No," I replied. "Like Ahmed, I will live out my days on
Marsabit."
"But that means you, too, must pass through the radiation."
"What of it?" I said with an unconcerned shrug. "I am an old
man. How much time can I have left -- weeks? Months? Surely not a
year. Probably the burden of my years will kill me long before the
radiation does."
"I hope you are right," said Kamau. "I should hate to think
of you spending your final days in agony."
"I have seen men who live in agony," I told him. "They are
the old _mzees_ who gather in the park each morning, leading lives
devoid of purpose, waiting only for death to claim another of
their number. I will not share their fate."
A frown crossed his face like an early morning shadow, and I
could see what he was thinking: he would have to take the vehicle
back and face the consequences alone.
"I will remain here with you," he said suddenly. "I cannot
turn my back on Eden a second time."
"It is not Eden," I said. "It is only a mountain in the
middle of a desert."
"Nonetheless, I am staying. We will start a new Utopia. It
will be Kirinyaga again, only done right this time."
I have work to do, I thought. _Important work. And you

would desert me in the end, as they have all deserted me. Better that you leave now._

"You must not worry about the authorities," I said in the same reassuring tones with which I spoke to the elephant. "Return the vehicle to my son and he will take care of everything."

"Why should he?" asked Kamau suspiciously.

"Because I have always been an embarrassment to him, and if it were known that I stole Ahmed from a government laboratory, I would graduate from an embarrassment to a humiliation. Trust me: he will not allow this to happen."

"If your son asks about you, what shall I tell him?"

"The truth," I answered. "He will not come looking for me."

"What will stop him?"

"The fear that he might find me and have to bring me back with him," I said.

Kamau's face reflected the battle that was going on inside him, his terror of returning alone pitted against his fear of the hardships of life on the mountain.

"It is true that my son would worry about me," he said hesitantly, as if expecting me to contradict him, perhaps even hoping that I would. "And I would never see my grandchildren again."

You are the last Kikuyu, indeed the last human being, that I shall ever see, I thought. _I will utter one last lie, disguised as a question, and if you do not see through it, then you will leave with a clear conscience and I will have performed a final act of compassion._

"Go home, my friend," I said. "For what is more important than a grandchild?"

"Come with me, Koriba," he urged. "They will not punish you
if you explain why you kidnapped him."
"I am not going back," I said firmly. "Not now, not ever.
Ahmed and I are both anachronisms. It is best that we live out our
lives here, away from a world we no longer recognize, a world that
has no place for us."
Kamau looked at the mountain. "You and he are joined at the
soul," he concluded.
"Perhaps," I agreed. I laid my hand on his shoulder.
"_Kwaheri,_ Kamau."
"Kwaheri, mzee," he replied unhappily. "Please ask Ngai to
forgive me for my weakness."
It seemed to take him forever to activate the vehicle and
turn it toward Nairobi, but finally he was out of sight, and I
turned and began ascending the foothills.
I had wasted many years seeking Ngai on the wrong mountain.
Men of lesser faith might believe Him dead or disinterested, but I
knew that if Ahmed could be reborn after all others of his kind
were long dead, then Ngai must surely be nearby, overseeing the
miracle. I would spend the rest of the day regaining my strength,
and then, in the morning, I would begin searching for Him again on
Marsabit.
And this time, I knew I would find Him.