Kengemi's Fly On The Wall - By Stanley Gazemba

Lodged in between Loresho to the north, Westlands to the east, Lavington across yonder to the south and MountainView, Kangemi is like a wart on the ass of our affluent neighbours. And it is so ripe with putrefaction that a single stroke of the lance will see it spurting all over your face. It is for this reason that our neighbours are continually wary about our presence, breeding giant man-eating dogs and walling themselves in with twelve-foot walls that are topped with coils of razor wire, in between strands of electric wiring; as if we are some mutant man-eating rats that must be kept strictly in the cage. And yet, like a bad smell that lingers around for as long as it wishes, they discover that after all that effort they still cannot wish us off, because they rely on us to guard and clean their homes, baby-sit for them, and do their petty fix-jobs. Occasionally we will even marry or get married to the siring of their very loins!

On a clear morning you can stand on the bridge straddling the busy Waiyaki Way and see the silhouette of the city spread out on the horizon to the east. It is just a short drive - or a brisk walk- away from the city centre, depending on how you choose to get there. Kangemi is home to a varied hodgepodge of people. There are well trained professionals who found that they couldn't get out of the ghetto even after they had landed their dream job, living side by side with college graduates who couldn't land a job at all. There are office cleaners and trained industrial workers rubbing shoulders with dirt-cheap prostitutes and small-time muggers who will twist your neck for a plastic Chinese watch. Why, there are even a sizeable number of retired civil servants who didn't have a country home to go back to, and who are busy squeezing a living out of the last coins of their golden handshake. It is home to a minority Kikuyu population who own the shanties and run most of the businesses, and a giant migrant population who pay the rent and patronize the commercial outlets. Of the later the Luhyia form the bulk, followed by Kambas, Luos, Kisiis and a sprinkling of the other thirty-eight tribes.

On a typical Sunday afternoon Kangemi's narrow dirt streets are jam-packed. The crowds surge to and fro like locusts on a trans-Sahara march, weaving around those who choose to hold conference in the middle of the street and prostrate street dogs and goats that have a right of way in the ghetto. From a distance the crowds appear like lumps of *ugali* and *nyama* negotiating their way down a giant steamy colon, seared by the various gastric juices- the glaring sun and cocoa-fine dust- until they are baked a brown shit.

In the run-up to the elections Kangemi was awash with activity, springing to life in a way we had last witnessed five years ago. All of a sudden the idle youth who had been used to idling away their days in Senator dens begging for a drink as they shared shriveled *miraa* twigs found themselves with so many jobs on their hands they were spoilt for choice. Desperate housewives who had been used to splitting their hairs on how best to knock together a budget out of the twenty bob the *mzee* of the house left in the morning all of a sudden found themselves on high demand singing and dancing the praises of the politician footing the bill at the numerous campaign gatherings. Old vans that had been abandoned in mechanics' scrap yards were fitted with bald tyres and coaxed back to life for the campaigns, crackly speakers fixed to the roof and glossy posters pasted all over,

leaving just enough space on the windshield for the driver to peep through. It was a season of plenty for temporary praise-singers, body-guards, and hecklers.

I sat there shivering, holding onto my equally scared son as the gunshots shattered the night. We had turned off all the lights and switched off the TV and radio, our natural instincts telling us it was the best way to throw the enemy off target in the dark. As we sat there stock-still, holding onto each other, all we could hear were our staggered heartbeats. Every crack of the G3s jolted right into our systems, causing warm bile to spread at the base of the stomach. It was more frightening heard this close. It was easier when we wrote or read about it in books or watched it in the movies. This here was more tactile, the tension of the moment palpable.

I expected anytime for a stray bullet to punch through my paper-thin *mabati* wall and blow me away into kingdom come. For the first time I hated being born in Kenya. I hated the utter helplessness of the moment. The fact that when they eventually kicked in my shaky wooden door I would be a sitting duck. I looked around in the familiar darkness, gauging my defenses. There was the stool on which my wife placed our stove. I could simply wield it by one leg and swing with all my might. There was also the thick broken lamp-stand that I kept underneath the bed. It was made of solid hard wood, and was heavy and felt nice in my grip. While it would surely smash a skull, I wondered if it could stop a bullet. I suddenly wished I had been in a country where I could walk up to a shop counter and purchase a sawn-off shotgun. At least with that, when they eventually got me, I would be there to meet them with a blast of lead in the belly, and die like a man-fighting.

After an unbearably long time the gunshots ceased and an uneasy calm returned.
“Daddy, *hao ni polisi*?” asked my shivering son, his eyes shining in the dark.
“Yes,” I whispered.
But hardly had we settled down than the screams of the marauding youths returned, punctuated by the ruckus of breaking glass and tearing *mabati*, in the background the whispery rasp of petrol flames lapping hungrily on a cool breezy night.

In all it was a long night- *usiku mrefu*, as the local parlance goes. Eventually the kids drifted off into troubled sleep and I put them to bed. We then lay in our places and pretended to sleep, our eyes squeezed shut, our ears wide awake.