

Kamzee's Donkey

By Gitau Muthuma

The Villager

This fictional piece depicts the life and struggles of a typical Dagoretti resident.

Evan Kamzee had finally had enough of the retail cigarette distribution business, the risks had become too much. His supplier manufactured counterfeit cigarettes from his Kangemi slum base in Dagoretti and Kamzee was one of his main distributors. The Kenya Revenue Authority inspectors had become more vigilant and he could no longer afford the hefty bribes these inspectors invariably demanded when they apprehended one.... and that is how the story of the donkey began.

Wangare, Kamzee's rather shrewish wife, harassed him incessantly over his inability to earn enough to support his three children and constantly complained about his addiction to cheap moonshine liquor. Kamzee had long ago forgotten how to love Wangare, while she, on her part, preferred to make him miserable by her company rather than let him be happy elsewhere. What she felt for him was not really love but the possessiveness of love.

The Regen shopping centre, where Kamzee and his family lived was blossoming into a township, high rise residential buildings in the neighbourhood were springing up and Regen was fast losing its rural aura. It was slowly but perceptibly changing into a suburb of Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. The population was growing and so was the demand for basic services such as water. The Nairobi Water Supply Company better known for its constant failure to supply water was derisively nicknamed the Nairobi Water Shortage Company by the locals, who were lucky if they accessed the precious commodity once a week.

Shrewd Kamzee smelt an opportunity and thought he would successfully venture into the water supply business. With the not inconsiderable earnings from the illegal cigarette distribution job, Kamzee decided he would buy a donkey, a cart and plastic jerrycans to sell water in the neighbourhood. Were he to sell around fifty jerrycans for twenty shillings each that would amount to about a thousand shillings daily, not quite a lot but adequate to keep Wangare, his difficult to please wife, reasonably happy.

Kamzee talked over his plan with Wangare who thought it a good one. "So where will you buy the donkey from?" she asked. Kamzee thought for a moment, "I hear donkeys in Gilgil are cheap, I think that is where I will go." Gilgil was about fifty kilometres away from Regen.

“Won’t the transportation be too expensive? Wangare asked, the lorry drivers may ask for a lot.”

“No, one does not put a donkey on a lorry, I will have to walk back on foot with it, it is a long way but it can be done.” Kamzee confidently stated.

“I hope this will not turn into a drinking spree, your money could be stolen by one of those women of easy virtue you are so fond of,” Wangare sarcastically observed. Kamzee knew better than to respond, he was in no mood for a quarrel.

Very early on Saturday morning Kamzee embarked on his journey to Gilgil. Munyotu his friend had introduced him to a donkey owner in Gilgil but when they got down to the bargain he realized he could not afford the young mare he admired and was forced to settle for a rather tired looking old ass. The transaction, after some haggling was completed to the satisfaction of both parties and Kamzee set off for home with his newly acquired donkey.

When he reached Mai Mahiu, a town about halfway between Gilgil and Regen, at around midday he decided to have his midday meal there. He tethered his sleepy looking donkey to a tree and headed into a butchery and ordered *mutura*, a popular African sausage made from the intestines of a cow or goat, and ugali. After the meal he dashed off into a bar next to the butchery and gulped down a bottle of the fiery Diamond hard liquor. He felt quite rejuvenated and was ready to resume his journey home.

A few kilometres from Mai Mahiu, Kamzee ran into a Maasai herd of cattle grazing along the road. It was a numerous herd but he was not quick enough to change direction to avoid plunging into it. It swamped his tired looking donkey and swallowed it up, digesting it into itself. Kamzee tried to hail the herders to stop the herd and help him find his donkey in vain. They did not seem to notice him and continued herding their cattle towards the Mau forest, far off in the hazy horizon and did not even deign to answer him.



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Kamzee continued to rave at the herdsmen like a demented madman, perhaps they had not seen his donkey get swallowed up into the herd; he waved his hands at the indifferent, stonyhearted herdsmen, he shouted himself hoarse, he tried charging into the impenetrable mass of the moving cattle; but his donkey was indistinguishable in the teeming mobile mass. That was the last time Kamzee ever set his eyes on his newly acquired, tired looking donkey.

Kamzee sat down on the grass by the roadside and watched the herd, his donkey within it, disappear into the Mau forest. He wondered what to tell his wife. He knew she would never believe him. He thought of the recriminations, the taunts and the insults that awaited him. He wondered how he would feed his family. He felt very dejected. After what seemed like a long time he stood up and started walking back to Mai Mahiu to board a vehicle home where the formidable Wangari awaited him.

It was while walking back that he saw a tethered donkey outside a seemingly deserted homestead. It looked younger and healthier than the one he had just lost. Its only defect was its left ear; it was half torn off and jagged at the edges, perhaps torn off in a fight with another donkey. He grew thoughtful, 'why not untie the donkey and take it home with him'. After all, he had lost his through no fault of his really. God would understand and forgive him this one sin.

Kamzee was not by nature a thief but the situation he found himself in needed an urgent solution. The thought of facing his formidable wife empty handed made

him warm up to the idea and he considered chances of ever being found out practically nil; Regen was far removed from Mai Mahiu and its owner would never dream of his donkey having been taken to such a far off destination. He hovered around casting anxious glances all about him; but there did not seem to be anybody within the homestead.

Kamzee entered the homestead whistling nonchalantly, trying to appear as relaxed and as proprietary as possible as he untied the donkey. It was a cold, cunning and deliberate business. The few people walking on the road did not seem to pay any particular attention to him as he led the donkey onto the road and began his journey home. The first few kilometres were anxious moments but as he travelled farther his confidence was restored. It seemed unlikely anybody would pursue him. He got to Naivasha town in the evening and looked for a cheap lodging at the outskirts of the township and tethered his donkey outside. He paid the watchman to keep an eye on it but he hardly slept a wink and kept on waking up to check on 'his' donkey. He resumed his journey early in the morning after a hurried breakfast of tea and *mandazi* and after fortifying himself in a nearby pub with a bottle of the fiery Diamond moonshine brew that he was addicted to and that was often his consolation.

He arrived home towards dusk to an unusually warm reception from Wangare. "You have for once done well, I believe our days of poverty will soon be over," Wangare beamed. "Let me warm up some food for you, you must be famished, how was your journey? Did the donkey cost you too much?" Too many questions Kamzee mused silently, of course he had no intention of telling her the truth... well, not the whole truth anyway, she must never know that he had lost one donkey and stole another. "Let me go have a talk with Munityotu first, I need to ask a few questions about how to get started in this water supply business," Kamzee evasively replied. "Oh, I know you are thirsty and you want to go to the pub after your long journey, just say you want to have a drink; but for once I don't mind, but do buy a kilo of meat while you are at it, and don't take too long my dear, it's what I will prepare for dinner." Wangare had not used the term 'my dear' in reference to Kamzee in ages and Kamzee knew the coast was now clear, he could go have his drink in peace and relieve the tension of his eventful journey.

Kamzee's water supply business picked up slowly but steadily but there were quite a number of water vendors and competition was stiff. Each vendor had his own customers, who did not see the need to switch from their old vendor to a new one and Kamzee had to work hard to acquire his own regular customers. The only issue the vendors agreed upon was the cost of water per jerry can -- a standard twenty shillings.

Kamzee's was an easy going and open nature; he was warm and friendly. He was a natural salesman and the housewives who bought his water found him

endearingly charming. Wangare was naturally hostile to all these housewife customers, as she was to any young female who had anything to do with her husband. She could not sometimes help overhearing some of the seemingly more romantic sounding conversations between Kamzee and some of his so called 'customers'. While she could not quite make out what the other party was saying on cellphone, she was irked by some of her husband's responses such as "okay my dear, I will be there in thirty minutes." Wangare would sarcastically comment, "so your customers have now become 'my dear', is that really a customer or one of your girlfriends?" Kamzee therefore preferred to take his calls outside the house arousing Wangare's suspicions even more.

One of the things he discovered about his customers, mostly housewives, was that they did not always have ready cash. Unlike the other water vendors who demanded cash on delivery, Kamzee began vending water on credit to some of the housewives, much to Wangare's chagrin. "It seems you give your water away for free to some of these 'special customers' of yours," she commented one day while noisily washing up utensils at the sink, "maybe they pay you in other ways that I do not know about," she sarcastically added. Kamzee who was innocent of all these innuendos barely paid attention and thought of his customers who after all were unlikely to shift from the estate any time soon without paying him up. In this way, he ensured that the housewives were unlikely to make their purchases from any other water vendor and his customer base steadily grew.

Kamzee also made it a point to get on friendly terms with the residential rental houses caretakers. He generously plied them with drinks at 'Shakahola' pub on the understanding that should any of their tenants require water, they should contact him first before the other vendors. He also got friendly with the building sites foremen using the same tactic and he landed quite a number of contracts to supply water to their sites. This was very lucrative business since the volumes of water required at these sites were huge. Wangare his wife could not quite disguise her satisfaction with their increased income and the new state of affairs; though she continued to grumble about his drinking and the inevitable female conquests which she imagined he achieved and which she assumed were a natural consequence to a man in a state of drunken disequilibrium.

"Kamzee, your donkey seems to be growing fat, what are you feeding it?" Wangare asked him one day. Kamzee had also noticed that his donkey was growing rounder, he normally tethered it by the roadsides where patches of grass grew and let it browse for whatever meagre meal it could scrounge; so he had not given the matter much thought. It was Munnyotu who upon examining it declared that it was pregnant and Kamzee was overjoyed. Although he had nearly had a disastrous start, matters were turning out very satisfactorily; two donkeys would mean more income.

Kamzee's donkey --- he had named it Toto --- as most donkeys were invariably named, eventually calved and he was now the proud owner of two donkeys, well, a donkey and its young mare. He envisioned himself becoming a prosperous man, Wangare growing into a plump contented matron, and his children's school fees problems solved.

Tyson Bwere was a mason by trade and the growing investments in real estate, especially the increase in the construction of high-rise rental apartments had drawn him to Regen from his home in Mai Mahiu. It was being said that these were some of the billions of shillings earned by Kenyans in the diaspora being invested in real estate. One day Kamzee brought water to the construction site where Bwere was the site manager. Bwere thought there was something familiar about the vendor's donkey; he had a peculiar feeling that he had seen it somewhere before.

Later in the day when Kamzee was long gone, Bwere still musing over the matter of the vendor's donkey, thought that it vaguely resembled his neighbour Torekia's lost one. He recalled the hue and cry from his neighbour Torekia's home when he found his donkey gone. He had dashed off to help but there was nothing to be done, the donkey had evaporated. They had speculated that it had probably been on heat and dashed off in search of a male. Or probably again, it had been stolen by a cartel of thieves who specialized in selling donkey meat. Bwere racked his brains as to why he strongly felt the donkey resembled Torekia's lost one. Then it hit him, the half-cut ear with the jagged end! Yes, it resembled Torekia's donkey. He continued observing it when Kamzee delivered water later but was unable to decide whether it really was Torekia's lost donkey.

One day when they chanced to bump into each other at Shakahola pub, Bwere offered Kamzee a drink. As they sipped the fiery Diamond moonshine, Bwere broached the subject, "Kamzee my friend, where did you buy that donkey of yours from?" Kamzee looked startled for a moment, but hid his momentary panic behind a smile. This builder would not know much about donkeys anyway. "Why do you ask, you are not planning to abandon brick laying and become a water vendor, are you? Have a drink on me, hey Kasmokie! bring this stone mason a drink." Kamzee ordered the chubby waitress trying to deflect the question. "Don't you think this Kasmokie lady is hot?" Kamzee observed as she served their drinks. Bwere noticed Kamzee's evasiveness on the issue of the donkey and did not pursue the matter; but he became more firmly convinced that Kamzee's donkey was indeed Torekia's lost donkey.

On one of his weekends home from his construction work, Bwere bumped into his neighbour Torekia in a local pub. Bwere had completely forgotten about the strange resemblance of the water vendor's donkey to Torekia's had not Torekia happened to talk about his lost donkey. It was then that he recalled the coincidence

of the vendor's donkey similarity to Torekia's lost donkey and Kamzee's reluctance to talk about how he had acquired it. He related the apparent coincidence of the donkey's appearance, especially the jagged half-cut ear.

Torekia got very interested in Bwere's story. He ordered another round of drinks and asked Bwere to go over it again. He was especially curious about Kamzee's brushing off the matter. "What do you think Bwere, should I come to Regen and take a look at this donkey?"

"Why not, it may just turn out to be your donkey, I will first scout where he normally tethers it and let you know, then you can come over," Bwere replied.

Kamzee tethered his donkey and its mare outside his house. Any slight commotion outside at night made him wake up to anxiously peep through his bedroom window to see whether all was alright with his donkeys. This was a precaution against theft as he very well knew ---from his own experience, to what might happen to an unattended donkey. Bwere found out where Kamzee lived, but when he saw the donkey tethered outside his home he was surprised by the young mare beside it. He realized the donkey must have given birth. He communicated this important piece of information to Torekia.

Torekia turned up on a Friday evening and Bwere took him around to Kamzee's home. Kamzee had inherited a quarter acre of land from his father, where he had constructed a two bedroomed timber family house. He tethered the donkeys outside in his small compound. When they got there, Torekia immediately recognized Toto his lost donkey. The half-torn ear was proof enough, he also noted the young mare beside her. He wondered how Kamzee had got possession of his donkey. It is said that donkeys have an uncanny memory; when Toto saw Torekia, she brayed loudly in recognition of her former owner.

Bwere took Torekia to Shakahola pub which he and Kamzee normally patronized. They ordered their drinks from Kasmokie and settled down to wait. "Tell me Bwere, how is this Kamzee fellow, is he the criminal type?" "Not really, he seems a hardworking, good natured fellow. He is sharp to be sure, but you can't survive in this world if you were a fool, would you? He is very fond of his drink though," Bwere observed. "How do you think he came into possession of my donkey?" Torekia wondered. "Someone might have sold it to him, he is unlikely to have gone all the way to Mai Mahiu, but you never know," Bwere replied. "I need your advice Bwere, since I must repossess my donkey, how do I go about it?"

Bwere finished his drink and hailed the waiter, "Kasmokie! you lovey lass, bring us two more drinks." The pub's business name was Upper Hill but the patrons had baptized it 'Shakahola' because once one entered there one emerged quite broke having drank all his money. Some drunken wag had nicknamed it after the infamous Shakahola farm where some misguided born again Christian converts

had once retired to after gifting their pastor with all their worldly belongings which they would not need in heaven and had died fasting, waiting to meet Jesus.....and the name had stuck. The noise level in the pub from about six o'clock was normally very high, the music was blaring loudly and the patrons had to almost shout to hear each other and to summon Kasmokie the waitress.

It was amidst this bedlam that Kamzee walked in. Bwere hailed him and made space for him at their table. "Have a drink my friend, how is the water vending business getting on?" Bwere asked. "Quite well thank God," Kamzee replied waving to some of his acquaintances as he sat down. His drink arrived, "sweet Kasmokie how are you?" Kamzee greeted the waitress, staring at the outline of her panting breasts beneath her blouse. "Am fine Kamzee, and stop staring at me like that," Kasmokie replied while opening his bottle of the lethal Diamond brew; but she was flattered to see that she aroused such powerful desire in him.

"Kamzee this is my friend Torekia, he is my immediate neighbour back home at Mai Mahiu, did you know I come from Mai Mahiu?" Bwere asked. "No," Kamzee replied shaking hands with Torekia. "Torekia has come to visit me," but he has a greater mission; he has come in search of his donkey that was stolen last year." Bwere had decided not to beat about the bush over the issue at hand.

Kamzee looked sharply at Torekia and felt uneasy, it was about one year ago when he had lost his donkey and stolen Toto at Mai Mahiu where these two hailed from. He sipped his drink and waited for Bwere to continue. "Do you remember my asking you one day in this same place where you had acquired your donkey from?" "I bought my donkey from Gilgil," Kamzee replied.

Torekia was watching Kamzee carefully trying to size him up, to understand what type of a person he really was, wondering how he would react to his disclosure that Toto was his stolen donkey. Kamzee looked like the hardworking decent type, but appearances could be misleading; his claim that he had bought the donkey from Gilgil cast doubts on his character too, why travel so far to purchase a donkey when there were much closer livestock markets? It was more probable he had bought it from a broker much nearer Regan than Gilgil, but both he and Bwere never thought that Kamzee might have actually stolen the donkey himself.

Torekia spoke up for the first time. "I took a look at your donkey, and it has an uncanny resemblance to the one I lost. In fact I may be so bold as to say that your donkey was stolen from my home." He went on to relate the circumstances surrounding the loss of his donkey but Kamzee hardly paid attention, he had after all, been the sole actor in that drama. "Bwere told me about a donkey whose left ear was half torn off and your apparent reluctance to talk about it, tell me truthfully, where did you acquire your donkey from?" Torekia asked.

Kamzee appeared lost in deep thought. He mentally cursed those hardhearted Maasai herdsmen who had landed him in the trouble he was in now. He wondered

how to handle this new and quite unexpected existential threat. He weighed the pros and cons of telling the truth and did not see how that would improve his situation. "I bought the donkey in Gilgil from a broker in the livestock market", Kamzee replied, "there really is no way of telling whether what one is buying is stolen property..... I mean one wouldn't expect stolen livestock to be openly sold in a market." Torekia mused over Kamzee's reply and thought it reasonable enough. "I think you do have a point there, these livestock thieves have become very daring."

"The main question now is what is to be done about this matter," Bwere interposed, "in my opinion there are only two courses of action possible; either report this matter to the police since it is a crime or discuss amongst ourselves what to do about it." Torekia looked at Kamzee thoughtfully, "I think we are all reasonable men here," he said, "I do not see how the police would help us, unless of course you remember the broker who sold you the donkey."

"No, I don't think I can recall him, and one year after is a long time and these brokers move all over from market to market; no I do not think I could recall him." Kamzee repeated emphatically. He wanted nothing to do with the police, his past brushes with the law during his counterfeit cigarette distribution days had given him a bad reputation with them and the aura of past criminality around him might just work against him. "I saw a young mare too," Torekia told Kamzee, so the donkey gave birth, did it?"

"Yes it did," Kamzee replied glumly as he mused. How was he going to earn his bread now? What was he to tell his wife Wangare?

"Torekia should take his donkey back and he should not compensate you for your loss," Bwere said, "you have after all made money using his donkey, but he is a fair man and we sympathize with your situation. This is what I propose we do. Let Torekia take back his donkey and leave you with its young mare. That way you will have had no loss at all and he will have got back his donkey, it will be a win-win situation for both of you."

"No!" both belong to me," Torekia thundered slapping the table, "I must have both of them."

They sat silently sipping their drinks. "Be reasonable my friend," Bwere told Torekia, "Kamzee here has been quite cooperative and has not raised any difficulties. He might have insisted that the donkey is his and dragged us off to the police where the matter would take ages to resolve. The law could probably side with him for all you know and you will have laboured for nothing." Torekia thought over Bwere's line of reasoning and concluded that it made sense. He must not let his greed have the better of him. "Okay, he may keep the young mare but he should compensate me for the year he has had it, I too incurred a major loss by being forced to hire a donkey to ferry things from my farm."

“Does this fellow look wealthy to you? forget about the past Torkia, what happened cannot be undone, thank God that you will at least have your donkey back,” Bwere wisely observed. “Why not sell the donkey to me, I will give you a fair price for it, Kamzee suggested. “No, Toto was very useful on my farm and I have never been able to replace her, I need to have her back,” Torkia replied. “What if you took the young mare instead and leave me with its mother,” Kamzee persuasively countered. “You are lucky Torkia has agreed not to take both the donkey and its young mare away, be content with what is left you.” Bwere assertively stated. “Torkia please sell me the donkey instead of taking it away, I need to continue earning a living.” Kamzee persuasively tried again. “That donkey was very useful to me, you know I am a farmer and a donkey does a lot of work on the farm,” Torkia replied. “I have not had the money to replace it and I thank my friend here for being so observant and for alerting me of my donkey’s whereabouts. I think you shall just have to find other ways of making money.”

Kamzee did not see that he had any option, at least he was to be left the young mare. As Torkia had correctly observed he had earned his daily bread for an year with his donkey. He was sure that had Torkia known the truth, he would have insisted on taking even the young mare away, or worse still, complained to the police. As it were he was lucky to get off lightly.

“When do you plan to take back your donkey to Mai Mahiu?” Kamzee asked. “Tomorrow first thing in the morning, it’s a long walk to Mai Mahiu,” Torkia answered. Kamzee knew of the long trek only too well. “I have one request to make to you, could you please accompany me to my house and help me explain to my wife why I will no longer be the owner of a donkey.” Torkia did not think that a very good idea, he saw no need to involve himself in Kamzee’s domestic affairs but Bwere, seeing Kamzee’s predicament, intervened and declared that they should both go and help Kamzee explain to his wife. That way, he argued, the explanation would be more credible and believable.

Wangare was surprised when Kamzee turned up with the two since he normally met his friends at Shakahola pub. She was about to go start preparing the customary cup of tea for the visitors but Bwere asked her not to since they were in a hurry and would not stay very long, they had just come to pass on some information. Kamzee cleared his throat, introduced his guests and hesitantly began, “Mama Karende you remember when I went to purchase a donkey at Mai Mahiu?” “Yes I do, that was about an year ago wasn’t it?” she replied looking puzzled. “These gentleman here,” Kamzee said indicating Torkia, “was the owner but I did not buy the donkey from him. I bought it from a broker in the market.” Wangare’s puzzlement grew and she wondered what this was all about. Kamzee continued, “It seems the broker had stolen the donkey from Torkia here and his neighbour Bwere, who works in construction here in Regen happened to see my donkey when I was delivering water at the construction site he is working

at and recognized it.” Wangare looked sharply at Bwere but did not think she had ever seen him before. “How did you recognize the donkey, I thought all donkeys look the same, at least they do to me, although I don’t know much about donkeys anyway.” Bwere launched into a long explanation of what had transpired, carefully emphasizing the similarities especially the half torn left ear before Torekia took over and narrated how his donkey got stolen.

Wangare was aghast, “so what happens now? Do you want to involve the police and have my husband arrested?” Wangare despite all her grouching could not imagine life without Kamzee. She pictured him languishing in jail and the thought frightened her. “No Mama Karendi, your husband is not to blame, he would not have known that the donkey was stolen property,” Torekia reassured her. “This is what I propose to do, I have come to take my donkey back but I will not leave your husband empty handed. I will let him keep the young mare that the donkey birthed so that he does not lose everything.” Wangare was silent for quite a while trying to understand the new turn of events. She thought Torekia’s decision fair and did not see any other way out of the predicament. “I think what you have said is reasonable, at least we shall retain the young mare,” Wangare replied at length. The gentlemen stood up to leave and shook hands with Wangare, “So sorry Mama,” Bwere consoled her, all will turn out well in the end. Kamzee escorted them out.

It was much later in the evening as Kamzee and his wife were discussing their future economic prospects that he decided to tell her the truth of what had really happened at Mai Mahiu. Wangare listened without interruption and for once sympathized with her husband. She was amazed at Kamzee’s audacity in stealing the donkey and for perhaps the first time appreciated her hold over her husband and understood how much she dominated him. That the thought of displeasing her had made him attempt this dare devil act was proof of the fact. She wondered what she would have done in his place. She doubted that she would have had the courage to steal a donkey.

“It’s okay my dear,” she said parting him on the back affectionately, “we still have the young mare; can it carry the weight of the load its mother carried?” “Not really, but I shall increase its load gradually and we will, by God’s grace, survive.

So the villager does have such encounters with the hard facts of life at one time or the other during his existence. Kamzee’s mare has since grown and he is still vending water. Wangare’s hostile feelings towards Kamzee’s young ‘special’ housewife customers who take water on credit is unabated and she continues to vilify his escapades to Shakahola and the female conquests that she imagines happen when he is under the influence of the moonshine liquor he is so fond of.

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