

## ONE

# The Farmers' Boycott

After the security officers decided not to shoot me that night in the forest, they blindfolded me again and forced me back into the van. Terrified, I lost track of time. Finally, the van stopped, and they told me to get out. The officers took me to a building and led me through it. They removed the handcuffs from my wrists and the blindfold from my face. As my eyes adjusted slowly to the light from the only bulb, I could see that I was in some kind of prison. Heavy wire links covered the window.

They ordered me to remove all my clothing. When I was naked, they pushed me through a doorway, and I fell into what seemed to be a dark room. Soon I realized that it was a small cement cell below the level of the prison floor: in essence, a pit. This was the beginning of the worst ordeal of my life.

I landed in cold water that rose up to my ankles. The lights went out immediately. There were no windows in the pit. I was very cold and in total darkness. I was completely disoriented and more frightened than I had ever been.

I ran my hands along the walls and felt the corners where they met. I stretched both my arms and touched the walls on each side simultaneously. I was in some kind of small tank or box. I heard the officers'

footsteps receding as they walked away, somewhere above me, until I could no longer hear any sounds at all.

Then the water level started to rise. It came up to my knees, my waist, and then my chest. I thought that my jailers were going to drown me, because the walls reached above my head. I had no way to climb higher to escape the rising water.

After a while, the water receded, back to ankle level. This became the pattern for days: at apparently random intervals, the cold water would rise and fall. When it was high, I had to stand to avoid drowning. When it was low, I tried to curl up and rest on the wet floor. The cell was not wide enough for me to lie down without twisting myself around. I could not sleep for more than minutes at a time, because I was afraid that the water would rise and drown me while I was asleep.

The cell was entirely without light. I never had any food. There were no toilet facilities. To stay alive, I had to drink the water on the floor into which I had urinated and defecated. I could estimate how long I had been in that cell by feeling the length of my growing whiskers and by comparing how hungry I became with how hungry I had been a few years earlier when my brothers had forced me to live as a homeless person on the streets of my village. By those measures, I remained in the water cell for about a week.

Eventually, I had the experience of leaving my body. My mind seemed to separate from my physical being. I could see my body lying naked on the floor, as if I were floating above it. In my mind, I had long conversations with my dead father. Once, I walked over to my body on the floor and kicked it. I saw my own death, and I attended my funeral. I was only about twenty years old, but my life seemed to have ended.

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The government of Kenya consigned me to the water torture cell because I had led a protest on behalf of the tea farmers in my region. A few years before the protest, I had become a tea farmer in the hope of eking out a meager living on a small parcel of land that the British government of

Kenya had given to my father, Ngaruri (pronounced "ga-roo'-ree") Muchiri.<sup>1</sup>

My father was a Kikuyu, a member of one of the largest tribes in Kenya. He was born during the period of British occupation (Kenya had been occupied since 1895, first as a British protectorate and then as a crown colony). The colonizers imposed a system of government very similar to one against which Kikuyus had revolted centuries earlier. The British forcefully removed people from their ancestral lands, appointed village chiefs from different tribes, and granted them unlimited powers over villages. Village chiefs answered only to senior district commissioners, who reported to the provincial commissioner, who reported to the colonial governor. As a result, many village chiefs became petty dictators in their respective villages because their word was law. In what became known as the Mau Mau rebellion, Kikuyus resisted this despotism. This rebellion in the 1950s contributed significantly to the success of the independence movement in 1963. Ironically, the new African government, dominated by Kikuyus, adopted the autocratic system that the British had imposed. It used the regional administrators to suppress all forms of dissent in many rural communities.

In one attempt to stop the Mau Mau rebellion, the British had passed a land reform act in 1956. They took farmland from some Kikuyus and redistributed it to other Kikuyus who did not support the rebellion. The British also allocated five acres of mountainous land, suitable for growing tea, to each loyal farmer who would agree to grow tea for British companies. They hoped to bring enough prosperity to these farmers that future rebellions would be less tempting. Undoubtedly, the colonial government also saw in this arrangement some advantages for the British companies that would process and ship the tea as well as for British consumers.

My father spent his early years working for the British settlers. From that experience, he understood British thinking and found covert ways to use the colonial administrative system to protect the interests of his Kikuyu friends and relatives. The British later appointed him a civil administrator. He remained loyal to them, was elected as a young regional

tribal chief, and never joined the Mau Maus. When the land reform act was passed, he encouraged other landless Kikuyu farmers to migrate to his region; and he helped them get land grants, including the additional five acres of tea-farming land. When enough farmers had congregated in the area, he founded the village of Kangaita. Later, my father ceased being a regional civil administrator, but because of his work in building Kangaita and helping other homeless Kikuyu families to regain farmland, the village people elected him the *munene*, the head of the council of elders of Kangaita.

Kangaita lies in the southern foothills of Mount Kenya. Snow-capped twin mountain peaks rise behind the forest where the village ends. By the time I was born, about 120 people lived in the village. As a little child, I imagined that the mountain was a fixed cloud that never cleared from the sky. Later on, my father told me it was the mountain of God, and I grew up believing that God lived there. On the southern side of the village, fields of tea plantations sprawled across the hills in a beautiful landscape as far as the eye could see. When I was a child, I loved to stand in the village square at the beginning of the long rainy season and watch amazing storms approach and dissipate over the hills before reaching our village. I used to think that we were the most blessed people in the world because we lived closer to God and could watch the rain fall from the sky.

My father had been married once before but was separated from his first wife before he married my mother, Maria. When my mother was a child, her father had beaten her mother to death. He remarried, and there was ceaseless friction between my mother and her new stepmother. When my mother was fifteen years old, my father appeared on the scene, and my maternal grandfather gave my mother to him as a ward, assigning her to cook and clean for my father. Though they later married, I think that they never loved each other.

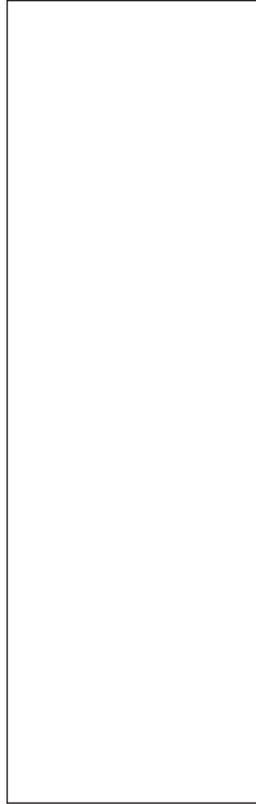
Before I was born, my mother had four children who survived infancy. According to my uncle, she also gave birth to three children who died in infancy or at very young ages, at least two of whom may have perished through her neglect. All of my surviving older siblings were products of



Map 1. Kenya

affairs that she had with men other than my father. I was the first of three children that she had with my father.

Today, I am seven feet tall, unlike typical Kikuyus, who are shorter than five feet, ten inches. But I was so small at my premature birth that everybody, including my mother, expected that I would soon die. I believe that I was born in the early 1970s, but I don't know exactly how old I am. While



Aunt Keru

my father was away, my mother went into labor and gave birth to me while she was collecting wood alone in the forest. Later, my father inscribed the date of my entry into this world in a small notebook in which he recorded village events. But he wrote down only the month and day, not the year.

My parents named me Wachira Ngaruri, and I was christened David Wachira Ngaruri. *Wachira* means “junior judge” or “people’s representative.” My father’s sister Keru later told me that I was named Wachira because my mother had a dream when I was a few days old. In the dream, my great-uncle, who was a *muchiri*, or judge, appeared in his traditional judicial regalia. He wore a leopard skin and a headdress made of colobus

monkey skin. His wrists, ankles, and neck were covered with colorful, bright cowry shell beads and braces; and he held a fly whisk and a walking stick. He told her that I would not die because I would be named after him and would become a judge. The next morning, frightened by the dream, my mother insisted on naming me Wachira, and I did not die.

There was a big age difference between me and my older brothers and sister. I grew up knowing the sheep and cows on our farm better than I knew these siblings. I didn't know then that we were only half-siblings. Even so, I didn't feel like their brother. They considered me a different generation, and, in Kikuyu tribal tradition, different generations don't customarily play or work with one another. Interaction is usually limited to "age mates," generations of male and female children, usually with a spread of at most five years, who have circumcision ceremonies at the same time. The oldest of my three half-brothers, Njogu, was about eighteen years older than I was. Mbacha was about fourteen when I was born, and Mugo was about eleven. Even my sister, Wangithi, was about ten years older than I was. To me, they were distant relatives.

Njogu and Mugo had violent temperaments. I don't recall ever playing with them. I remember only the beatings they gave me. My sister beat me too. Nobody tried to discipline her because she was the only girl in the family. My middle brother, Mbacha, wouldn't beat me, but he encouraged other children to beat me or told them that he would keep Mugo and Njogu from beating them if they attacked me instead. The sweetest moments in my childhood were those in which I played alone in the forest, safely hidden from these siblings and my mother.

During my earliest years, I loved to sing. I could make a song out of anything. In the evenings, my brothers and I would bring the animals from the forest to the farm, and while my father tended to them, my mother would cook and tell stories. We children would sit around the fire, and each of us would talk about our day. One evening, when I was singing about my day, Njogu smashed me in the face, saying that I made too much noise. My mother told me that I could keep Njogu from punching me if I stopped singing. I never sang again.

Every Easter, a motor rally drove through our village. During one of these rallies, a car broke down outside the village, and a helicopter landed to bring a replacement part. I had never seen or heard of a helicopter before. I was intrigued and amazed by the craft's ability to hover in the air above me like a bird. As it prepared to land, I felt the wind of its rotors and saw men with white skin come out of the helicopter. I had heard about white men, but this was the first time I had ever seen one close up. By the time the helicopter left, I had sketched a picture of it. I later built a detailed wooden model of the helicopter, even putting rotors on it. But my brothers found it and destroyed it before I could figure out how to make the rotors go around. From then on, I learned to hide my toys and my things in a clearing in the forest that my brothers did not know about. I also built a secret swimming pool in the forest, where I would play alone.

Once, when my family was growing tea bushes, I dreamed that we were all working on the farm, harvesting tea leaves with tea baskets on our backs. We were competing to see who could harvest the most tea leaves. Something caused my brothers to put all their tea leaves in my basket, so I won the competition. When we all were in the kitchen in my mother's hut, I told my family about my dream. Mugo dragged me outside and punched me repeatedly in the face. I ran back into the hut, blood gushing from my nose and mouth. My sister laughed, and my mother told me to shut up and stop crying. My father took me back to his hut and cleaned me up. He warned me that I should not tell my brothers about dreams like that, and he told me that they beat me up because they were afraid of me. He said that even though I had been born so small, I was growing very rapidly and would be bigger than they were. At that time, I wanted him to do something to make my brothers and sister stop hitting me; his words did not comfort me. But he taught me that although my brothers had to resort to physical force to get what they wanted, there were other ways to achieve my goals.

Our village consisted of traditional Kikuyu-style round huts, composed of mixtures of mud, nappier grass, cow dung, and white ash. The roofs were

made of elephant grass tied from a central pole. Each hut had a fireplace in the middle. My mother and father lived in separate huts. Eventually I stopped sleeping in my mother's hut and moved to my father's residence, which was also the meeting place for the village council. His floor was covered with buffalo and goat skins. My first duty of the day was to start the fire in his hut so that the big pot of beer would brew throughout the day. Later in the morning, all the elders would sit around the fire, drink beer, and talk about everything that happened in the village, from who went to the bathroom that morning, and at what time, to whose cow had been left in the forest and who had gone looking for it. During these discussions, I would get beer or water or whatever one of the elders requested. I learned a lot by listening to the elders and helping to carry out their decisions.

For example, just outside the village was a pasture where, for most of the year, villagers were not allowed to graze their animals. It was a protected reserve, and it was opened for grazing animals only once a year, during the dry season. Whenever it opened, every family would take its animals into the pasture; and within days, there would be nothing left. Then everyone would start searching for any available grazing land, and those who owned large pastures made fortunes by leasing them to other farmers. My father and the village council discussed this problem for days. After three days of heated debate, they resolved to expand the size of the reserve, to divide it into five plots, and to allow only a certain number of animals to graze in each plot. To ensure that those resolutions were carried out, I was instructed to find a surveyor and a handyman to build the fence and to negotiate their terms of payment.

Every week, my father and I made the long walk across the village hills to the district headquarters to meet with the regional council chief, Wamuri. He occupied a small stone office just outside the district market square. He was a decent man. Whenever we met him, he took us to a very nice restaurant and bought me sweet tea and fried sugar donuts. I was very comfortable with Wamuri, and I asked a lot of questions that I normally wouldn't have asked my father. Sometimes my father later cautioned me, saying, "Be careful about the way you question authority. The biggest tree

in the forest is the first one to be cut down. You are a big tree, and if you don't learn how to interact respectfully with authority, you will be the first one to be cut down." Perhaps I did not learn this lesson well enough.

My mother was a physically strong woman. She may also have had some sort of undiagnosed emotional disability. She had little or no respect for any authority that challenged her will. She was the only woman I knew who could beat men into submission. Though she was a vicious protector of her children, my mother was not otherwise involved with me during my early childhood. She was, however, involved in all aspects of my brothers' upbringing. My older brothers would go around the village beating other boys, but if any boy dared to hit them back, my mother would attack that boy's family in public. Sometimes, when my mother went to the local market square, the slightest show of her anger would cause everyone in the market to disperse as if a wild animal had just escaped from its cage. To my mother, physical strength was power; whereas to my father, reason was power.

My father and my mother also fought frequently with each other. The fights were physical as well as emotional, and my father usually lost. He was about thirty-five years older than my mother, and my mother was a powerful figure, taller than all the Kikuyu men in our village. One day, over her opposition, my father planted on our farm the first pine trees ever seen in our region. My mother attempted to uproot them. My father attempted to replant them. She didn't like his response, and she scooped him off the ground and threw him down on his back. For a moment, I thought that she had killed him. He lay there, unmoving and unconscious, for a while. He didn't have any broken bones, but his health seemed to decline from that day until his death about seven years later.

When I was about eight years old, I began attending the local missionary school. I walked the two miles to school each day. The boys at school made fun of me because I was growing very tall and I was very skinny. My knees knocked against each other when I walked, and I looked gangly and weak. One day as I was walking home, the boys followed me and taunted me by calling me "giraffe," an English word they

had just learned. I ran crying into my mother's hut. She demanded to know why I was crying. When I explained that the other boys were picking on me, she became furious. She took me outside, where the boys were playing together, and insisted that they tell her what they had done to make me cry. The boys were terrified of her, and one of them spoke up immediately. "We called him a 'giraffe,'" he squeaked, and he hid behind another boy. My mother did not speak English, and when she tried to repeat this word, her Kikuyu pronunciation distorted it. "Jioff?" she repeated slowly, squinting in confusion. The boys laughed despite their fear, because "Jioff" sounds even funnier to Kikuyu ears than "giraffe." When my mother let the boys go without a beating, they told the story to everyone in the village. By the next day, the entire village was calling me "Jeff." That nickname stuck, and I have been called Jeff ever since.

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While my father was managing our small farm and serving as the chief elder of the village, he began tea farming on the additional five acres of land that the British had allocated to him. Years earlier, the British had created the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), a government corporation, to provide technical assistance to tea farmers and also to buy the harvested tea leaves from them. After Kenya became independent in 1963, the KTDA remained a state corporation, run and regulated by the Tea Board of Kenya.

In 1979, the tea harvest was good, and the KTDA made the largest payment in its history to the farmers. My father received 27,500 Kenyan shillings (about \$300), more money than he had ever possessed. He needed to open a bank account because it wasn't safe to keep so much cash in his house. I remember going to the bank with him. He withdrew a large amount of money and asked me to carry it as we walked home. For the next several years, I was the family accountant, and we always had money when we needed it. Each month my father and I went to the local district headquarters, where the only bank was located. He withdrew money and gave it to me for safekeeping. I had to record all family expenses for my

father. I was not allowed to spend the money without his authority, and I was not supposed to inform my older brothers or my mother of where we kept the money. But my father's health was failing, and he worried that if he needed hospitalization, he would not be able to go to the bank to take out the money he would need. So eventually he signed papers allowing my mother to withdraw money. Once she had access to the account, her sisters and their children began spending all their time at my father's hut, living on his income. My parents' fights escalated.

The happiest day of my life in Kenya came in 1981, when my mother gave birth to my brother and sister, twins Njoka and Lucy. I fell in love with them as soon as I saw them, and I never left them even for a day until the government imprisoned me eleven years later. But that same year, my parents had a very big fight about money. My father questioned my mother's frequent withdrawals, and he revoked her authority over his bank account. In retaliation, my mother decided that she would no longer take care of the children. She never again prepared a meal for me or gave food to Njoka or Lucy. After she stopped feeding Njoka and Lucy, my father and I took care of the babies. About the same time, my mother started talking to herself, and one day I watched her burn all her clothes and belongings. Not long after, she left her hut and wandered the streets of the village, unwashed, wearing only filthy tattered clothes, and she assaulted people in the street.

My father's health continued to fail. He coughed all the time. After several visits to the hospital, he told me that he had a disease called tuberculosis. One day, I saw him weeping, and I asked him why. He said that he was not concerned about my older brothers and sisters, because they were grown, but he was worried about me and the twins. He told me that if anything happened to him, he wanted me to take care of the twins. I promised to do so. The next day, he called me and said that he needed to go to the hospital. A neighbor brought a car, and I watched it drive off. An hour later, my older brother came back in the company of two village elders and told me that my father had died.

Within a few days, my life changed forever. The second day after the funeral, my older brothers locked my father's hut, where I had been

sleeping. I had to sleep in my mother's house, which was in very bad condition. It was January, and I was very cold. The next day, my older brothers went to the bank and withdrew a lot of money. They came back to the farm with a lot of building materials, which they locked in my father's house. Then they tore down my mother's house, leaving the twins and me with nowhere to stay. The twins were about two or three years old. I begged my brothers to let us into my father's house so that we would have a place to sleep. But they beat us and chased us away from the farm. Fortunately, I had about 100 shillings in my pocket, which my father had given me. This was a lot of money for a teenager to have at that time.

We went to my Aunt Keru's house. But Aunt Keru was elderly, and she had to look after her husband and his children from a previous marriage. Although she invited us to eat at her house, she advised us go back to our farm and stay there. But whenever we tried to move back there, my brothers refused to let us return. One day, Mugo found us sitting outside my father's house after we had returned from a day with Aunt Keru. He grabbed a dry branch from a nearby tree and whipped us with it, the three of us scattering and screaming at the top of our lungs. After that incident, we never returned to the farm.

My mother had moved away and rented a cheap shack in a large, dangerous slum about thirty miles east of the village. We never went there to see her. Instead, we lived on the streets for two years. Occasionally, we slept at the house of a sympathetic neighbor or at Aunt Keru's, but more often we slept under a tree. I worked on the neighbors' farms in exchange for food for the three of us. Despite the hardships, those were the peaceful times, and I got to know my little brother and sister very well.

My best friend was David Kiguta, the son of a neighbor. He too had the middle name Wachira, or "judge," because his grandfather had been a very important traditional chief, who also had the powers of a judge. I gave him the nickname "Wash." When we were very young, before my father died, Wash and I hunted and fished together. We went into the forest to watch the elephants, and we sometimes played there, even sleeping inside a particularly large hollow tree. Later, when the twins and I had to live on the

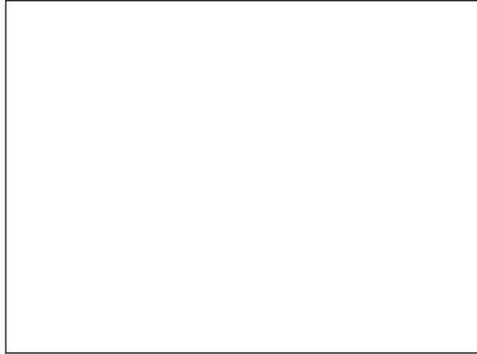


Peaceful times: Wangithi, Njoka, Wangithi's son Duncan, Lucy, and myself

streets, Wash sometimes joined us. But most of the time, I was alone with the children. I became, in effect, their father; and I often went hungry so that they could eat. Despite our usually good spirits, living without shelter was unpleasant. Sometimes I went without food for six or seven days, and on winter nights we had to cope with the wet, chill climate.

By 1988, I could no longer tolerate homelessness. I met with one of the elders who had served on the council with my father to ask him whether the council could do something to allow us to go back to our farm. He told me that because my father had died without a will, his ten acres of land should have been divided among his five sons. Because he had been married to my mother when my three older brothers were born, they were presumed to be his sons and were entitled to share in his property. But Njoka and I had been denied our shares.

At about this time, my brothers Njogu and Mugo approached me because they wanted the district commissioner, as administrator of my father's estate, to release 21,000 shillings that were still in my father's bank



Mugo

account, and they needed my agreement. I agreed to join their petition to release the money if they would build a house for me and the twins on my father's land. My hope was that my mother would live in the house and that Njoka, Lucy, and I could go to school. My own education had stopped in middle school, when I had to start taking care of the twins. Njogu and Mugo agreed, and the district commissioner released the funds. But as soon as they received the money, my brothers started to build a house only for themselves.

I threatened to report them to the district commissioner, and a really big fight broke out. Up to this point, I had always lost fights with my brothers; but by this time I was pretty big, and I started winning. This made them very angry, and they tied me up, dragged me to my father's grave, put a rope around my neck, and beat me with rocks and choked me until I was unconscious.

I woke up in the hospital. Gathomi, the local chief, stood beside my bed. He had heard the noise of the beating and had saved my life. When I recovered, he convened the village council and invited me to address it. I had never spoken to the council before. After hearing my story, the council divided the land among the male children, just as it should have been divided after my father died. My brothers took the best part of the land, with my father's house, for themselves; but my part of the property

included some of the tea bushes that my father had cultivated. As the land was being surveyed, my brothers told me that I would never make that part of the property profitable and that they would eventually take it back.

After the survey was completed, I built a shed for myself and the children. I worked on other people's farms until I had enough money to buy one cow. I sold the milk that we did not need to buy clothes and pay for school uniforms for the twins. I registered the twins at the local missionary school and began planting tea seedlings, beginning my brief career as a tea farmer. For the next three years, I cultivated these few acres of land, tending the tea bushes that my father had planted and clearing and planting more tea bushes.

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By 1991, my farm was producing as much tea as it could ever produce. As payment for the tea I sold that year, I received about 10,000 shillings (about \$130), which was far less than I had spent to grow the tea. This was sobering, and it made me start to look into why I was losing money. I also began to evaluate the costs of producing and harvesting tea leaves. I realized that my loss had resulted from policies that the KTDA and the Kenyan government had imposed on tea farmers.

The government's tea-growing license prohibited farmers from planting, removing, or destroying any tea bushes without permission from the KTDA. This prohibition effectively prevented farmers from switching part of their land to more profitable crops. We were not allowed to process the tea ourselves or to grow vegetables for our own consumption on the plots where tea bushes were also growing. Violations of the terms of the license were punishable by imprisonment and a heavy fine.

Also, all farmers had to obey any instructions issued by the KTDA. Small-scale tea farmers like me were prohibited from selling our tea on the open market; we could sell our harvest only to the KTDA, a monopoly buyer, at the price it set. We could buy our fertilizer only from the KTDA, at steep prices. Every month, we sent our tea leaves to the local KTDA collection center, which had been built by the farmers but

was managed by the KTDA. The entire raw product had to include two leaves and a bud; farmers whose tea deviated from that standard could lose their harvest. The roads between the villages and the collection center were so poor that the collection trucks often failed to arrive. Then the farmers had to carry twenty-five-pound bags of tea for two or three miles to a good road. When the tea reached the collection center, it was weighed. Then the KTDA processed the leaves in a factory and sold the processed tea on the international market.

We were paid monthly for the tea leaves we supplied, and we also received an annual bonus in November for the tea we had sold during the previous season. The amount of the bonus was unpredictable, but it never exceeded 3 shillings per kilogram.

In 1991, the KTDA paid farmers 3 shillings per kilogram for green (unprocessed) tea leaves, plus a November bonus of only 2 shillings more. After the 20 percent value-added tax was deducted, we ended up receiving only 4 shillings for each kilo of leaf tea. It took 4 kilos of leaf tea to produce 1 kilo of processed tea, so we earned 16 shillings for the leaves that made a kilo of processed tea. The government bragged that Kenyan tea was so well regarded that the international wholesale market price of processed tea was never less than 40 shillings per kilo and sometimes reached 140 shillings. I realized that processing and distribution accounted for some of the difference, but it seemed to me that the 16 shilling price we received for unprocessed tea was so far below the open market price as to raise questions about where the balance of at least 24 shillings per kilo had gone.

During the winter and spring of 1992, I had a large harvest. My farming costs were about 5 shillings per kilo of unprocessed green leaf tea, and therefore about 1 shilling per kilo higher than my income. Even after I received my bonus, my debt at the village grocery stall kept increasing. I began to discuss my frustrations with Wash and some of my other friends. I was angry; I felt that the KTDA was taking advantage of us. "We are all trapped," I complained, "because none of us can grow other crops along with or instead of the tea." I announced that I was going to stop farming tea because we were paid so little for our crop.

One night in early summer, a small group of us, tea farmers and tea pickers, walked and danced through the streets of Kangaita and the neighboring villages. As we danced, many of the farmers also sang a song that they had made up about how we were not going to grow or pick tea again.

To my surprise, at least five hundred farmers and pickers from the region gathered near our village the next day to find out why people had been singing and vowing to stop growing tea. This was an important subject for the people in Kangaita and the nearby villages, which were located in Kirinyaga District of Central Province, an important tea-producing region. Most of the residents had become engaged in the tea industry in one way or another as farmers, pickers, or processors.

Wash and I heard the commotion in the field near the village and wandered over. As the crowd grew, people debated with each other about whether to boycott the KTDA. The older farmers, resigned to poverty after years of tea growing, did not think that a few small-scale tea farmers could change the government's policies or prices. But those of us who were young and new to the tea industry couldn't see ourselves submitting to debt and subsistence conditions for our whole lives. One older farmer warned that it was foolish for us to demand more from the government. I surprised myself by blurting out that farming tea under the KTDA's rules made us no better than slaves. We were limited to tea farming and could not do what we wanted with our property.

Suddenly, everyone started to listen to me because of my strong language. As the crowd became more attentive, I grew more impassioned. I argued that if we could not change the KTDA policies, we would live as poorly as our parents had lived. I suggested that on the following day we should organize a march to the nearby KTDA tea-processing factory and that we should use peaceful means, such as a mass boycott, to prevent the factory from operating until the KTDA met our demands. Either it must raise the price that it paid for our tea, account for the difference between what we received and the market price of tea, or release us from the conditions of our tea licenses so that we could destroy our bushes and grow a profitable product.

The next day, the fields around our village were crowded with more than a thousand farmers from all the neighboring villages, who had gathered for the march on the factory. They looked to me to lead the march, because it had been my idea. So I was at the head of the procession. We marched to the factory, about two and a half miles from Kangaita, and gathered around the gates. I stood on the back of a flatbed truck and used a bullhorn to demand that the manager, Mr. Njuguna, speak to us. He emerged from the factory and saw people from every village staring at him. By this time, the police had arrived and were watching us. Tension grew as the crowd became fearful that the police would resort to violence to break up the protest.

Speaking through my bullhorn, I urged the farmers to remain calm and to avoid any violence that could provoke the police. I told them that if we remained peaceful, the police would ensure our security. Then I turned my attention to Njuguna and insisted that he close the factory until we received better prices or an explanation of where the profits were going.

As I spoke to him in front of the crowd, I became concerned that if he did close the factory, the people who worked there could lose their jobs. I therefore added the demand that he not fire any workers until our dispute with the KTDA was resolved. He looked at the huge crowd of people standing before him. After a short hesitation, he put a padlock on the factory door. Everyone cheered in celebration. We began to hope that things could change.

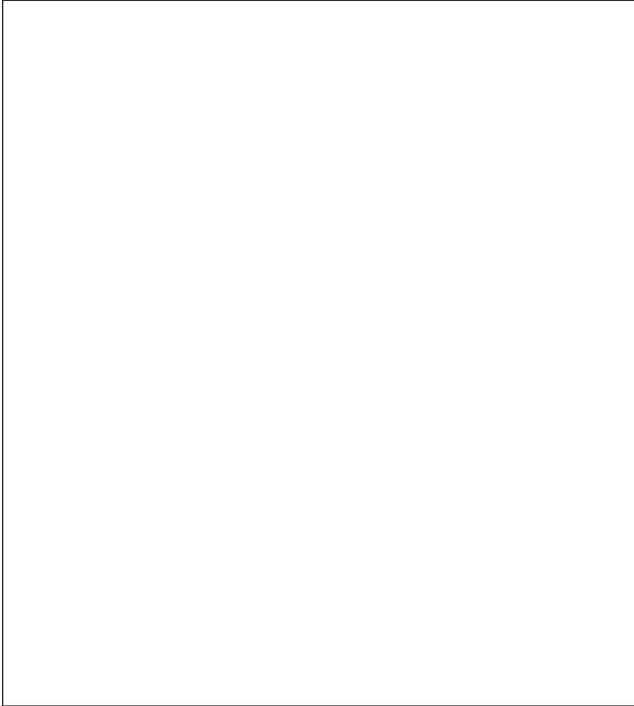
The tea-harvesting boycott quickly spread to all nine villages that had supplied tea to the factory. Only my brother Mugo and a few other farmers continued to harvest tea. My friends and I met every day to figure out what to do next. We discussed problems that the boycott would create. I worried that unemployment, idleness, and the absence of income from the sale of tea leaves would lead to hunger and crime and that the government would use any antisocial conduct as a basis for arresting us. Meeting in our homes and in the streets, we formed informal committees to take care of the villagers and keep order. We had a food committee to distribute food from those who had a little to those who had none,

an intelligence committee to try to monitor what the police were doing, and a communications committee that set up a word-of-mouth network to relay messages among the villages. All committee members had to be tea farmers approved by those in their villages.

We conducted our planning meetings in secret because we knew that the government of Kenya did not tolerate challenges to its policies. Daniel arap Moi, the president of Kenya, had come to power in 1978 upon the death of Kenya's first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. My father had greatly admired Kenyatta, who had been able to convince white settlers that they could remain in Kenya under a black president. When he heard about Kenyatta's death, my father looked as though he had lost a close friend. He told me, "Our Muthamaki [great leader] has died. We don't know what will happen. I hope that you will not have to see us return to the days of colonial rule."

Moi was a political nonentity when he served as Kenyatta's vice president. After Kenyatta died in his sleep, however, Moi was sworn in as president and eventually went on to become one of the longest-serving strongmen on the continent. He rapidly brought the state security forces under his personal control and used them to suppress dissent. In 1982, he crushed an air force mutiny against him. Immediately thereafter, he took leadership of the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), and made Kenya a one-party state, passing new laws to outlaw other parties.

Using the machinery of government, President Moi censored the press and arrested opposition politicians. It soon became common knowledge among Kenyans that people who dared to challenge his power might disappear forever. Those who reemerged from arrest and imprisonment had broken bodies and spirits after enduring torture at the hands of Moi's security forces. In rural villages such as Kangaita, KANU recruited militant youths who conducted door-to-door searches for "seditious materials," which usually meant any book or magazine that the local KANU leadership could not understand. Students who happened to have contraband books—even books that had been purchased before they were proscribed—were ar-



Daniel arap Moi

rested and often disappeared. Sometimes, even illiterate citizens were charged with treason when banned books were found in their houses.

Despite a ban on opposition parties, several opposition leaders had emerged, forming political organizations such as the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy. In November 1991, Moi arrested several of those leaders to prevent them from holding a rally. Some of them died in prison. Western governments responded by discontinuing foreign aid to the Kenyan government.

Our boycott committee knew that we could become a target of Moi's police forces. We acted cautiously, but our fear did not dissuade us from boycotting or from holding a few public meetings to keep the farmers informed. We were not without enemies in the village, especially those

who, like my brother Mugo, attended our public meetings with the chief of police and pointed out some of the organizers to him. Our boycott brought tea production in Central Province to a halt. That was a significant achievement, because Central Province was the heart of Kenya's tea industry, and tea had become the nation's most lucrative export crop. Only tourism brought in more foreign exchange. As a result, our protest made national news.

. . .

Flush with our growing success, we planned a longer-term reform: the creation of a farmers' union to work for structural changes in the tea industry. The goal of the union would be to advocate for the right to sell our tea to anyone who wanted to buy it. The best way to achieve this objective was to reform the structure of the KTDA so that small-scale farmers would have fair representation on its board of directors.

We decided to begin this next phase of our work by organizing a second march, this time to Kerugoya, about seven miles south of Kangaita. Although it was a dusty agricultural town, Kerugoya was also the center for the district's political administration and had a soccer stadium, an open-air market, several hardware stores, and an imposing government building where District Commissioner Francis Tiliitei, the highest-ranking official in our district, had his office.

On the day we picked for our march, the government planned a public political rally in Murang'a, a town about one hundred miles west of Kerugoya. Like Kerugoya, Murang'a was a district administrative center. There, too, most of the farmers were supporting the boycott. President Moi was scheduled to speak at this rally. The commissioners and other district administrators from the region, as well as all the farmers, were expected to go to the president's rally to hear what he had to say about our grievances. But if the farmers attended our march, they could not also hear the president. We therefore worried that the government would disperse our march to boost attendance in Murang'a and to prevent the district officials from listening to our grievances in Kerugoya. Nevertheless, we decided to

proceed with the march, believing that if we drew a huge crowd of farmers on that day, it would demonstrate the depth and breadth of our protest.

Hundreds of farmers gathered at a junction where the feeder roads from the villages merged with the main highway to Kerugoya. Women wrapped their children around their shoulders with fabric slings and balanced them on their backs. Men wore tattered suits and working boots. Before we started marching, we sent a team of young men and women ahead to scout for police who might have been sent to disperse us. Another team of young men ran ahead to the nearby villages to help provide water to the marchers. At about 9:00 A.M., we started marching. We chanted antigovernment slogans and carried tea branches on our way to Kerugoya. Some of the farmers sang as we marched. As we passed through villages, thousands of farmers joined our march to the headquarters. I had never seen so many people coming to one place.

By the time we arrived in Kerugoya, all the businesses in town had closed their doors, and the owners were standing outside their shops watching the crowd. Some of them joined the march. As we proceeded toward the government offices, the police created a human chain and refused to allow us to enter the commissioner's compound to speak with Commissioner Tiliitei. But Tiliitei agreed to meet with us. He asked me and the other organizers to lead the crowd to the soccer stadium, where everyone could watch him listen to our grievances. Like all other stadiums across the country, the stadium was named after the president; it was known as Kerugoya Moi Stadium.

Commissioner Tiliitei set up a public address system so that everyone could hear us. The crowd numbered about thirty thousand. It was so large that many people could not find seats in the grandstand or even a place to stand on the field. Some stood outside the stadium, watching over a low fence. Inside the stadium, we asked the people to sit on the grass until the commissioner arrived. A few minutes later, he entered the stadium in a convoy of cars that resembled a presidential motorcade. Armed security personnel ran along the convoy and violently pushed people aside.

As his aides handed the commissioner a microphone, he said quietly to me, "I am impressed. I have been in this district for three years, and I have never been able to assemble such a large group." Then he turned to address the farmers. He told them that President Moi had originally wanted him to go to Murang'a, but after hearing about the march, the president had asked him to speak to the farmers in Kerugoya, to tell us to go home and listen to his address on the radio.

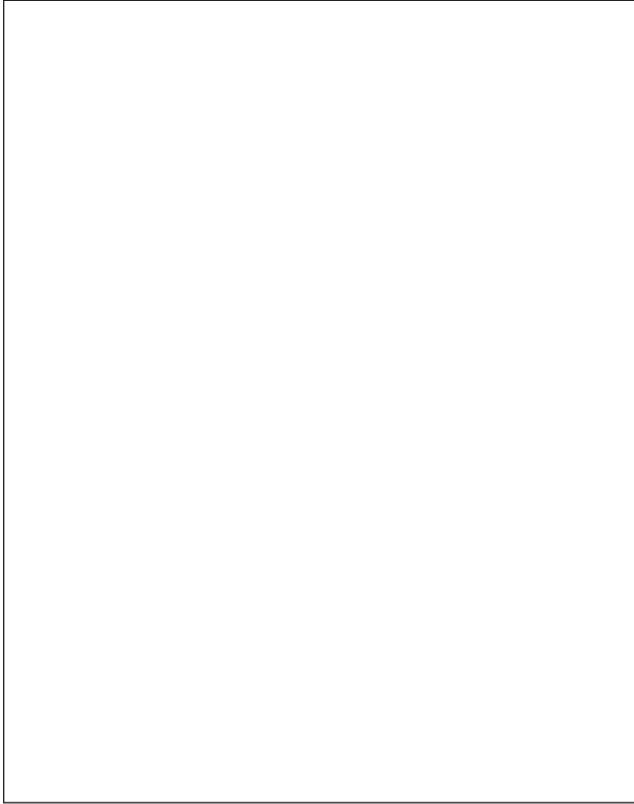
As I heard Commissioner Tiliitei speak these words, I feared that he was invoking his administrative power to order us to go home and that he would have the organizers arrested if we did not comply. But as he implored the crowd to disperse, the farmers began to heckle and shout at him. Frustrated, he stopped in mid-sentence and turned his attention to me. "I cannot talk to these people!" he said angrily. "You people did not come here because you wanted my help."

I told him, "I can calm them down. Let me have the microphone." The commissioner gave it to me.

I looked over the crowd. I had never thought of myself as a politician, and I was surprised and a little frightened to find myself the sole spokesman for all these farmers. The district's police chief and its intelligence officer sat just a few yards away from me. But I was pretty sure that no one would arrest me in front of tens of thousands of people, so I decided to speak my mind. I focused my full attention on the commissioner and on Wash, who was standing in front, as if they were the only people in the stadium.

I told the commissioner that we farmers had come to present our grievances to him. I asked the crowd, "How many of you agree that tea farming is so unprofitable that it is not worth our time? Raise your hand so that the commissioner can see." A sea of hands waved back, and the crowd chanted, "We won't go back, we won't go back!"

I had learned from my father that the best way to be understood is to tell a story, so I told the commissioner the story of a farmer's life. "A tea farmer," I explained, "spends three years preparing the land with his family. During that time, the farmer is compensated only by the hope that one



The speech at the stadium

day he will have a good harvest and be able to build a house, buy some clothes, and pay his children's school fees. For three years, the farmer tends the seedlings and weeds the bushes, sometimes surviving on only one meal a day. After three years, he must pay 50 shillings for a license that prohibits him from selling his leaves to anyone but the KTDA and from growing any other crops. In short, after three years of developing his farm, the farmer becomes subject to the direction of the KTDA."

Then I outlined the economics of tea farming. In front of all the farmers, I laid out the costs of growing tea, the taxes and charges that the government imposed, and the low price that the KTDA offered for tea leaves.

I explained that we had recently met with some local KTDA representatives to ask about the huge discrepancy between the market price for processed tea and the price we were paid for the leaves. The KTDA officials claimed that they did not know the reason and told us to ask the government.

I concluded by making a series of demands on behalf of the farmers. We wanted the KTDA board to be dissolved and restructured to include farmers. We called on the KTDA either to increase the basic price for a kilo of tea leaves from 3 shillings to 8 shillings or to allow us to sell our tea leaves to any buyer who wanted them. I wound up with a line that may have infuriated President Moi. "We demand that if this government cannot meet the needs of the people it claims to represent, it should resign and allow us to elect a democratic government that will let us sell our goods and services in an open market."

As I handed the microphone back to the commissioner, the crowd waved, cheered, and danced in agreement with my speech. Wash was in tears. Women began singing traditional songs. One sang a Kikuyu song whose lyrics mean, "Working together is easier than fighting each other. We work together to benefit our children." This became the slogan of the boycott.

I was surprised that I had been able to deliver this speech in front of so many people. It was as if I had been freed from some bond that I could feel but not touch.

As the farmers were dispersing to return to their villages, the commissioner told me that he wanted to meet with me in a week and that he wanted us to put our demands in writing. I agreed, but the boycott committee warned me that it was a trap, fearing that we would be taken from such a meeting and put in jail. However, we concluded that we could not get anywhere if we did not meet with the commissioner. As a precaution, we decided to send a delegation that would include me but would not include most of the boycott leaders.

Several days later, I went to the commissioner's office with a group of farmers chosen by the boycott committee. We brought a handwritten list of demands. He claimed that he could not read my handwriting

and ordered us to have the demands typed. "Meanwhile," he said, "I want you to end this boycott so that we can have a healthy dialogue." I told him that we would type the list but that we would not end the boycott.

One night later that week, three armed police officers came to my home and ordered me to go with them to see Commissioner Tiliitei. I was afraid to leave with them, but I had no choice. We went in their Land Rover to Commissioner Tiliitei's house, where I alone met with him and one security officer. He ushered us into his living room. He told me that he was under great pressure from his superiors to end the boycott. He promised that they could make my life very comfortable if I ended the boycott and went back to tea farming. This was not a surprising response, as bribery had become a way of life in the government of Kenya. I rejected his offer and repeated our demands. I asked him, "If your friends in the government can make my life comfortable, why can't you distribute that money to the farmers who are dying of hunger and poverty? They are not boycotting to avoid hard work. They just cannot afford to farm tea anymore."

Commissioner Tiliitei became very angry. "I am not going to let a group of boys ruin my career," he retorted. "You are on your own, and don't say I did not warn you." He walked out of the room and gestured to the security officer to show me the door. I left his house and found a friend to drive me back to Kangaita.

. . .

This meeting with Commissioner Tiliitei changed the tone of our dealings with the government. Now I began to fear that the government would arrest or kill me. I thought that I might lose my life in a freak "accident."

I decided that I had to reach out to opposition groups for their advice and help. One of the members of the organizing committee knew some politicians. He had met Mwai Kibaki, who had been Moi's vice president and minister of health but had recently broken with Moi and formed an

opposition group called the Democratic Party. I had a late-night meeting with Kibaki and joined his Democratic Party. I was certain at the time that we were meeting in secret, but I later learned that the government had Kibaki under surveillance and that it spied on us.

My fear of government retaliation increased a few days later. The local newspapers reported a July 30 speech by President Moi in which he warned that the leaders of the tea boycott would face “dire consequences” if the boycott continued. He claimed, falsely, that we were forcing farmers to join the boycott by burning the farms of those who refused to cooperate with us. I was more afraid than before, but I couldn’t let down the thousands of farmers by backing down in the face of a threat. I went into hiding, moving from village to village and sleeping in the homes of many friends.

Then I learned that the police were arresting innocent villagers and beating them to try to get them to reveal my whereabouts. They even arrested my oldest brother, Njogu. The police did not know about Njogu’s animosity toward me, nor had they investigated enough to realize that he knew nothing and had nothing to do with the boycott. They knew only that he was my brother, which was enough to cause his arrest. I later learned that the police threatened to castrate him, but he was unable to lead them to me because he did not know where I was.

I felt ashamed to be hiding while others, who often had only minor connections with the boycott, were being arrested and beaten. I also knew that the police would find me sooner or later. I thought about trying to leave the country, as some dissident students had done. But I learned that those students had been able to get out because they had relatives in the countries to which they fled. I also learned that it was almost impossible to leave without a passport, and I did not have one. When I realized that I could not escape, I decided to turn myself in. I walked to the police headquarters in Kerugoya, with dozens of farmers following me in solidarity. Along the way, I heard that fires had been started on some farms and that, although the government was blaming the boycott committee for the arson, the fires had actually been started by the police as a pretext for the arrests.

I entered the police headquarters in Kerugoya and asked to speak with Chief Inspector Mosera, who was in charge. He owned a tea farm and had seemed sympathetic to the farmers. He and I knew each other and had exchanged some information during the boycott. He ushered me into his office, closed the door, and offered me a seat. "I have orders to arrest you," he informed me. "There is nothing I can do for you because Special Branch is now in charge."

Special Branch was the intelligence arm of the president's guards. "I have to lock you up, and I am sure you understand my position," Mosera said. He then picked up a red phone on his desk and told someone, "I've got him. He walked right into the station." He ordered me to remove my shoes, and he locked me in a cell without informing me of any charges.

The cell was dark. It was empty except for a dirty plastic container that smelled of urine. The walls were inscribed with messages from former occupants. One read, "This place is hell. Mutoto."

I thought that Mosera might throw away the keys and that I might die in that cell. I could hear the cries of people who were being interrogated and tortured. I knew that the security forces wanted statements that they could use against me, perhaps in a trial for treason. I thought that I could recognize the screams of my brother Njogu; later, I learned that he was tortured for three weeks before being released.

I thought about my little brother and sister, whom I had left in the care of my older sister, Wangithi, and my friend Wash. I had not spent very much time with them since the beginning of the boycott. I wanted them to know how much I loved and missed them. I imagined them sitting by the fire by themselves and wishing that I was there to prepare dinner.

I couldn't stand hearing the screams. I called to the guard and shouted that they could let everyone else go because I would tell them what they needed to know. An officer carrying a whip unlocked the cell and handcuffed me. He took me to a small office where another officer sat at a desk. He was writing something, and he continued to write as if no one else was in the room. On the desk next to him was a hedge clipper with blood-stained blades, dripping with small droplets of fresh blood. Bloodstains

were smeared on the walls and on the floor. I became frightened as I imagined that I was about to be castrated. I wondered how much it would hurt. I thought to myself, "I will talk, but I will tell them only what they already know. I will be friendly, and they will not have to torture me."

Knowing that I was about to be tortured was unbearable. I turned to the officer who had taken me into the room and said, "You don't have to use this. I am ready to work with you and tell you what I know." The man at the desk suddenly stopped writing. He stared at me with a strange smile and said, "You'll talk when I want you to talk." Then he nodded to the officer: "Take him back. We've got a new team coming."

They came for me in the night, when, after several fitful hours, I was finally falling asleep. Very quickly, three officers took me out of my cell, blindfolded me, handcuffed both hands behind my back, pushed me outside, and forced me to sit on the floor of a van. The door of the van slammed behind me, and I flinched, thinking that I had been shot. The van started moving, and we drove for about three hours. The officers talked among themselves. One of the officers spoke only in Swahili, which I could understand. The other two spoke Swahili to me but talked to each other in Kalenjin, the language of President Moi's tribe. I recognized the language but could not understand it. I was frightened and tried to control my fear by focusing on breathing.

The van stopped. One of the officers grabbed my jacket collar and pulled me out of the van. I slipped and fell on the ground and blindly tried to catch my balance. Someone grabbed my shoulders and pulled me up so that I could stand. Another poked a sharp object into my lower back. "*Endelea mbere!*" he shouted in Swahili, ordering me to move forward.

I couldn't see through the blindfold, but I could hear birds chirping, so I knew that it would soon be dawn. The air was cold, and the ground was mushy. I could tell that I was in a forest, and I imagined that I would be buried in an unmarked grave where I would never be found. I expected that at any moment I might be shot in the back by these men, who would later claim that I tried to escape.

"I don't like wasting my valuable time with people like these," one of the officers screamed. I tensed, waiting for his shot. I had seen movies of people being executed and dying before they hit the ground. I hoped that it would be painless.

Someone grabbed me by the front of my collar and said, "Before I kill you, I need to know who told you to start this tea foolishness. We want to know names. Do you understand?" It was hard for me to speak, because his knuckles were cutting off my windpipe, but I told him that I had started the boycott and that no one had put me up to it. "We know you didn't start this by yourself," he scoffed. "Something like this can't be started by village people like you."

Another voice asked, "Do you know Kibaki?"

I lied to him, telling him that I had never spoken to Kibaki.

I complained to the officer that the handcuffs were digging into my skin and asked the officers to loosen them. One of them said, "You don't need to worry about that because I am going to blow your stupid brains away."

"Get on your knees," another officer bellowed. Before I could do so, he grabbed my shirt collar and pushed me, hard, against what felt like the trunk of a tree. My head felt like it would explode, and for a moment, I wished they would just get it over with. I felt a hard object being pressed into the back of my head, just above the hairline. I thought that it was a gun, and I expected and wanted to die at any second.

Moments passed. The officer pulled me away from the tree and turned me around so that my back and the back of my head were against the tree. I lowered myself and knelt on soft ground. He pressed the hard object to my forehead. From immediately in front of me, I heard a sound that seemed the cocking of a gun.

"Look at yourself," the officer demanded. It was a ridiculous command, because I was blindfolded. "You don't look as cool as you did when you were giving your speech in the stadium. I am going to kill you now. Do you think those farmers can help you now?" I continued to think that each second would be my last and that this nightmare would soon end.

The officer who spoke only in Swahili broke in: "It is stupid to kill him. He is just a small fish. He has a lot of information. If he is alive, he can lead us to the big fish."

Another officer replied in Swahili, "I have dealt with Kikuyus before. They don't know how to stop. When I release a Kikuyu, he comes back. The best thing to do with a Kikuyu is to kill him. Then you never have to deal with him again."

"But if we don't kill him," argued the first officer, "he could lead us to the head of the whole organization. Where did you get your training? *Mathura!*" This was an expression implying that his fellow officer was impulsive like a slum dweller.

A screaming argument ensued between two officers, in Kalenjin. I couldn't understand what they were saying. While they argued, the third officer said to me, in Swahili, "You stupid Kikuyus think you know everything. Do you know you can lose your life because of politics?"

I tried not to show how afraid I was. "If you shoot me," I replied, "I will not die for nothing. The farmers have heard my voice. Killing me will not stop the boycott. You can kill me, but you cannot kill the spirit of all those people."

Eventually the argument in Kalenjin ended. Without removing my blindfold or handcuffs, one of the officers grabbed my collar again and dragged me along the ground. Then another pulled me up and forced me to walk. They shut me in the van and began to drive. My hands were numb with cold. As the van sped through the night, I couldn't stop worrying about what would happen to Njoka and Lucy if Moi's officers killed me.

When the van stopped, the men dragged me out and led me through a building. When they took off the blindfold, the light blinded me. They made me remove my muddy clothing and threw me into the cold water torture chamber. For days, I knew nothing but darkness, cold, fear, hunger, thirst, and the belief that I had already died.