



Knowing Binyavanga

By Isaac Otidi Amuke



“I want to go and drink in River Road, where you guys used to drink,” Binyavanga told me, wanting to experience Nairobi’s underbelly, where broke University of Nairobi students and those staying in cheap downtown hostels engaged in debauchery. It had all started a month or so earlier. I had shared with him bits and pieces of a memoir on student activism that I had been working on. That story seemed to make Binyavanga want to talk for hours on end, as if wanting to discover a part of Kenya he wasn’t familiar with, including drinking in Nairobi’s dingy backstreet bars.

I had instigated our chance meeting weeks earlier through a random Facebook message. After a year of seeking and being granted asylum in Uganda following an untidy spillover of my student activism, I had returned to Kenya in early 2010, broke and broken. Sitting in a Kenya National Commission on Human Rights safe house in Nairobi’s Kilimani neighbourhood, I started writing a memoir, later deciding to share a section of it with someone I considered a literary authority, wanting to know whether it was all just trash. I settled on Binyavanga, at the time Director of the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists at Bard College in New York. I wrote him one of those possibly irritating I-know-nothing-about-publishing-but-I-think-I’m-onto-something messages, suspecting he received tens of those at a time. Luckily, Binyavanga responded in under ten minutes, saying he was busy but wouldn’t mind having a look. He shared his email address, and asked me to send him a chapter. He emailed back in less than 30 minutes.

“Where are you?” Binyavanga wrote, “Are you safe?”

Under a month later, upon his return to Nairobi—with loads of emails in-between about his intention to grant me one of the early Achebe Center writing fellowships—Binyavanga and I met for the first time at Divino, a restaurant on Nairobi's Argwings Kodhek Road, and spoke for ten hours. Towards the end of the evening, Binyavanga told me he had a friend who lived nearby, on Kirichwa Road, whom he thought I should meet. That friend was his contemporary, the writer and journalist Parselelo Kantai, who joined us at Divino. The next weekend, staying true to the spirit of our new friendship, Binyavanga invited me to one of his epic parties at his house in Karen, introducing me to his high-flying literati friends as a promising writer in his usual exuberant way. That day, at that party in Binyavanga's house, I became a writer.

Eager to learn more about my bleak University of Nairobi days, his curiosity sparked by the writing I had shared with him, Binyavanga decided to immerse himself into the downtown Nairobi scene, which was foreign to him. And so, one Saturday evening, I joined Binyavanga and his stocky, talkative cab driver, Njuki, who took us to the less glamorous part of the city. We drove around downtown Nairobi, to those places with their infamous little pubs with names like Emirates, where music blares out of faulty speakers and the streets are populated with staggering, drunken patrons.

Binyavanga didn't seem impressed, much as he wanted to be in the depth of it all. Then Njuki took a turn off River Road, landing us at the junction of Keekorok Road and Jaisala Road, next to the better-known Kirinyaga Road. There stood an imposing, modernish building, AJS Plaza, which seemed out of place in the midst of structures that had seen better days, possibly dating back to colonial days. At the rear of the building, on the lower ground floor, was what looked like a kiosk, selling alcohol. There were seats placed in front of a small window from where drinks emerged.

"I think I like this place," Binyavanga said. "Let's sit here."

Jaisala Road, which is where the watering hole was located, was quiet and deserted. Sitting on the plastic chairs, we faced a tiny dark alley, which served as the urinal for the little kiosk. Every time Binyavanga stood up, delicately balanced his imposing frame and crossed the street, positioning himself at the edge of the dark corridor to relieve himself, I wondered what I had done, bringing him to these sorts of places.

Before I could explore that thought further, Binyavanga would return, relieved and reenergised, downing his bottle of Guinness, engaging gear-five as Parselelo Kantai would later cheekily christen that moment when an idea hits Binyavanga's mind and he is shouting and drinking and making his point loudly and urgently. A lot of gear-fives happened at Kantai's Kirichwa Road backyard at four in the morning as our host asked us to keep it down for the sake of his neighbours.

"Don't be afraid," Binyavanga told me about writing, sensing my half-heartedness. "Don't wait for permission. If you see space, occupy it. Don't close your mind to any possibilities."

Later that night, the only activity on Jaisala Road, other than that originating from our corner of the street, was the steady stream of Congolese nationals, mostly musicians, returning from live performances in places across the city—places like Simmers, that popular city center nightspot—to their rooms at Jaisala Hotel in the building across the road. Or to the cheap lodgings in the upper floors of the buildings on the street.

An idea came to Binyavanga.

"I want to buy a building here," he said, "one located on a corner, and transform this place."

Binyavanga revisited this conversation over the years, his idea of owning a building in that part of Nairobi, where he wanted to establish an arts and culture center, house the *Kwani?* office, and in so

doing collapse the Nairobi art scene's class divide. To his thinking, those from upper class Nairobi would—in the usual way that gentrification works—be interested in being part of this downtown experience, while those from the less privileged parts of the city would only need to board one *matatu* and access the venue *bila* hustle. As our first joint project, that night, Binyavanga gave me a much needed \$100—I was dead broke—to scout for a suitable building for such a project.

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“Here's some money,” Binyavanga said. “I don't want you to get stuck.”

At around that time, the literary journal *Kwani?*, of which Binyavanga was the looming founding editor, was working on its seventh edition, the *majuu* issue. African writers who lived or had lived in the Diaspora were being asked to tell their tales of life abroad. Having briefly read my Kampala asylum seeking escapades, which I doubt fitted neatly into *Kwani?*'s Diaspora template, Binyavanga reached out to *Kwani?*'s managing editor, Billy Kahora, introducing yet another of his discoveries, another promising Kenyan writer.

“You have to publish this guy,” Binyavanga pushed Billy on the phone, over and over again.

Billy, possibly half curious and partly seeking to get Binyavanga off his back, asked me to send him 10,000 words of my Kampala story. That is how *Waiting for America in Kampala*, my first piece of published writing, came to be. I told of sneaking out of Nairobi into Kampala with the material and other support of the then American Ambassador to Kenya, thereafter spending months navigating Uganda's Directorate of Refugee Affairs and UNHCR processes.

Binyavanga went back to New York, staying in touch with me the whole time. He was back in under three months, and would call every other day, asking to meet up for lunch and talk through the evening and into the night. A lover of fine dining, he would ask me to join him at either Le Rustique on General Mathenge Drive, Talisman in Karen or Mediterraneo at The Junction. Whenever I went to meet him, I always found Binyavanga punching away at his MacBook, which almost always had bits of cigarette ash on the keyboard. He would light a Dunhill Switch cigarette in mid-conversation, and when making an important point, lift his cigarette-holding arm up in the air, put the cigarette in his other hand, take a long puff and blow the smoke upwards. He would then engage gear-five, sipping a Guinness, a cappuccino or sparkling water.

“I want to protect you,” Binyavanga would say, feeling obligated to give me some form of cover from whoever he imagined had been after me. “If they think of coming after you, I want them to see me, and know that we can make a lot of noise if anything happens to you.”

That is how *Waiting for America in Kampala*, my first piece of published writing, came to be. I detailed my sneaking out of Nairobi into Kampala with the material and other support of the then American Ambassador to Kenya.

One late afternoon, after a visa renewal appointment at the American embassy in Nairobi, Binyavanga called and asked me to join him at the Java Coffee House in Gigiri, where I found him later that evening. The moment I settled in, I noticed something strange was happening to him. He was punching on his MacBook keyboard relentlessly, his level of concentration higher than what I

was accustomed to. He seemed somber and quieter, yet peaceful, and smiled whenever he looked up from whatever he was writing. Then he spoke.

“I am resigning from the Achebe Center,” he said, without giving the reason why he was walking away. “I will send the letter before boarding my flight to New York later tonight.”

When he returned from New York a fortnight later, Binyavanga made me a proposition. He was now talking about spending more time in Africa, as if overcome by a new sense of agency. He had originally wanted to grant me an Achebe Center fellowship that would give me time and space to write. Now that he was no longer at the Center, he had an alternative.

“Can you live in Nakuru?” he asked me one afternoon. “There is a house. My father’s house.”

I had never lived in Nakuru, and didn’t know what life was like there. But seeing how keen Binyavanga was to have me find a space to clear my mind and get on with the writing, I immediately said yes. We had gotten to a place where I felt he knew exactly what was good for me, because why else would he keep at it when he had other important things he could spend his time on? He wrote a brief email introducing me to his siblings—Jimmy, Ciru and Chiqy—telling them that I would house-sit their home for three months. I was soon off to Nakuru.

I arrived in Nakuru’s Milimani neighbourhood to find a five-bedroom mansion, a small detail Binyavanga had omitted to mention. The plan was that I would receive a stipend for groceries and Binyavanga would make trips down to Nakuru to check on me. Whenever he came around, we spent hours talking politics, writing, Africa, and in the evenings we would make our way to downtown Nakuru, where he would take me on a tour of old pubs with history. He would stay for up to a week.

My routine was simple. Wake up, bask with Tony the dog, get some writing done, make lunch with Vincent the gardener, write some more, take a long evening walk, have lunch leftovers for dinner, write again, then sleep. When the loneliness got too much or the writing wasn’t working, I would go to the backyard and have the occasional smoke, promising myself not to make a habit of it. On Fridays and Saturdays, I went to Rafikis, the happening nightspot in Nakuru at the time. I stood alone at a spot near the entrance, and drank till morning, speaking to no one. Frequenting Rafikis was my way of seeing other humans other than my two constant companions, Vincent, who was always busy pruning the hedges, and Tony the dog. Before I knew it, I had lived in Nakuru for a year and it was time to move back to Nairobi.

“Come to Karen,” Binyavanga told me as I left Nakuru. “I’ve got an extra bedroom.”

I got to Binyavanga’s Karen home after nightfall. I knew the place from my visit a year earlier when he had invited me over for the party at which he had introduced me to his writer friends. The living room was packed with young writers working with him, compiling the Africa39 longlist—39 African writers aged under 40 touted as the force that would shape African literature in the coming decades. Books, and what I imagined were printed copies of submissions from across Africa, littered the place. I sat quietly in a corner and watched them work. Later that night, Binyavanga showed me to the extra bedroom which I would occupy for the next two years.

Barely a month after my arrival in Karen, on the night of 17 January 2014, we were sitting in the cold living room, working as we always did, everyone facing the page. On the stroke of midnight, I looked up, uttering the first words spoken for the better part of that night.

“Happy birthday, Binya,” I said.

“Thank you,” he replied, barely looking up.

"I am coming out tomorrow morning," he said, "through a piece published on an African platform." The following morning the world and I woke up to [*I am a homosexual, Mum*](#).

Binyavanga's cell phone was ringing off the hook. Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, The Guardian, among a myriad other international news outlets, all wanted an interview. We were riding in a taxi, as we always did, going I can't remember where, when Binyavanga, seated in the front passenger seat, holding a cigarette out the window, turned and looked at me.

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"Man, I need your help," he said. "Can you help me handle these media inquiries? There'll be *chums*." And just like that, I started working as Binyavanga's occasional assistant, before it became a full-time firefighting gig not without its dramatic moments, like being pulled out of writing workshops to make calls to embassy officials to sort out incomplete visa applications.

From dealing with his literary agents in London and New York, to maintaining his calendar, booking flights and planning airport drop-offs and pick-ups in Nairobi, to replying to requests for interviews and such, finding a place for them in his crowded diary, this gig-on-steroids also involved buying groceries, dealing with the landlord, making visa applications, and tracking bill payments. It was a full-on engagement, all the while trying to maintain a friendship and a social life. I became Binyavanga's friend, assistant, housemate, confidant, and bodyguard even, all rolled into one.

The distress call came on a Friday night—the 24th of October 2015—catching me midway through dinner. I was attending the farewell party for the African Writers Trust editorial workshop somewhere in Bugolobi, Kampala, keen on partying away the remainder of the night. The caller was Binyavanga's closest high school friend, whom I knew well but not in an I-can-call-you-on-a-Friday-night-just-to-say-hello way. I left the loud banquet room and went outside.

"Isaac, are you in Nairobi?" he asked.

"No. I am not," I replied. "I am in Kampala, but will be back by tomorrow midday."

The news was that Binyavanga had suffered a stroke and had been rushed to hospital. The friend, who was making his way to the hospital, was checking to see if I was in Nairobi, if I had any details to share. Disoriented, I ended up drinking a little too much—to the point of almost missing my early morning ride to the airport—keeping the news to myself. I landed in Nairobi, dropped off my bags at the house in Karen and made my way to Karen Hospital.

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I found Binyavanga in the ICU, looking healthy and awake, but having difficulty with his speech. It seemed temporary, as if he would undergo a procedure or two and then everything would go back to normal. Before the stroke, Binyavanga had embarked on a crazy European run—Toronto, London then Paris, or something like that—attending a series of events before jumping on a plane and flying off to the next city. Seeing how tight his schedule had been and how much he had had to do, I thought this was all short-term, a product of the fatigue. Once out of ICU, Binyavanga would call me

every morning, asking me to go and be with him at the hospital. I would tell him I was already on my way anyway, that he didn't need to call for me to go to him.

“Call so and so,” he would mumble from his hospital bed. “Tell them I've had a stroke.”

It was as if we had moved his living room to his hospital room; he refused to slow down. We worked every morning, replying to emails, making phone calls, cancelling speaking and other engagements. Binyavanga was nothing if not painfully stubborn, never surrendering, insisting on acting as if everything was normal, refusing to take no for an answer from anyone. From Karen Hospital, it was Nairobi Hospital after a very brief break, before a group of friends and his family worked out a plan to get him to India, where his writer friend Achal Prabhala had recommended a solid post-stroke recovery programme. The idea of leaving the country appealed to Binyavanga.

On the day Binyavanga was leaving for India, I was returning from a Commonwealth Writers event in Malta, which I had attended as an East Africa stringer. As I was coming out of arrivals, I spotted a Nairobi Hospital ambulance parked outside the international departures gate and, recognising some of our mutual friends standing next to its open door, I walked over and saw Binyavanga lying on a stretcher, waiting to be wheeled onto the runway to board his flight. We exchanged pleasantries before I wished him good luck and said goodbye. A few weeks later, Binyavanga started sending emails to me and to the group of friends, asking that I travel to India. He became persistent, and soon, I was off to India.

I travelled to India on my birthday in December 2015, arriving in Bangalore, where Binyavanga was recuperating, at four in the morning. I made my way to the three-bedroom serviced apartment on Ulsoor Lake, where Binyavanga was staying with his sister Ciru, and a friend of theirs, Tango, who showed me to my room. At about eight in the morning, Binyavanga knocked on my door. I opened, we hugged, and he welcomed me to India. And that is how my eventful one-month stay in India began.

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It was back to routine. We would wake up and have breakfast in the restaurant situated within the apartment building, by which time the taxi driver was already waiting in the basement parking. I would accompany Binyavanga to hospital for his sessions—speech therapy, physiotherapy, the works—after which we would go for lunch together and then spend the better part of the afternoon at a high-end gym. (I sat outside the building, people watching.) Then we would go back to the apartment, from where we all went out for dinner or something like that, and the next morning we would start all over again.

From Bangalore, and having regained much of his physical strength, Binyavanga was briefly back in Kenya, before leaving for Berlin to take up a DAAD fellowship for a year. Berlin was difficult. He encountered racism, and found himself having online scuffles with all kinds of people, including *Kwani?* Thereafter, he briefly moved to South Africa, before returning to Kenya in 2017. I made a point of visiting him at least once a week. We spoke about anything and everything, just like in the old days, the only difference being that he couldn't speak with the same vigour, ease and speed as before. The dreams grew even bigger, and every time I visited there was either an improvement on a concept, or a totally different idea he wanted to pursue. On the weeks when I couldn't make it to see him, he would call asking why I hadn't visited. At other times, he called and said he was lonely.

“I want you to take me to Kigali,” Binyavanga told me in September 2018, “to go bury my uncle.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to accompany Binyavanga to Kigali. I couldn't ascertain whether he was fit to travel, and wondered why none of those around him wanted to make the trip with him. I kept avoiding him, sometimes not taking his calls, feeling that I was in a Catch 22 situation—wanting to be there for him, but worrying about his health. However, on the eve of the trip, Binyavanga did what Binyavanga did best: put me in a situation where I couldn't say no.

“I've bought two tickets, mine and yours,” he said on phone, “We're going to Kigali *kesho*.”

The first sign that Binyavanga wasn't his best self was at the security screening at the airport in Nairobi; I had to step in to assist him with every step of the process. Inside the aircraft, the passenger seated next to him, noticing that he might need assistance during the flight, offered me his seat so that I could be with Binyavanga. We arrived in Kigali and got in touch with his cousin Brenda, who directed us to a hotel across the street from the Rwandan Parliament. We booked adjacent deluxe rooms on the fifth floor, each the size of an apartment. It was typical Binyavanga, always going over the top, be it with fashion or restaurants.

Binyavanga would wake up every morning and knock at my door, asking me to help him get ready for the day. On the day of the funeral I took him to his uncle's home, where he paid his last respects and reconnected with his maternal cousins. We attended the requiem mass at a Catholic cathedral in central Kigali, sitting at the back of the church. I was born a Catholic and as I participated in the rituals, Binyavanga kept giving me a sideways look that seemed to say, “I thought I knew you”. We attended the burial at a cemetery in the outskirts of Kigali, before taking our flight back to Nairobi the following day.

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It was during that Kigali trip, his last trip outside Kenya, that I last saw Binyavanga walking unaided. A few weeks later, he was back in hospital, staying for a couple of weeks, having suffered another stroke. He was discharged and underwent a lot of physiotherapy, regaining much of his physical strength. I visited him two to three times a week, and mostly found him lying on the couch, watching Netflix on his MacBook. He would sit up, trying to have a conversation, before asking me to recommend shows or movies on Netflix. I would mention a show or a movie, read him the synopsis, after which he would say yes or no. We would speak, yet again, about his desire to do a PhD in Literature at Princeton, with him asking that the writer Andia Kisia and I work on his application. He would repeat his wish to study the work of Kojo Laing, since to Binyavanga's mind, no one wrote better than Laing.

Just weeks later, Binyavanga was back in hospital, never to make it out alive. I visited him in the ICU one afternoon. Standing there, alone, watching him through a glass barrier—no one was allowed any closer—I felt my knees giving way, almost collapsing to the floor. We looked at each other. I felt that he wanted to speak, to ask me to do something for him, or to pass a message to someone, as it had always been with us. He couldn't utter the words. After the longest, the frailest, eye contact, he slowly closed his eyes and slept. It felt like goodbye.

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