



The Measure of a Man

By Mark Maish



It is 8:30 am on a chilly Saturday morning punctuated with light rain showers. I prompt the driver to reverse the pickup truck into the entry porch. They begin unloading my stuff. A couch, office desk and a chair that I purchased with the proceeds from my first contract. These items remind me of the hurdles I have surmounted in a bid to make a mark in this world.

I am moving back to my parent's house at the age of 25 when I should be out there conquering the world. I feel like a total loser. A disgrace to my entire lineage but deep down I knew I had met my Waterloo.

I was born in 1991 in Kwale County. Soon after my birth, my family moved to Nyahururu only to relocate back to Kinango, a little-known town in Kwale when I was five. I left like an outsider, laughed at by other kids since I could only speak in my mother tongue but I soon mastered the national languages.

In 1997, Kenya becomes engulfed in political animosities in the run-up to the general elections. During the campaign period, the former PM Raila Odinga and hordes of politicians held a public rally at Kinango Secondary School, which was close to our house. My friends and I attended the rally, squeezing through the crowd until we stood a few feet from the podium. I do not remember

what was said. What I remember was the amount of money one of the politicians contributed to the school. Ksh. 200,000 in cash! That was the largest amount of money I had seen at the time.

A few days later, news of a militia group called Kaya Bombo spread throughout Kwale. Something changed in the playground. The local kids started taunting kids whose parents were not natives of the coast region. Before this, we played as children, paying no attention to our origins. Overnight, we had turned into upcountry folk, unwanted in the coast region.

“Nyinyi ni wabara. Mrudi kwenu!”

Some of the locals regarded the Kaya Bombo militia as heroes out to redistribute wealth and land back to its ancestral owners, addressing historical injustices and expelling immigrants believed to have stolen opportunities meant for locals. Some kids even fought over who would move into our house once we were all slaughtered. It was rumored that the militia members had mystical powers. When they broke into houses at night, they ethnically profiled their hostages by holding out a one bob coin and conducting an accent test. If you said something like *silingi* or *shirigi* they would cut off your head.

Petrified by these stories, we, the children of *wabara* helped each other learn how to pronounce *Shilingi* in order to pass for locals in event of a gang attack. Back at home, my parents stocked up on foodstuffs. By 6:45 pm, every evening, we would switch off all the lights, barricade ourselves indoors, huddled in one room, on the floor, farthest from the windows to avoid getting hit by stray bullets as gunshots echoed all night long. The District Officer was our immediate neighbour and family friend so we enjoyed the privilege of security of his armed guards.

That year, Likoni police station was ransacked and burned to the ground. Members of the migrant communities along Likoni-Kombani-Tiwi-Ukunda-Msambweni stretch lost property. My folks permanently halted the construction of some property in Ukunda. Once the violence was quelled, we attempted to restore our normal lives, although a few of our family friends moved back upcountry fearing for their lives.

10 years later, in 2007, the political temperatures soared again after the disputed presidential election. This time we were prepared. We all moved into my grandparent’s farm in Shimba Hills. The licensed firearm holders in the extended family kept their guns close by. The rest of us armed ourselves with machetes, clubs, bows, and arrows in a bid to protect our women, children and property. This period rekindled the intense fear, suspense and painful memories of the ‘97 Likoni clashes as news of the wanton destruction of property and ethnic killings in the Rift Valley reached us. Fortunately, most parts of the coast did not experience incidences of election-related violence.

Towards the end of January 2008, a sense of normalcy resumed. I was excited to go back to school at Kenyatta High School, in Taita for my final year. However, in class, I became a target of profiling, tormented by my business studies teacher. Every time he walked into class he would call out.

“Mark Maina Mwangi, where are you?”

I would meekly stand up.

“Ohh the mungiki is still here! I will personally make sure you are sent home...”

The insults and threats became a regular affair and I realized that I was paying for the sins of those behind the disputed presidential outcome. One evening class, the teacher walked up to my desk, grabbed my exercise book and tore it into pieces. I received a slap on the face and got kicked out of class for a crime I did not commit; writing a love letter.

For weeks I had endured his abuse but he eventually got to me.

What if I was indeed a mungiki and murderer as the teacher claimed?

I was broken. I called my folks that night to let them know I was done with schooling. I could not take it anymore. The next morning my mother came to school to see me. She gave me two options. To gather my stuff and leave for a new school or stay there and fight for myself like other men. I chose to stay. A choice I have had to make throughout my life.

In 2010, I joined Kenyatta University to pursue engineering for my undergraduate studies. Before I began pursuing civil engineering, I thought it would be interesting. That we would be learning and doing things that would revolutionize the world only to end up studying same old concepts without any real-world application. In my sophomore year, we started reading stories of young people in the west, dropping out of campus to start tech companies that turned them into billionaires overnight. We debated the merits of tertiary education with my comrades while contemplating quitting school for entrepreneurship. In the 2nd semester of my 2nd year at university, I quit campus, pulled together my savings and borrowed some cash to set up my first business. I used up all the capital to import a couple of Tablet-PCs. I envisioned building an electronics import business empire, raking in millions and never having to work for anyone or need a degree. Unfortunately, I did not conduct an extensive market research. The same week my shipment landed, a giant Telco rolled out a series of cheaper Tablet-PCs. I ran into huge losses and returned to college humbled, spending the next several months paying off my debts.

But once a hustler always a hustler and in my final year of campus, I was running a construction consultancy company on the side. I landed a project and contracted three of my lecturers to do the job for me. This was a campus life highlight. However, the succeeding contract came with drama. After spending my last coin to undertake the project, the client disappeared without paying a dime. In my naivety, I trusted too much and forgot to sign a contract. Who would want to pull down a young man trying to build an empire, right?

I was completely broke and too embarrassed to ask help. At my wits ends, I started writing for online magazines in order to stay afloat. Everything else I touched had turned into dust. During this low moment in life, I channelled my frustration into creativity and wrote [The Kenya's Middle-Class Nightmare](#) blog post which went viral receiving over 400,000 reads. Suddenly, I was getting job offers and speaking engagements from all over the country. I settled on two, one in media and the other in marketing.

As a man who gives his all in everything he does, in a few months, my projects in both companies were hugely successful. I was working 8am-4pm in one company and 5pm to 11pm in the other from Monday to Friday and most weekends. I did not have a life outside of work. Nonetheless, my quick rise up the ranks did not sit well with a number of older and senior colleagues. To them, I was not only an outsider but also someone who was yet to pay his dues like they did over the years. They began frustrating my projects at every turn

My boss became inordinately toxic. Nothing I ever did was right. Shouting, insults, threats and intimidation were his weapons of choice. At first, I took it to the chin, trying to keep level-headed but the aggression chipped at my soul every single day, leaving me trapped, constantly stressed and walking on eggshells. I would have either to sell my soul to the devil or return to a life of uncertainty. I choose the latter. Something else happened to trigger this decision.

One afternoon, I get a call from a lady I went to college with. In a voice devoid of emotion, she says, *"Hi Mark! Do you know your friend is gone? Ebu come to MP Shah Hospital...He just died."*

I dismiss her and get back to work trying to process the news. Minutes later my phone begins to ring incessantly with numbers I do not recognise. I decide to switch it off. *This can't be possible.* I talked to him two days ago and he was responding well to treatment. We had even planned for a road trip as soon as he was discharged.

At 5:30 pm, I head out to the hospital in Parklands to find his family and former college mates, huddled at a lounge next to the ICU, grieving.

'This is an elaborate prank. He is okay. He will walk out in any minute now and laugh at how sad we all are.'

The hospital staff lead the gathering of family and friends to a windowless building where the humming of freezers could be heard from outside. A gentleman and lady in scrubs usher us into an eerily cold room. A faint stench of bleach hangs in the air.

Lying in one of the freezers is my best friend wrapped in a white sheet like an Egyptian mummy. Eyes closed and peaceful. Except for his pale lips and bulging forehead veins, he might as well be sleeping. I call out his name. Try to wake him up without success and the reality finally descends like a ton of bricks. He is gone. Crossed to the land of no return. Unable to contain my emotions anymore I break down. Weep like a toddler without care of who is watching.

The next couple of days are terrible. I have lost people before. Friends. Relatives. But this loss is too personal. For almost a decade he was my best friend, wingman, confidant and more like an elder brother. He taught me pretty much everything I know about being a man. He was the man I went to for advice. Whenever I was in trouble he bailed me out.

To deal with the loss, I start drinking more than usual. I switch from beer to whiskey in an effort to numb the pain. I begin doubting the existence of God. He was such a selfless, loyal, caring and a stand-up guy yet he died young, why was I spared?

I bottle up these feelings while trying to avoid the places we used to frequent together. Despondency sets in. One of my initiatives as a lifestyle blogger involves helping out people. I listen to their problems while trying to find solutions. People of all ages, both online and real-life come to me for help. I am their rock. A shoulder to lean on. Tens of people reach out to me with their life issues every week, however, none of them ever inquires how I am doing. My pal was the guy I went to with my problems. Now, I have nobody in my corner.

To deal with the emotional turmoil I begin hooking up with random women for no strings attached sex. The actual human connection I seek proves elusive. In Nairobi, it is way easier to hook up with a random person every night than it is to find someone who is real.

The drinking intensifies, cheered on by my acquaintances. I become that guy, the life of the party on the outside but wounded inside, crying out for help. Those around do not seem to notice it. I rapidly sink into depression and loneliness but I am too ashamed to admit for I care too much for my public brand.

One morning I step out of bed only to lose balance and fall to the floor. The room spins in circles. I feel terribly sick. My stomach churns. I stagger to the toilet, sink onto my knees, pull up the seat, hunch over and try to puke. Nothing comes out. That is when I realize I have not eaten anything for over two days. It was clear I had completely lost control to my addictions.

My denial only exacerbates the situation. I try travelling, sampling the nightlife across the country but there was no escape from this labyrinth. I have to face my demons head-on.

So, I de-clutter my life and give away most of my possessions including gadgets clothes and shoes. Then I hire a pick up to ferry what was left to my parent's home in Kwale, the only safe haven I could think of.

Just as the crew finishes unloading, my old man walks out of the house. If at all he was surprised to see me, he does not reveal it considering I did not notify him of my impending arrival.

At 26, my old man built his mother a house. He lost his father at a young age, faced adversity forcing him to single-handedly take charge of his family, educate siblings and change his fortunes. Having gone through that tough life he made sure I lacked nothing. Sons are supposed to be better than their fathers in all aspects of life. Sadly, I may never be half the man my old man is despite all advantages life has given me.

"Come in and have some breakfast."

My father fries two eggs, toasts bread and serves me together with some coffee.

My parents never ask me why I came back home. Instead, they seem genuinely happy to see me and welcome me back like the prodigal son. After two weeks, I open up about my struggles and why I needed time off the city to heal.

"Son, there is no shame in a man asking for help. You made the right choice to come back home. Even when you are fifty years old, you always have a place in this home."

The next day, my parents give me a house to move into, appoint me as a manager to the family ventures complete with an office and access to a car. I work twice as hard masquerading as an entrepreneur does but deep down I know I am only lucky and not the self-made man I pretend to be.

Time off the city changes my outlook towards life. I take time off social media in an effort to reconnect with my inner-self, hang around people who I have known for years.

I had been harbouring hate, avoiding dealing with grief, trying to seek acceptance, unconditional love and support in all the wrong places because I was too embarrassed to ask for help. I learned that being a man should never be an excuse to bottle up everything. I am human after all and there is no shame in stumbling. It takes courage to continue and failure is such a great teacher.

The true measure of a man is not defined by the invincible cloak we wrap around our public personas but by how we continually respond to the challenges of life.

After almost a year of working for family, I hand over the reins and move back to the city a bit wiser with a single goal. Reclaim my life and work on becoming a better man.

A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it. ~ George Moore

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