



THE UNDOING PROJECT: Writing to awaken

By Owaahh



My dad was born in 1946. His dad, my grandfather, was born in 1918. Both of them were born at the tail end of wars that everyone thought would be the wars to end all wars. Many things happened between those two births. Kenya officially became a colony, the Great Depression ruined the global economy, and a new, bigger, and more destructive war begun and ended.

My grandparents got married, hurriedly, in 1941 (or 1942). Their black and white wedding photo tells nothing of the turmoil that was already taking place. All it shows is a young couple in love, with my grandmother sitting in her white dress, shoeless, and my grandfather standing next to her. Nothing in the photo tells you that it was only months before my grandfather was conscripted to fight in a war he had no stake in.

His war was not in the trenches. At least not the literal ones. His was in the camps, in the medical tents, and wherever men and women trying to hurt each other finally succeeded. There was Burma and Egypt, and every battleground in between. In lieu of bullet or shrapnel wounds, he came back with his face and soul permanently marked. The reminders of chickenpox he contracted trying to make sure other soldiers didn't. He came back with those scars, a metallic service bowl, and a virile need to survive. So immediately the guns went quiet and he could finally come back to his wife, they set at it. They spent the next decade doing exactly that, through the turmoil of the '50s. My grandfather spent his lifetime as a health officer. He sought stability and discipline, and his scars survived not just as physical marks, but as a nickname given to him by his boys.

I was born to my father in his 40s. He's a man's man and an introvert who prefers solitary walks to long conversations. On his face he has a scar from one such walk at night. Years before I was born, he was attacked on a walk and slashed on the forehead. He healed, but the scar hasn't faded with time. On his ebony skin, even as age grows on him, it still defines the right side of his forehead. It made him more careful, but didn't kill his love for long solitary walks.

But there were other things. Like his dad, who grew up in the early years of the formal colony, my dad also was raised in a land in brutal transition. His was not the kipande or labour system, it was the Mau Mau war. He was arrested, at least twice, while he was a kid in Kiambu. Once, no one knew where he was for three days. He and his cousin had been picked out of a random line-up by snitches covered in sacks-called *gakunia*-as Mau Mau sympathisers. They were barely 10 years old. Those experiences made them cautious, and the trauma made it easy for them to see enemies where there weren't.

My dad does not say much about the Roaring 60s, but I think the decade meant a lot to him. He was in his 20s, he had hope, and he lived in a country full of opportunity and promise. Then the 70s had responsibility and commitment. The 80s too. The 90s even worse. Somewhere in between those decades, he became a police clerk, then settled on teaching as his lifelong work. And retired just at the start of the new millennium. In those decades he could count among his students two of my future teachers, and one future Attorney General.

As three generations of firstborn sons, our childhoods couldn't have been more different. One lived through the early years of colonialism. The next through the Emergency years. I lived through the austerity years of Nyayoism, in the dying embers of the political revolution that begun in the early 80s. Did that define our chosen crafts? From a health officer to a teacher to a writer?

Of these men, I am the only writer and the only atheist. At first it felt unique to be these things, like I had the privilege of not having the trauma of war and conquest in my childhood. But it doesn't feel like that anymore. Now it feels as if I carry the traumas of their generations as well as mine, and my love for history doesn't help. As if my quest for knowledge is a quest to understand them, and at least find little ways to help my generation not repeat the same mistakes, and to process its trauma differently.

In 2002, my dad told me he would vote for Uhuru Kenyatta. I did not understand it. The man would lose, we rightly agreed, so why would he still vote for him? I thought he more than most would understand. He had seen bad politics break the society he worked in. He had lined up to swear the 1969 oath as a young adult, not by choice, but it still markedly defined how he views Kenya as a nation state. His trauma from the 1950s was weaponised for political gain, yet he was a curious soul for whom tribe has never meant anything in social and business interactions. He was there, not just as a witness and a student of history, but as a teacher of it for three decades.

I thought he would understand. He should have. But now I get him. I think. His reason at the time was loyalty, or something like that. Loyalty to home. To people. To an idea. It sounded incomplete, but it was a lesson in experiences.

For most of my life, he was an agnostic, the first one I ever knew. He still identified as Christian, but something about denominations bothered him. He was a seeker, an open book as he called himself. Then, as the grey took over and his gait became more deliberate, he made a decision. He became the people he had been sarcastic about, choosing one denomination over all others. One way to worship over everything else. He had only seen his father as a man with the scars of war in timeless patterns on his face and heart; a man for whom death had been real and close. Perhaps his father's commitment to a single church, the Anglicans, was why he needed to seek first. Decide later.

I have always been an avowed atheist. Still, every few years I wonder if age will make Pascal's Wager look more enticing. Like it did for him, until it did not. Am I walking the same journey as he and his father, only in a different time with different experiences? Is it cascading through us, three men with alternating surnames, this life experience? Sometimes I think the difference is in what age they had to raise the next generation of men. My grandfather was just two years shy of 30 when he got my dad, while mine was well into his 40s. Their ideas were markedly different; one wanted to raise a strong son who would be his legacy, the other wanted his son to find himself from an early age. The only thing that made my dad tick, other than bad grammar and bad grades, was my experiments with all the girly stuff that littered our home.

I write because my father made writing, even letters to him, an exercise in expression. Letters came back marked with corrections and notes to improve diction. History books littered my childhood, and knowledge, especially questioning history, were one of the few things that made his eyes light up. His father was a distant man with the demons of war tormenting him even before the previous one had abated.

I write because I can't not write. Even if I had ended up in a lab or at crime scenes, which was my chosen career, I would still write. I wanted to live in a lab to tell stories of sex, money and murder, the three pillars to any great story worth telling. Yet I found myself miles away from a lab, from trace evidence and semen samples, and in a world where they still exist, but seem to make more sense. What if that's how, when he ended up in the war, my grandfather found himself treating the wounded and the dying. Making sure they didn't contract more diseases or injuries than they already had? What if it was taking the road less travelled, and finding that there were several little paths that led from it? How my father, in the decade after independence, found himself offered managerial jobs in several companies but chose, instead, to be a police clerk. Then a teacher of women and men. A man who, even after he retired, still found time to teach older men and women. Who loved languages and history and everything in between. Was that his war, ignorance? Does he have scars from it I haven't understood yet? What is my war? What is it that, by virtue of the person I am in the sands of time, is my lifelong work?

In my culture, there would be a generation transition every 30 or so years. It was a massive affair where aging men accepted they couldn't fight any more. They couldn't fend for all. And most importantly, that they had done their part. They needed to let younger men find and do theirs. Each generation understood it had a short window to get its work done. Its life purpose. Whether that was war or peace didn't really matter, because each is a version of the other. The last one was just a century ago, the same year my grandfather was born, but its tenets are now lost. Its rules should have survived in some way, not just in retirement age, but as a concept. That youth is fleeting. That it's the time to be energetic, and reckless. With your physical self, with your ideas of the world. A time to fail and succeed. To make stupid mistakes about whatever the new technology is at the time. To rage and fight and protest. To work and cry and try. To experiment. To simply live.

In our family this transition was marked somewhat by the death of my grandfather just months after I came into this world. He had done his part, and once told my mother that at least he had lived to see himself. Did he hope, like I see my father with his grandkids, that life would be better for me than it had been for him? That I wouldn't carry his scars but I would learn the lessons they left behind?

I often wonder how these lessons have cascaded in ways I don't understand yet. I am a millennial in a world where my generation is seen as needy, aggressive, liberal, reckless, and distracted. Like my parents were when they walked into the '60s with unbridled optimism, youthful exuberance, and a taste for the latest fads. That forced those older than them to ban miniskirts and long hair, because they were 'spoiling the youth.' Kenya has been here before, because the experiences of each

generation shape how it raises the next. I think of this when I see how my generation, now young parents, are struggling to raise their kids in a world on steroids.

What makes a millennial a bad word? What makes it a thing to be said disparagingly? Is it because we live (according to Western statistics-which are wrong) in the most peaceful time in recorded human history? Is it because not only do we talk to each other remotely, we now live and work there too? Is it because we are more informed about sexual and reproductive health, about gay rights and right of Palestine to exist? Or is it because we didn't live through some of the most defining moments of the nation-state we call home. Will we find, as we age into our 30s and 40s, the smartphone generation as obnoxious as older generations find us today?

Life is a lived experience. There is only one way to do that, to live it. To seek. To find, sometimes. To accept Trump as the clarion call to the next phase of American aggression, which might just drive us to the next war we historians will describe as the war of our generation. To accept that each generation has a purpose, and ours isn't defined by colonialism and independence, as much as it is defined by our need for jobs, better Internet, fewer wars, more inclusion, and a more humanist approach to social problems. By rapid political transitions, a debt bomb, the traumas we inherited, and those we are inflicting on ourselves. Those are our wars, so far, and they are real. If the next generation has different wars, then so be it.

My grandfather, my dad and I are three different men, all born in the same century yet defined by different experiences. We are broken in different ways yet we have, if my mother is to be believed (and she's a mostly solid source), similar in our ways. Our reactions. Our decisions. Our stubbornness. Our messes. Our mistakes. Yet still, our views of the world, our politics and ideas, are a world apart. Even though we mostly have the same genetic tools, we are different because we were born in different times, and we processed them differently. Their generations were broken, but they were also blessed. Mine is too. I am a millennial, and my generation is struggling to define itself. To find its purpose. To do its best and worst.

We are different. And that's okay. For those of us who don't believe in an afterlife, this is the only run. And fucking run we shall!

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