



ME AGAINST THE SYSTEM: The frustration of Wasted Potential

By Duncan Kairu



At almost 35, I'm yet to find balance in life. I was born into a family of five, two parents, two boys and a girl. I am the first born. My two siblings are doing just fine. Set in the family way, raising children, pursuing and living life by their own personal terms, happily, no less. Given all the trouble they put me through growing up, I can honestly say their success is my success, and wouldn't have it any other way.

My personal life however, is a conundrum of sorts. No family. No (real) job, No prospects! Growing up in Kayole, Eastlands in '94, life was harmonious and easy for a child who saw the world through innocent eyes. Kayole estate was a World Bank housing project designated for the middle class. In the original plan, facilities such as schools, dispensaries and markets were strategically placed to serve the residents with paved roads and functioning streetlights. The houses came with large parking lots and a fully functional drainage system that stands to date. Crime was rare. In early 90s, there were a few white folks living in Kayole before they all moved out and relocated as the neighbourhood lost its gentrified status.

Apart from the few model houses that were built to World Bank standards, the rest of the dwellings were squatting houses that mushroomed into a hostile takeover after residents began flaunting the building regulations with no consequences. Those who were connected, began constructing 8 to 12

rooms on 50×100 plots and the Eastlands suburban vision that was part of the original plan fell apart. Toilets, bathrooms and cloth lines were communal in these new dwellings and with it came congestion tension between tenants.

In the early 90s, Kayole was characterised by wide open spaces everywhere, a gigantic play ground. Our days were marked by childish pursuits that included, football matches played using improvised polythene plastic paper bags rolled into a tight ball then fastened with sisal strands to give it a firm texture. My love for the sport was, as my mother put it, more than that of life itself. She had a point. I had a dream of becoming a professional footballer and joining the ranks of Roberto Baggio, the Italian midfielder, Luis Figo, the Portuguese Forward, and the Brazilian striker sensation, Romario, my football godfathers of the 90s. All of whom I followed on KBC, thanks to a portable radio that my dad had bought to keep himself updated on the politics of the day.

I must have been 12 years old when I first started noticing the three white men visiting our neighborhood and spending a lot of time watching us play. Two tall men, both lean in frame and the third, a bald man with the beginnings of a paunch. They drove an old Nissan Sunny. After the matches they would sit us down and offer us soft drinks and cookies engaging us in polite conversations about our families, our education, dreams for the future and whether we wanted to play footie in Britain! I particularly intrigued them a great deal.

Their talk of playing in Britain, cast a spell on me and I became obsessed with the idea. They kept on showing up every few months each time bearing gifts of new balls and sport shoes. Eventually, they insisted on meeting my parents to “introduce” themselves. My mother was super elated and quickly gave in to the request after I broke the news at home. My father however, a hardware store employee off River Road, downtown, warned me about fraternizing with strangers. His authoritarian style of parenting stifled any designs I had about my own life choices. So when he said no, it was final. Attempts by mother to bring him on board bore no fruit. His refusal adversely affecting me and I was diagnosed with clinical depression that required psychiatric evaluation.

The final blow came in 1997 when the indiscriminate land grabbing linked to David Mwenje, then Member of Parliament for Embakasi and other politicians in the Moi era arrived in my neighbourhood. The political class and their cohorts embarked on a privatisation spree, leaving no open public space untouched including our playground. Marooned and helpless, the sport died a natural death and the football scouts stopped coming. Consequently, my hopes died shortly thereafter, my dreams, valid as they were, with me as well. It would only come to emerge later that they were UK agents scouting for new talent in Africa and I was on their watch list. Twenty two years down the line, I wonder how my life would have turned out had I gotten my professional football break!

To stave off the pain of loss, I began drawing and sketching and my scribbling morphed into a budding career in calligraphy and poetry. My passion for creative writing was inspired and fueled by Tupac Shakur’s 1996 Album, *Me against the World*. I felt like a social pariah and Tupac’s music and US hip hop on inner city experiences became relatable. In the mid 90s, the transport sector experienced the emergence of a new breed of vehicle in Nairobi as the privatisation and free market bug hit with the collapse of the two major state funded public transport bus services, the Nyayo and Kenya Bus. The privately owned matatus ushered in a new-fangled culture that revolutionized the whole matatu industry and gave it its present day mojo. This was the age of the Manyanga, a name drawn from the original street *Sheng* term used to depict a young voluptuous woman. The pimped matatu was a far cry from its weathered predecessors, with graffiti cutting across its body, both inside and out. They spotted large sport tyres with flashy rims and loud music systems that played a lot of hip-hop and reggae music to lure customers. Influenced by both American hip-hop and Jamaican ragga cultures, both weed smoking and baggy jeans hip-hop fashion became vogue as the

flashy touts paraded their brand of swag that quickly caught on as a trend that started in Eastlands and spread on to all parts of the city.

My two skill sets found a place in the industry where I spent my days in garages designing creative works and getting paid for it. I became a matatu graffiti artist and settled in my new 'career' until a directive from the Ministry of Transport under the famous "Michuki Rules" instituted by John Michuki in the Kibaki era banned matatu art. Flashy matatu art was term as a conduit for "hooliganism" and undesirable social elements and in an effort to streamline the industry, monochromes and yellow strip became the new civilised matatu look. Most garages closed shop ostensibly forcing many youths to look for alternative means to survive. All I was left with was my poetry and prose.

While moonlighting as a matatu art creative, I completed a certificate course at Utalii College specialized in food and beverage and joined the multitudes in the job market hunting for opportunities. My first stop was at The Norfolk, Nairobi, where a college buddy worked courtesy of his father, an industrial kahuna. He tried pushing my case with the head chef who agreed to an internship but personnel blocked my entry sighting my "nobodiness!" Undeterred, I kept pushing my luck for about a year until the management had enough of my persistence and finally physically threw me out of the premises.

Disillusioned, I decided to send over a hundred applications all over the country hoping for the best only to receive one reply, a regret letter, no less. In my desperation, I stormed through hotel doors demanding to see human resource managers to explain the problem! Was it me or them! Most would ask in surprise rather than shock at my audacity, "Who sent you?"

"Myself," I would reply, "I sent myself" but that was not the response, they wanted to hear! I had no godfather in this skewed system, essentially, a nobody. As the post election conflict of 2007-2008 and the ensuing unrest blew over the country, I despaired, weeping and wiping my tears silently as my country burned with my hopes and dreams.

After a year of listlessness, a job vacancy landed on my lap in March of 2009, when I received a message stating, "a tour company is looking to hire new drivers, for more details, call the number below," The number and company was unfamiliar but I went ahead and called the number immediately. A lady shared directions to their offices, in industrial area where I reported for an interview and despite my absolute lack knowledge of the tour operator space, I got hired on the spot and training started promptly. I began travelling to the country's game parks, Nairobi, Nakuru, Meru, Mara, Tsavo guiding visitors and learning about wildlife. I experienced the novelty of museums, hotels and resorts as a tour driver, met new people and got wide exposure to Kenya's rich natural and cultural heritage. There was one challenge though, the company was not paying us salaries even after seven months of hard labor. Frustrated and fed up, the bunch of disgruntled workers decided to exercise to two options left at hand, paralyze the operations and sink the ship or jump overboard and swim to shore. We settled for the former then bailed. Needless to say, I was once again on the streets scratching my chin, staring into space, my college certificates in hand. There were no breaks for another year and a half. Thankfully, the seven month stint had equipped me with enough skills and contacts to maneuver.

Shelving my academic credentials, I began hustling every top dog I had come to know in the industry, head-on. Luckily, my number came up and I got absorbed by one of the many I reached out to. Wilfred was a good man who wanted good for everyone. The management sadly misconstrued his kindness for nepotism and fired him. Without a safety net, my godfather dispatched, I knew it was only a matter of time before things went south which happened a week later. From then on, the job tap ran dry. At my wits end, living an insipid existence, I started entertaining suicidal thoughts.

My turning point was triggered by an old, torn bible handed down by my mother which sat gathering dust on my table. I was never a religious person and my church attendance was incidental but something caught my eye between the pages. I opened the book and stumbled on Acts 17:26-27

“And He has made from one origin and blood all nations of men to settle on the face of the earth, having determined their periods and boundaries. So that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him, although he is not far from each of us.”

This verse provoked my contemplation on my spiritual purpose and the place of God in my life.

About to close the book, I happened upon this,

Romans 10:13 “Whosoever calls on the name of Jesus shall be saved.”

I stared at the verse, blankly, then vividly remembered a quote someone had once shared of a drowning man clutching on to a serpent. I closed my eyes and uttered a very simple prayer, crying, then shut the book and put it aside. Nothing happened and life went on as usual. Three months later when I started having psychic revelations, that correlated with live situations during the day. I started noticing very “mundane” things like a person’s energy, when one is in distress. I could discern impending illnesses, investment outcomes, accidents, robberies, even death, surprisingly. I attributed all this to a divine revelation and embarked on a new spiritual journey in the Christian faith my mind renewed. Jesus saved me!

Meanwhile, old buddies I had met along the dusty streets of struggle kept enquiring about my welfare. Some had joined the taxi business to earn a living. With nothing to lose, I found myself reunited with them chatting the days away, occasionally covering for any absentee drivers and developed an interest in the taxi business as a new career path. My first car was a Nissan B14, silver in colour that belonged to a senior police officer in Nairobi who always threatened to shoot me if I ever played him. He had a serious demeanor. The threat was not taken lightly.

I entered in the taxi world feeling like a fish out of water. By day, Nairobi is the city in the sun. At night it is a hell hole that requires intelligence and a thick skin to get by. A puzzle to be solved before one can advance to the next level. By any measure, a pain in the butt. Police want a piece of you. City Council use any opportunity to shake you down. Thugs lurk at every bend and fellow operators want you dead.

The experiences I have faced are surreal. I remember my first case, her name was Dorothy. Heavy with child, we had just left Uchumi supermarket, at Adams Arcade and were discussing baby names headed to Nairobi hospital where she was to be admitted waiting to deliver. The two way Ngong Road was legendary with traffic jams that turned full blown chaotic during the rainy season. Everything was fine until she started feeling some kind of “wetness” and sharp pains from her lower abdomen that saw a previously calm woman turn breathless and scream in agony. I was clueless in matters of childbirth. The screaming sent me into a panic seizure and my thinking brain was suspended. It would take the intervention of two good Samaritans to deliver a newborn baby in my backseat. Between them sat Dorothy, looking half dead with blood all over. A few meters stood a cop directing traffic away from us, shoos curious onlookers that had gathered. It would take me months to recover from the ordeal.

Another bizarre episode happened at The Junction months later when a thug put a gun on my skull intending to steal my car as I walked towards it. His mission however, proved impossible when two police officers arrived and stood by obliviously waiting for a matatu. I took off singing Amazing Grace. I have ferried a corpse, had distressed a woman ditch her 2 year old daughter in my cab, had

to deal with horny couples copulating in the back seats and met a long list of unsavoury characters in line of duty. The taxi business is Nairobi peppered with drama but the best was yet to come. In February 2015, more disruption came knocking when Uber, the app-based modern day taxi hit Nairobi streets running.

With its remote management capabilities, cheap rates and new cars, industrial dynamics changed drastically giving it an unfair edge over us old school traditional taxi types. Mass protests by local operators to have it deregistered met with tear gas courtesy of the government as we fought for the measly crumbs off the taxi table. This would mark the third time the government and free market forces had kicked me in the nuts and arrested my development! Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and years but nothing gave. My story was now akin to that of a wounded dog of war relegated to the back alleys to leak its wounds, waiting for death. To cope, most of my peers found solace in alcohol, gambling and prostitutes.

I have been caught between the proverbial rock and a crazy place, for almost a decade now and my youth is spent with nothing to show for it. I kill time by writing. It is my alcohol, my mistress, my prostitute. I love her and together we stare at the horizon hoping for better days ahead in this, my country.

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