



Surviving the Hood: A Walk Through Nairobi's Iconic Neighbourhoods

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What you up to I asked.
I'm going back home to take some pictures for my foundation was the answer.

For us hood folk - no matter where we land - especially if we survive the hood - then it is forever home. Because we remember how far we have gone.
And no matter what trauma and hardships we suffered - we remember this time through rose tinted glasses.

What? Going back home, *home* I said
Yes, won't be there for long but we can meet after. No way! I am coming with you. I am going home too. And so, we set off.

First stop Kaloleni - *Ololo* - for a walk and picture taking.
You see for them Americans to give their hard-earned cash - we have to reaffirm our poverty and massage their saviour ego.
But today I am not on that soapbox.

I am 7 years old, visiting a relative in Kaloleni - eating peanuts that *Nyaredo* (my uncle) has bought us.

I am 7 years old - waiting for the medicine man to bring a variety of roots that need to be boiled and me washed with it. You see at age 7 I have terrible eczema and the many trips to Aga Khan courtesy of the KQ medical cover has not helped.

Dana knows the cure - and so off we go to Kaloleni.

We say hi to Mama. She is shocked to see me. I am happy to see her.

And of course, I come bearing gifts. I know she loves flowers - and these are bright orange. My Mama loved orange.

Mothers are precious and I do miss my own Mama, so I channel that love to any mother I come across - especially my friends Mums.

These houses looked much bigger when I was 7. They seem shrunken - but we have grown. This takes me back to the sights and sounds of our homes growing up.

Wow - it must have been loud - with laughter, joy, tears and hopes.

We walk around the old neighbourhood.

There is a beautiful old building that was the maternity clinic back in the day. A safe place. Walking distance from any home for mothers to welcome new life.

The library is next - open - recently renovated.

The social hall still stands ...and there is a handball pitch too.

Hmmm - handball I inquire - yes, it has been here since our childhood.

This estate was planned.

Every common space has a tree.

The wooden shutters - painted green and that city council sky blue are still present. I am 7 years old, eating peanuts as I wait for the medicine man.

Next stop is my hood. Jericho.

Jogoo Road has changed but it is still the same.

Barma market - where we bought live kukus for those special Sundays still stands. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

We exit Jogoo Road as we remember the number 7 and 8B bus routes. Long live Kenya Bus Service!

Bahati estate is still the same. Jennifer would get off here.

She was beautiful - Arab looking Kamba gal - Evelyn Tei's cousin. Next

Evelyn and Davi would get off at Kimathi.

These were *the it* houses! 3-bedroom stand-alone homes - yo!

I was then in the bus by myself or with Agnes till Jeri.

Funny - no one lived in Jerusalem or Ofafa Jericho...maybe they did, and we just didn't take the same bus...

Welcome to Trench Town

The sign greeted me as the bus turned into my road. Then I knew I was home safe!

Oduko so - the big shops - the main shopping centre - our Mall

I ate mtura there and ferried metal birikas of soup from there to neighbours' homes. I got my shoes mended there at the cobbler outside the bar.

My feet grew like weeds - no new shoes, mended shoes for me.

My Mum's local - drinking those small Tuskers with my Godmother and various aunties. Laughing.

The field next to the *dukas* was where the monthly open-air movies were screened. To this day I wonder who was behind that...

Bringing a screen and projector and showing a free movie to the masses.

Then the clinic...

The clinic where you had to buy an empty small bottle for your cough medicine. In the hood, Actifed came in 5 litre jerricans.

The clinic where Starehe Boys volunteered during the holidays.

Them in their very colourful uniforms - ever so smart. Patrick Shaw smart. The clinic that I ran to when I broke my toe...

Which was not set properly - and has given me *wahala* ever since.

I remember the day clearly because my uncle Cliff was there volunteering that day... The game was *tapo...or blada...or cha mkebe...*

Anyway

I ended up with a broken toe that healed funny.

St. Joseph's ...my nursery and local catholic church. Weird place, looking back.

Lots of light skinned kids ...*pointies*...running around. The only white *jamaas* were the.... yeap! 'nuff said!

We drive to the parking lot and I am 12. I loved a boy from that house.

He smelled sooo good - Old Spice I remember.

First place I ever heard Tracy Chapman.

His brother was playing his guitar to '*Fast car*'. But alas, he was smelling good for someone else...

Celestine's house.

Her mother told her not to talk to me because '*I knew too much*'. Celestine got pregnant in Standard 8...

Clearly, I knew nothing!

Wiki's house - Wycliff - his full name was too long for us kids. First boy and last male who ever slapped me.

Heard my brother defended me by giving him a thorough beating! The joys of big bros in the hood.

Hilary's house.

Now that was an anomaly...

Hilary lived there with his Mum. The end.

Just him and his Mum...in that huge 2 bedroomed house! My family of 5 kids was the smallest...the average was 8 kids We had a cousin and house help living with us...

We slept in one room.

So, you see the thought of just Hilary - alone - in the room - solo...that was mind boggling!

Owanjo so...the big field Looks so small now.

Walking to church along the bougainvillea fence...

Wondering why the boys are allowed to watch football whilst I have to go to church.

Oti Papa - towering tall. The coach. Superstar Someone scores, the crowd goes wild...

I walk to church...

I am 10.

Walking across the field after school to the far far corner to buy deep fried *mhogo*... Laughing with

my two mates - Pauline and Mamie

Pure bliss

Them Mushrooms are having a jam/rehearsal session. The drums sound good, I fall in love with the guitar We eat and listen...

Thoma's house.

First real rejection. I am 15 going on 16

Standing in the kitchen - the gally kitchens of Jeri... Gathered courage to go in for a kiss.

Dude jumped back as if I was about to stab him...

Note to self - do not make any sudden movements towards the male species. They are somewhat fragile when not in control.

Years later - we are back in the kitchen. Him from Sweden, me from my new hood. He has lost his Dad; I am saying pole.

And I remind him ...*ai ai ai...wacha hiyo story Posh* (my hood nickname). We laugh and he goes - *lakini you are free ku jaribu tena.*

The car park.

With the Maasai *watchie* wrapped in his Raymond's blanket, armed with his bow and arrow. It must have been a good year for Peugeot...everyone seemed to own one...or so it seemed. There was the occasional Datsun, Nissan and my Mama's VW - KGG 908.

My street. Our house.

Laughter - it is a Saturday and Mama is having her *bura* - she is laughing, my aunties are laughing, gossiping, listening, helping, soothing, accounting for the monthly contributions. They are drinking and laughing, and Franco plays in the background.

Sisterhood - this is what it looks like.

Joy - Earth, Wind and Fire - blasts from the record player. I am mesmerised by the sparkly cover.

Fear - people running, horses...what? *horses* in Jericho? Screams... the 82 coup has arrived. *Tears* - loud wailing - my Uncle's death - HIV - early days...he makes it into Newsweek... *Violence* - *mwizi* comes the rallying call. We all pour out of our homes...

Nyerere with a panga, blood everywhere, *leta mafuta*...

Later on I wonder how witnessing that affected us kids...

Domes - the wall shook...my neighbour battering his wife. Her head made contact with the wall.

The late-night knocks, the crying, black eye, broken bone - letting in a weeping female who needs to make it to hospital...

Clear thought goes through my child mind - never marry a Kisii or a Luo for that matter...

The big easy - remembering the lazy Sunday afternoons, the footballers walking home, Leonard Mambo Mbotela asking us *je, huu ni ungwana.*

The only time I think Luo men my Dad's age attempted to understand Swahili.

The Bus Stop

My stop - 3 steps and I am home.

The bus stop where Mwangi gathered courage and gave me a love letter via Freddie.

In their *Martini* uniform. *Martini* which I later realised was Martin Luther King Primary School. Go figure!

Mwangi from Ziwani.

As I got off the 8B - he got on. At times he didn't.

He sat there with a clear view of our kitchen and veranda. Young love.

I turned him down gently...he swore to love me *fore*...

The Obembo tree.

Weeping Willow - I discovered years later in my adulthood.

Dhi kel kedi - go bring a stick. God help you if you got a dry one!

It had to be flexible...so as it came down on you, you were dead just from the swishing sound it made.

I am 9.

In standard 3...

I have a toothache.

I take a nap after lunch and I miss my afternoon classes. The maid reports me to my Dad with glee!

Dhi om kedi. I die a thousand deaths. I am sick, in pain, my tooth!

All my Dad hears is that I skipped school...like that is my fucking nature!

I pick a nice flexible one because even in my misery, I want to be good and obedient and get a good *kedi*.

I have seen this guy cane my brother.

Watched my brother cry - my defender, my hero against the hood boys... I can't imagine that wrath reigning down on me.

My Dad is speaking... I can't hear him...

I am dying - can't he see? *I am crying* - I am the good one. *I am screaming* - I am not lying! He raises his arm...

I pee...right there where I stand. He looks at me in shock...

I look at him in shock... He tells me to go shower.

He never raised his hands again...to me. But everyone else got it...sadly.

That is why only one boy has ever slapped me. One. Once. The end.

The hood.

We connected at a basic level

No pretence. No explaining. No pity. No judgement Just simple memories...

The medicine man The bus ride Sunday football Them Mushrooms

The Weeping Willow - which caused a lot of weeping Love - young unrequited love

Friends - rest in peace Mamie Tracy Chapman

Old Spice.

I am 45.

Standing in an empty car park Facing *owanjo so*

The bougainvillea is long gone

There is a stone wall instead - protecting the space from land grabbers...Kenya! The grass and red soil are now gone...

It is astro turf

Kids play in their bright yellow jerseys...dreaming... Oti Papa would be proud.

I wonder about Celestine, Wiki and Hillary...

Me at 45

Standing in the car park Old spice in my memory

But now not quite Old Spice but an expensive scent Tracy in my memory...

Nvirri the Storyteller on my mind

Football in the background

And in front of me... Home.

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