

## *The Day Nairobi Tested Me*

There's a particular silence in Nairobi just before sunrise not peace, but that tense, anxious quiet that tells you the city is holding its breath before the chaos begins. Even the dogs seem to bark with restraint in Njaanuary. That's the month where your wallet starts sounding like a moral lesson, and your stomach echoes with promises of better days.

It's the 9th of January, 2024 to be precise, waking up to a growling belly and no bread in sight. Only a piece of leftover ugali and some Sukuma wiki(kales) sat on my kitchen table which looked like abandoned dreams but to me this was salvation for the day. Well, this would turn to be breakfast of a champions, yes, a Nairobi champion.

Outside, the city had already clocked in, hawkers were arranging mangoes like currency. A mkokoteni guy was arguing with a boda boda rider over who had right of way on a pedestrian path. A street preacher near Globe Roundabout shouted at sin with a megaphone that barely worked: "REPENT! Nairobi is SODOM!" A tired matatu conductor lit a cigarette with eyes that looked like they'd seen all of life's disappointments and decided to keep smoking anyway.

I threw on my shirt, the same one I had worn to three interviews already ironed with a hot sufuria lid the night before and laid it under the mattress so that it stayed straight throughout the night into the morning. The only thing missing was my favourite pair of shoes, someone had introduced their feet to them a week earlier, right outside my door. "Nairobi ni ya wenye macho," the caretaker had said with a shrug.

I had three CVs left in my folder, each slightly curated from sweat and hope, I headed out into the glare of Njaanuary's unforgiving sun. Nairobi heat is personal; it follows you like debt. Every

breath you take feels like it's questioning your life decisions. Well, Nairobi's sun doesn't rise it ambushes you.

My first stop was Industrial Area, a manufacturing company that had advertised a job "with immediate effect." I walked in and found 62 other jobseekers queued up like it was a relief food line. Some in suits, some in dust coats, one guy even wore a lab coat maybe to show versatility. We all looked at each other with suspicion, like hyenas circling the same dying antelope.

When my turn came, the HR lady glanced at my papers for three seconds and asked, "Uko na experience?" I started to explain my side hustle repairing electronics in Ruiru, but before I could finish, she nodded toward the door like it was a summary. But I was just starting and I had not even talked about how I knew how to use a computer, maybe she saw me as a threat because I was not only sharp but also smart. She finally told me we will call you of which I just knew I will never receive the call.

At another office, I waited two hours only to be told the interview had been postponed indefinitely, that they were reviewing some changes that had occurred and they would send us an invitation email for the rescheduled interview. Another building turned out to be an forex scam running "recruitment" on Facebook. The guy next to me realized this after they asked him to pay Ksh 500 for "processing." I didn't even have 500 to get conned with, sometimes luck comes dressed in white clothes you may think it's a ghost only for you to realize it's an Angel.

By noon, I was on Moi Avenue, chewing a PK (I usually love the blue mint one cause its usually very cool) and leaning against a building reflecting about my life and asking myself what I had done wrong to be a ghost of employment. Across the road, a hawker selling socks sprinted like a gazelle as kanjo officers pounced out of nowhere, grabbing his wares and kicking his wooden stand

apart like it owed them money. “Eii Nairobi,” a woman muttered beside me, “Hii si city, ni exam ya maisha.” Selling without a license on the streets of Nairobi was itself a crime and no one was spared.

I moved on, trying not to become part of the day’s headlines. Somewhere on Tom Mboya Street, a man shouted, “Simu yangu! Simu yangu!” clutching empty air as a kid disappeared past the streets with his phone. Two men standing next to me watched and shook their heads. “Nairobi ni kama squid game,” one said. “Ukicheza, unaenda.”

By the time the sun started slanting toward evening, I had nothing to show for my hustle except a dusty folder and a growing desire to scream into a drainage trench.

It was time I walked around a little before I headed to go home, so I decided to take a shortcut and ignored the warnings of shortcuts being always longer. That lane, that infamous, narrow corridor squeezed between two buildings off Luthuli Avenue. Locals called it “Shortcut ya hatari.” I had heard stories of pickpockets, staged accidents, invisible hands that reached into your pockets and dreams. But the shortcut also saved you almost fifteen minutes of walking if you were headed toward River Road or lower Keneth Matiba Road.

I stopped, stared at the entrance like it had called my name.

The lane was barely 150 meters long, but the shadows inside made it feel endless. Two crows perched on opposite balconies above it, silent like witnesses. A banana peel lay in the middle of the path, daring me to take the first step. On one wall, someone had spray-painted: “City of Dreams.” The “D” in “Dreams” had been scratched off. It now read: “City of Reams.” Which felt about right Nairobi reams you.

I looked around.

The sun was still out and it was 3:12 PM. Bright enough, I reasoned besides, I was a grown man, what kind of man fears a shortcut in broad daylight?

A voice inside me whispered, "*We ni mwanaume, na ni saa tisa, tembea bana.*" (which meant be brave and walk)

Another voice hissed back, "*Bro, usiingie, hii njia inajua watu.*" (the path had its owners)

The first thing I noticed inside the shortcut was how the city's noise vanished like someone had turned down the volume on Nairobi itself. No matatu hoots, no hawkers yelling "Mia, mia, soo!", which meant something else on going to buy what was termed to be one hundred. There were no distant gospel tunes or "*Karibia karibia customer upate line ya airtel.....*" It was just silence.

I walked slowly, each step louder than the last, the air felt different like it hadn't moved in hours. The smell was a strange cocktail; dust, urine, boiling sweat, and something I couldn't quite place. Fear, maybe it was the kind of smell that makes your ancestors itch in their graves.

About twenty meters in, I passed a wall with an old political poster. *Ruto for President, 2022 Vote for Change*. The face on it was half-torn, smiling like it knew the joke. Nairobi changes, alright changes your plans, your path, sometimes your fate.

Then I saw movement, they were quick, too quick. A shadow darted across the far end. My gut whispered, "*Turn back.*" But I reminded myself, loudly, in my head, "*You're a man, bro. You lift 20-litre jerricans like they're feathers so what's a shadow to you?*"

My legs didn't agree.

They slowed.

I heard a voice that I didn't quite want to think it to be scary but the courage in me had vanished like steam from a pot.

I froze, tried to walk like I didn't notice, like I belonged here but nothing about this felt normal. My heart was no longer beating it was drumming.

"Boss," a voice said behind me.

Sharp, clipped a summons, not a question.

I didn't turn, not immediately and thought to myself maybe if I kept walking, they'd think I hadn't heard.

Another voice, this one from the front.

"*Leta simu we ngamia.*" I wasn't a camel as he had termed me but he definitely needed my phone.

Now I turned.

Three of them, one in front and two behind. They weren't boys and neither were they men, they were that Nairobi breed. Young enough to run fast, old enough to kill you. The one in front was tall, dark, wearing a tattered denim black jacket and heavy boots held a pistol with one hand, lazily like it was a toy. His other hand held a toothpick. Like he was fresh from lunch and this was just a side mission.

Behind me, I heard the scrape of a knife. That sound alone did something to my knees.

I couldn't breathe properly, I was no longer a man. I was a statistic, waiting to be counted by the police report no one would read.

"*Simu na pesa haraka.*" (Hand over money and your phone)

I reached into my pocket like it was on fire, my Infinix phone trembled in my hand as I passed it over. One of the guys behind me grabbed it like a stolen prize. The other went for my pocket and found the 200 shillings I'd been hiding there like state secrets.

*"Na hiyo jacket pia,"* (that Jacket too) said the toothpick guy.

My leather jacket, the only thing I owned that made me feel like I could walk into a room and pretend I belonged.

I started to speak some whisper of protest escaped my throat, but then the one with the gun pointed it at my forehead, and all my Swahili left my brain. All I had were vowel sounds.

*"Unasema?"* (What did you say?)

*"I...I....."*

Stupid. I didn't even finish the sentence.

He stepped closer, I saw his eyes then blank, like he'd done this a hundred times. Maybe he had, maybe this was his Tuesday routine.

I don't know if I cried, but something wet touched my lip, I guess it was sweat, tears, regret. Nairobi water is salty in all its forms.

*"Twende wazii,"* one of them said. Let's go.

And just like that, they vanished, not running but just walking like they had finished an errand. The kind of calm only predators have.

I checked my pockets again, nothing, not even the 50 shillings I had hidden in my back pocket had survived.

I had no way to get home, no money or phone, my jacket too was gone. Even my dignity had been snatched, wrapped in the folds of fear and discarded somewhere in that dark alley.

I leaned against the wall, slid down to the ground slowly, and sat in the filth. My head dropped between my knees, Nairobi had bitten me properly. Not a nibble but a full clamp of the jaws.

For a moment, I thought about screaming but who would care? This was Nairobi screaming is background noise.

Instead, I laughed quietly. That kind of broken laugh people mistake for madness. A mkokoteni rolled past at the end of the alley. The driver looked in, saw me, and sped up.

I got up wobbled the dusted my trousers like I was dusting off shame.

I still had 60 meters of the shortcut left but this time it felt like a thousand.

As I walked out, slowly, every face on Luthuli Avenue looked like it knew. The askari standing at the corner. The mama selling smokies. Even the guy hawking wireless earphones seemed to smirk.

No one asked what happened, they didn't need to. Nairobi speaks silence fluently.

When I stepped out of that alley and back into Nairobi's sun, I expected everything to look different. I had just been mugged, robbed at gunpoint, threatened with a knife. I thought the world would pause, bow its head, maybe even whisper condolences.

Instead, Nairobi kept moving.

A boda boda flew past so close I could smell the sweat on the rider's armpit. A street preacher shouted from a plastic speaker, "*Usipookoka leo, utaokoka lini?*" A child dropped a maize cob, started crying, got slapped by the mother. Life continued urgent, cruel, indifferent and that is the Nairobi that is unstoppable.

I stood there for a moment, sweaty shirt stuck to my back, and no phone, no cash, no jacket, no nothing just memory and adrenaline.

I started walking.

Down Luthuli, past the shop selling cheap Android chargers. Past the blind beggar who taps his bowl twice for coins. Past the nyama choma guy with one eye, who calls every customer “boss.” Every face I saw looked familiar not because I knew them, but because they wore the same expression I had, tired, tested, twisted by the day.

At Ronald Ngala, I paused to count my options my fare home was 100 shillings while I had 20 shillings. The mathematics of poverty doesn’t follow logic, it follows hunger, shame, and stubbornness. I knew I wasn’t walking home and not in that heat and the trauma I still had.

That’s when I remembered the Safaricom shop near Archives where they let you use a phone if you beg properly. I joined the queue, rehearsing my lines like an actor in a play I didn’t audition for.

“Excuse me, I was robbed, I just need to make one call. Please.”

The lady at the counter looked me over like I was one of those stories that ends in unpaid airtime. She saw the look in my face was genuine and handed me the phone. I stared at it for sometime just blank.

I didn’t know who to call.

I didn’t memorize numbers anymore. Why would I? That’s what phones were for. I closed my eyes, tried to force one number from my memory and there was nothing. Then, like a ghost in my head, it came to me.



My ex.

Of all the people, hers was the only number my mind hadn't let go.

I dialled; it rang then it clicked.

“Hello?”

The same voice, calm, tired and slightly amused.

I explained everything in 30 seconds.

Silence.

Then, “Sawa, I'll Mpesa you something. Don't call again.”

Click.

Two minutes later, a message popped Confirmed OGA2LEO, you have received 200 shillings. I thanked the lady and I was feeling better since my rescue was just a phone call away.

Boarding a matatu from Nairobi town to Ruiru is not for the faint of heart it's a full body experience wrapped in chaos, noise, and unspoken rules. First, you're not really boarding the matatu you are surviving your way into it. At Odeon touts shout “Ruiru ndani! Ruiru ndani! Githurai! Mwihoko!” as they tug at your arm like you owe them something. The music from the matatu is usually deafening full-blast gengetone or reggae and the graffiti-covered walls flash LED lights even during the day. The vehicle doesn't stop for you to board it slows. You jump in like a thief, squeeze between a vendor with a sack of warus or a sweet seller or a hawker who tells you how his pencils write very well among others. If the seats are full, the conductor might offer you the “sambaza” that tiny wooden piece placed between two seats like a punishment you take it, of course because you don't want problems.

Inside, there's no silence. The conductor, dressed like he just walked off a runway in Gikosh, swings from the door shouting, "Panda haraka bana!" while collecting fare with no change in sight. If you don't ask for your balance you may alight without it. If you make eye contact, he might think you're disrespecting him. There's often a preaching woman shouting about hell on one end, a phone snatcher pretending to sleep on the other, and someone behind you eating chips mwitu whose vinegar hits your nose like tear gas. And yet, somehow, this is normal. This is Nairobi's version of public transport rude, reckless, and ridiculously alive.

At home, I sat on the floor for an hour, not thinking. Just existing. Like a man who had been exorcised not of demons, but of ego, of expectation, of the version of himself that believed the city owed him kindness. The silence in that room was loud. I could hear my own breath, the faint clatter of life outside my window, and the truth settling in my chest like dusk. Nairobi doesn't warn you before it bites, it just waits for your softest spot.

My reflection in the mirror startled me not because I looked broken, but because I didn't. No phone yet somehow, I still looked like me, slightly more undone, yes, but still standing. And that was the most Nairobi thing of all, the ability to walk through fire, smell of smoke, and still straighten your shirt before stepping out again. Dignity here isn't about what you wear it's about showing up anyway.

I didn't have some big realization or vow to change the world or write a manifesto. Just quiet acceptance the kind you learn after being robbed not just of your belongings, but of certainty. I knew tomorrow I'd have to wake up, iron a shirt with hope, and walk out into the same streets that had chewed me up the day before. The only thing more dangerous than this city is dreaming in it. And yet, dream we must not because we believe Nairobi will be gentle, but because we refuse to give it the last word.

I sat back down, this time on the edge of the bed as my eyes scanned the room, bare walls, the hum of a dying bulb proof of life, in its own quiet way maybe that's what survival really looks like here. Not loud declarations or revenge plots but the soft courage to continue. To laugh again, to dare, to heal even if it is slowly.

And though Nairobi had taken something from me that day something I still can't name it also left me with this the gift of story, a scar that speaks, a memory stitched with fear, absurdity, and faith. I didn't win but I didn't disappear either I am still here, breathing, watching, writing and maybe, just maybe, that was just enough.

Because the truth is I wasn't special, the city hadn't singled me out because it was my turn. That's how Nairobi works, where dreams wear helmets, where every short-cut comes with a long receipt, where you laugh because crying costs too much. In Nairobi, after the city robs you, you learn to walk like nothing happened. You hold your head high, even when your wallet is empty and your shoes don't match.

Because here, survival is the only dream allowed to come true.