

Kibera Nights

By Patrick Donohue, August 2005

"In Nairobi, stay away from the shanty towns, especially at night."

- advice from a popular travel book

The door closes, Kibera opens, and East Africa's largest shantytown swallows us into the night. It's dark near Edwin's place, a sight sapping blackness that is darker with the knowledge of the trenches and trips that lie ahead, a misstep can send you rolling down make shift steps to soak in the flowing runoff, Kibera's sewage system. Edwin can see well enough in the dark and navigates the pitfalls without hesitation; I make a joke about mzungu eyes and then switch on my torch. I notice as we walk that the only other people using torches are the mzee, the old men or women. We walk through small alleys and walkways, passing row after row of mud houses with radios blaring, stray light seeping through cracks around the doors and below the roofs. I can't shake the feeling that I'm walking across somebody's front porch but I soon realize that's exactly what we're doing.

The passing people are dark African shadows; it's a surreal experience and I fancifully imagine that I can slip by without notice, achieving that anonymity I find impossible during the day. A mzungu in the dark, does he finally become a mtu, a person? To the young children I'm just another mzungu, a white person, but the kids old enough to have seen kung-fu movies will shout out "Chinese", "Jackie Chan", or that distinctive "hi-ya" cry, matched with chopping hands and a comically fierce look. Onush, my colleague Erik's host, later tells me that the children are probably afraid of me, fearing that I'll open up some karate on them if they're not careful. My fleeting hopes that my sun-browning skin will help me escape notice are dashed when I learn that some older Kenyans think I might be Indian, the much maligned minority of Kenya, disliked because they're said to run all the businesses and pay Kenyans little. It's too hard to stop and explain that I represent the Vietnamese-Irish people, a difficult mixture to appreciate in a land where your tribe is supposed to explain so much about you. For all that I wear my winter hat - not so much for the cool night, which for the bundled-up Kenyans is a biting cold - no, I wear my winter hat to hide my hair, too long to ever be mistaken as Kenyan. I think it might be working, the children aren't shouting their mzungu bird call, their sing-song "how are you?", and there are no sudden looks; but perhaps the night just offers a different pace and people keep their notice to themselves. Edwin jokes that people are probably too surprised to say anything. What would a mzungu be doing in Kibera after dark?

As we pass closer to the main road the world begins to light and shadows

become more intense. Lone electric bulbs light up shop fronts; a single candle flickers in the midst of a cart of vegetables, ready for use in the evening meal; paraffin lamps glow over fruits, charcoal, meat, soap, batteries, everything for sale in the night as well as the day. Smoke from jikos, charcoal and wood stoves, mixes with the light from the nearby Simu ya Jamii payphone shacks, forming whirling ghosts that play at the corner of my eyes. Looking closer I notice many of the paraffin lamps are just wicks inside old liquor bottles, low-tech, low-cost, functional.

"How late is the street active?" I ask Edwin.

"At ten you will still see people walking," Edwin replies, "often later still, walking and talking, visiting friends." Edwin walks with what I've come to call the Kiberan stroll, a light swaggering walk, slow moving with shoulders back and arms swaying loosely, his hands sometimes grasped behind or tucked in the back pockets of his dark blue jeans. The stroll exudes an air of walking in the world, rather than just rushing through, and it's a style of movement I spend the next several weeks trying to perfect. That night however my walk is much more of a staggering affair, feet searching out places neither too wet nor rocky. My mud splattered shoes and pants attest that I'm not always successful.

The closer we get to the road the denser people become and there's more light, which means more glances, but still no outcries. I see a group of children out playing late, kicking around an improvised football, made from a blown up condom wrapped in a plastic bag and a string net. The children are jostling the ball through the plastic bags and scraps you find all over Kibera, which look like fallen white leaves on an Autumn day. We pass a video palace: a mud hut with a TV and VCR, showing years-old films to packed rooms for 10 shillings a seat. A few nights later Edwin and I will sit in a much larger one, the second floor of a wood and sheet metal building on Kibera Drive, to watch Brazil's 4 to 1 victory over Argentina on a generator-powered 27" TV with eighty other football fanatics. There are few fans of Argentina football in Kibera that night; the silence will be so absolute when the blue and white jerseys score their lone goal, I am uncertain if the shot really went in at all.

Bars and hotelis (restaurants) spring up around us as we walk on, and local women line the mud track, fanning the coals that fry fish, chips, chapati, mandazi, samosas, and maize; you can complain about a lot of things in Kibera, but the food is plentiful and cheap. Then bump, bump, bump through a throng of people, around a corner, and suddenly we're on Kibera Drive, with matatus (the bus-vans of Kenya) and larger vehicles rumbling by. The matatus slow down as they pass us, their touts hanging out of open

doors to shout destinations, "YaYa, Postal, ishirini, twenty bop!" but then rapping the van with a coin filled hand to signal the driver to continue, time and fuel are money and we're not getting on. I'm told matatus have become much safer in recent years, largely due to a new law that enforces the novel concept of only one passenger per seat. Still, riding in a matatu is a cramped experience, packed shoulder to shoulder on the van's benches, your head so close to the roof that you feel like you are wearing a baseball cap with the brim pulled low, visibility is extremely limited and you fear the ever present potholes and bumps, locally known just as Nairobi's roads.

Strolling along the paved sidewalk we cross over a stone overpass, above the railway that bisects Kibera and acts as a second thoroughfare for the slum. Looking down I see some men pulling a sack laden handcart along the tracks and I feel a sudden sense of anxiety - there's too little room trackside for both men and cargo and Nairobi's trains, though slow, are relentless. As I return my gaze to the road, I see that Edwin has moved ahead and so I hurry to catch up. Bryn, a cultural advisor we consulted before coming to Kenya, told us you won't have a problem with people in Kibera as long as you look like you know where you're going. Put on your don't-F-with-me face and just walk on by. I think over that course of action while I think about why we're here. The Base of the Pyramid Protocol is about business opportunities that arise from participating in a community, how can you discover something new if you never admit you're lost?

I don't slow my pace though and I heed Bryn's advice, remembering a moment the week before when I had offered my hand to an old man out in Molo town and almost didn't get it back. The mzee's grip had tightened hard and with backpack on, pockets full of shiny things, I felt naked and vulnerable to the group of street children the mzee was dragging me towards. With a twist I broke his grip, some "hi-ya" karate coming in handy after all, and I quickly jumped into Ministry of Agriculture Land Rover we were traveling in, safe for the moment behind locked car doors. As much as you don't want to, you can't help but become hardened by such things; it's a constant struggle not to avoid the very people you came to seek out.

Back on Kibera Drive, we stop by a butcher shop to pick up some meat for the evening meal. Sides of goat and beef hang unrefrigerated in the window, harshly displayed by a single electric bulb. I'm surprised not to see flies buzzing around but then I remember a conversation with Abok from SC Johnson about how butchers often buy cans of Baygon or Raid, now I know why. As Edwin bargains I stand in the doorway, not sure whether to come in or out, outside where I would stand brightly in the light, or inside where I might hinder Edwin's haggling. It's hard to explain to people that Edwin, the African, is paying for everything, "You have a mzungu living with you, this

blessing, why doesn't he give you more money?" Kiberans are also unbelieving when they hear that in mzungu countries we too have people sleeping in our streets, that poverty can be found everywhere. "What do you think about Kibera," we are asked, "are you shocked at how we live?" The question is often asked with a half smile, a voyeur's expectation, like watching for a friend's reaction to your most loved (or hated) movie for the first time. I always try to respond with the positive, that the sense of community here is stronger than almost anywhere I've ever been, and that sure, children may be playing on top of trash, but at least the children are playing - bouncing, bumping, falling, crying, smiling, getting back up again; it's life.

Finally the butcher slices up a chunk of meat, wrapping the pieces in a page of old newspaper which he then places inside a small black plastic bag he hands to Edwin. Two weeks earlier we saw hundreds of those same bags clogging the trenches of Kibera; trenches we were trying to empty and clean with metal rakes and spades, one of the weekly cleanups by Carolina for Kibera (CFK), an amazing community based organization that is Edwin's employer and our most important partner in Kibera. The black bags were deeply tangled in the trenches, some of them impossible to dislodge no matter how hard we pulled, and we often just gave up and left them knowing that they would only grow like living roots. The cleanups can be disheartening if you don't look at them the right way, because when you next come back, the trenches you had emptied just the week before may be full again, trash stemming the flow of the murky runoff, the black blood of Kibera, which carries away the community's waste, inorganic or otherwise. CFK's goal with the cleanups though is one of raising awareness and motivating youth: awareness of what lies at your own doorstep and of what a concerted effort by a small group of people can do, and motivating youth to become involved and be seen by their communities as more than idle creatures, more than just thugs and criminals in the making. One way CFK does this is by brilliantly tapping into the love of every Kenyan boy (and many a Kenyan girl) - playing football. To play in CFK's all Kibera league your team must first earn a number of community development points, earned through the cleanups or other CFK activities. Their strategy has brought some five thousand Kiberan youths under the CFK banner of community development: a veritable army to combat idleness and apathy.

From the butcher shop Edwin and I head over to a stall selling vegetables, where we pick up some onions, tomatoes, and sukuma wiki, a category of greens which translates to "push the week" because they're cheap enough to last you the week. Edwin already has the maize flour for the ugali, the staple of Kenyan meals, so we head back to our home in the Kiberan village of Kianda, stopping only once more to pick up some stove fuel at his

neighborhood duka, a small shop well off the main road and just around the corner from Edwin's house. Dukas are the front line of the Kenyan economy; even though more supermarkets, the Nakumatts, the Uchumis, and other chains are springing up all the time, most Kenyans still buy their goods and daily needs from neighborhood dukas - the small kiosk shops. We once heard that in Nairobi the large supermarkets pull in about eight to ten billion Kenyan shillings a year, while the dukas collectively can pull in that same amount in just a couple of months. And you can find a duka anywhere, on small dirt roads way, way out in the farmlands of Elburgon or Nyota, or deep in the mazelike pathways of Kibera, like the one near Edwin's home where, in addition to household goods, Edwin occasionally buys me a shower; for 5 shillings a visit I can use the small bathing business the owner has nearby.

Edwin's house is part of a small gated compound in Kibera, a little courtyard of six 12' x 15' mud condos. To enter we first cross over a little wooden bridge covering a sewage trench, a kind of moat for a Kiberan castle, and then pass through the "gate", a piece of scrap metal over a wood frame with a locking bolt on the inside. Edwin often trades gate duty with his next-door neighbor: if someone comes back late at night one of the two will answer the knock and let the straggler home. The courtyard of the compound is a floor of rock and cement; laundry and dishes are washed there, the water is dumped in the middle to run down a sloping center to the trench outside. Almost everyday you can see women there doing the wash, straight legged but bent over almost in two, the characteristic pose of the hard-working Kenyan women. I'm later told that Kenyan women don't like to squat, that they prefer this straight-backed bend that sticks their butts so high in the air. I'm certain none of them have any problems touching their toes, but for me, my back aches every time I see them work.

Edwin's home is the second house on the left, marked by the Manchester United sticker on the door. As a good rule of thumb Kenyan men are crazy about football, but although you might first think they'd be crazy about Kenyan football, or African football in general, you're quickly corrected when asked who you support: Arsenal, Manchester, Chelsea, or Liverpool, teams from the English Premiere league. Edwin is a Manchester fanatic, his single room house is wallpapered with posters, curtains, and calendars of his red-jersey favorites. The next day we'll head into the city center to Gikomba, a mad sprawling market, the largest in Nairobi, supposedly so I can see where goods sold in Kibera come from but really because Edwin gets an SMS from a shopkeeper there with a new Manchester curtain in stock. A few notable exceptions to Edwin's Manchester decor are the framed photo of his late father, hanging above a wall calendar displaying a photo of money, and a Bridgestone pin-up girl that's large enough for me to be in love with. It's

clear this is a bachelor's pad.

The house is cramped but cozy, with a bed, couch, chair and bookshelf taking up most of the room. On the bookshelf sits his stereo, an old radio cassette deck without the cassette doors, driving a speaker he built himself and which doubles as a corner table. We spend many pleasurable moments there drinking tea, talking, and listening to the BBC during the day or reggae at night. Between Edwin's sofa and bed there's space for a coffee table, which he pulls off of the bed and places on the floor, and a little table in the front corner which is his kitchen area, with pots and knives, and his paraffin stove: a Japanese contraption he bought in the city just nine months before. Edwin can cook on the stove inside, the smoke is limited and ventilation in Kiberan houses, to put it politely, is "mzuri sana", very good. Edwin shows me how to light the stove: pull off the top pieces, two concentric metal cans, one pin-holed, press a lit match to the seven raised wicks, then replace the parts and start cooking. We heat up water first for some tea, which we do prior to cooking the main meal of ugali, nyama (meat), and sakuma wiki.

Making tea here is a longer process than I'm used to, where you boil water in an electric kettle and dump it into a mug with a prepackaged teabag. Here you boil the water first, add a bag of milk (which Edwin steps out to buy fresh from the corner shop), wait for the milk and water to boil, then add the tea leaves. The next step is to strain it into a thermos, so you can have hot tea for the rest of the night. Most Kenyans, I notice, like their tea with lots of sugar; I get a raised eyebrow or comment when I take only my polite one teaspoon: a compromise as I don't normally take sugar at all. I get the same looks when anyone sees me laboring in Kibera, hauling a cart, sorting trash, painting walls, taking a shower. "Why would a mzungu, who can have so much, do this? Is he being punished? Is he crazy? Is he a missionary?"

As we sip our tea Edwin throws a new pot on the stove, this time dumping in the chopped beef from the butcher shop. Edwin explains that he first dries the beef on the stove before adding cooking fat and chopped onions. The sizzling beef has a savory aroma and my stomach begins to rumble. "Today we'll make a big ugali," Edwin says, "because I think we're both very hungry." Later I will realize that everyday we make a big ugali, because it's rare to pause during the day to take lunch. My colleague Erik and I discuss this, observing that we never seem to see our hosts eat during the day. For Erik it sounds worse, he swears he's never seen Onush go to use the bathroom or bathe, so Erik always feels soft when asking to do either. There's a definite desire to show that we too can be tough, we can handle it, "for mzungu everywhere!" Edwin meanwhile, teases me for the rest of the week when I finally share my ugali observation, because no matter how big

an ugali we make, we always seem to finish it. So Edwin dubs me with a Kiswahili name, "Ugali Kubwa", Big Ugali.

Edwin sits on his bed across the coffee table from me (I'm on the couch) and pulls over the bag of tomatoes and a bowl. From a 20-liter jerry can by the sofa he pours some water into the bowl and then washes the tomatoes. "Do you know how to chop tomatoes?" he asks me. When I reply yes, Edwin clarifies, "do you know how to chop tomatoes without touching anything?" There's no cutting board, so chopping has to be done by cutting the vegetables in your hand. Edwin demonstrates on one tomato and then passes the rest to me, waiting to watch my technique. As I slowly slice the tomatoes in my hand, I notice that his knives are not so sharp and so I smile and ask, "Is this painful to watch?" He laughs and answers, "Yes, but only because I'm afraid for your fingers." Edwin has the kind of laugh that feels like an embrace or a warm clap on the back and his smile is big, big even for Kenya, a land of big smiles.

Minutes later with tomatoes chopped and my fingers still attached Edwin adds the tomatoes to the pot, letting them stew and simmer. He places another pot on top of the cooking meat to begin heating water for the ugali, wasting no energy from the stove. When the meat and tomatoes are done he removes the pot and places the pot with the water directly on the flame, dumping the meat and tomato stew into a covered Tupperware container. After the water boils he adds a half package of maize, stirring it with a large wooden spatula. "It's important to soak up all the water," Edwin comments. The maize quickly does so and Edwin lets the mixture sit while he again grabs the bag of maize. Slowly he dumps some more into the pot, and then begins stirring it methodically with his spatula, occasionally pulling the ugali to the side of the pot before turning it over again. Ugali quickly thickens like cement and requires a strong hand; timing is crucial. When it's done, he places a plate on top the pot and then flips it so the pot is now covering the ugali on the coffee table. Then he prepares the sakuma wiki by dumping the bag of dried greens into more boiling water; they cook quickly.

Edwin pulls out a bucket and more water to wash our hands, and then we set the rest of the meal. Before eating we pause to say a quick grace, "I'm really happy that you're Catholic," Edwin says. When Edwin tells his life story he'll often pause to thank God; I have heard those stories and I agree that he's got a lot to be thankful for. Edwin is one of six children, three boys and three girls, whose mother left them when they were still young. Their father died several years later in a car accident. Most of his siblings were raised by aunts and uncles but Edwin spent the rest of his childhood bouncing from friend's home to friend's home before finally being admitted to a youth rehabilitation center, after a life changing encounter with a social

worker who found him, understood him, and inspired him. I remember a statistic that said only 20% of street children are successfully “rehabilitated”; Edwin is part of that fortunate fifth. A supportive host of people helped him through primary school, secondary school, and a diploma in social work, but much of Edwin’s success is due to his own hard work. He graduated with honors, and then to many of his supporters’ delight, went back to Kibera and the rehabilitation center to volunteer and work. “I’m living evidence,” Edwin declares, “that you can survive and come out to be a dependable person.” He pauses and then adds, “I love my work, I love it so much.” These days in addition to working with us on the BoP Protocol he also organizes CFK’s youth sports league. We quickly come to rely on Edwin’s insights into our own work as much as his knowledge and experience of Kibera.

Our food is delicious, and we eat it Kenyan style, balling a piece of the white cornmeal ugali into our right hands, and then using the ugali to scoop up the meat and vegetables. We don’t speak for many moments, our concentration fixed on the pleasure and motions of eating. Finally sitting back with a sigh and hands on his stomach, Edwin tells me that we’ll do the dishes in the morning; he doesn’t feel like doing them now. He pulls out the bucket again to wash our hands and we separate the leftover food to put on top of a tower of pots: too high to attract the Kiberan mice. The trash from the meal consists of a few plastic bags, some bones from the meat, an empty water bottle (mine) and the packaging for the milk and tea. Edwin collects the trash throughout the week and then packs it out to be picked up by one of CFK’s partners, the youth groups involved in the Taka ni Pato, “trash is cash”, program. Over the following weeks I get to know several of the Taka ni Pato groups quite well; while Edwin works at CFK’s office in Kibera I instead spend my days with groups like the red jumpsuit clad Kibera Youth Self Help Group, hauling and sorting trash, pulling out the “pato”: the plastics, glass, metal, organics for compost, everything that has resale or reuse value. Many of Kibera’s “youths” have a business savvy and entrepreneurial passion that I find inspiring. Their social programs and business enterprises continue to grow: car washes, carpet cleanings, trash collection, juice selling, youth mentoring, awareness concerts. And one day while pushing a trash cart through the heart of Kibera with Justin Mokuu, the chairman of Kibera Youth, I find myself in a discussion about the group’s strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; we’re hauling trash in an African shanty town and Justin is explaining to me a SWOT analysis, a marketing tool taught by many business schools in the U.S.

Bellies full of ugali and beef, Edwin and I sit back to enjoy a little more tea and to listen to the BBC coverage of the Live 8 concerts: a massive series of shows to “increase awareness” about poverty in Africa. The intent of the

concert organizers, which include super celebs like U2's Bono, is to influence the Group of 8 (G8) meeting in Scotland; most often mentioned is the demand for the rich countries to double the donor aid to Africa and cancel 100% of its existing debt. Occasionally the BBC will break from the concert to do interviews with people actually in Africa, in Nairobi and Lagos, where reactions to the concert are lukewarm at best, ignorant at most, and dismissive at worst. The concerts are all in mzungu parts of the world, with only one technically in Africa, in South Africa, a country which many Kenyans I meet tell me is on a separate continent altogether. Kenyans, especially Kiberans, find the subject of donor aid to their country a tricky one; they like the theory and intent, but are very wary donor aid's big brother in Africa, corruption. My new friends say the biggest problem in Africa isn't a lack of aid, but mismanagement and bad leadership, and that doubling the amount of aid could actually make things worse.

One day I have a discussion with Salim Mohamed, CFK's Program Manager in Kenya, about the G8 and the attention that Africa, Kenya, and Kibera in particular are now receiving. "Make poverty history," Salim says with a shake of his head, "haven't we already spent 50 years making poverty part of our history?" I can't tell for sure, but Salim's eyes may be moist when he adds, "And what is poverty any ways? Is it just one person having more money than someone else? How can you get rid of that?" Yet despite his words I know that Salim wrestles with the problems of poverty in his community everyday and I can easily say that Salim is one of the most amazing men I have ever met. In our travels throughout Kenya we encounter many people who have heard of CFK and Salim; many are surprised if they meet him: a not tall, wiry man of difficult to determine tribal relation, the expectation is that he would be much bigger, that his laugh would not be quite so mischievous. And for the 4th of July, Salim is invited to the U.S. ambassador's house for a celebration, a private party rife with Kenyan VIPs and notables, including the security-tight and iconic former President Moi. Salim's invitation is addressed to "Dr. Salim Mohamed", which makes Salim and the CFK staff laugh, Salim's education was of a different sort, few titles or degrees there. Yet it will be Salim who will give me one of the highest accolades I can ever remember receiving, "You think differently than you did when you first got here," Salim says after we spend weeks working in Kibera, "you've got a degree in the community now."

It's time to get ready for bed, so I pull on my sweatpants and my long-sleeved Stanford shirt, and then grab my toothbrush and paste from my bag. Edwin smiles when he sees what I'm doing. "You still remember where to spit?" he asks me. I nod a smile back at him, put on my sandals, and then head out the door. Where I spit is into the trench in front of Edwin's compound and moments after I open the gate several heads poke out of his

neighbors' doors; one, two, three men and a boy come staggering out of the compound, each to perch above the sewage trench and take a "short call".

Life in Kibera, I find, is about balance. Balance between saving money for school fees or spending it on the evening meal, balance between keeping your produce stand open for a few more customers or closing it on time to avoid the thieves, balance between when to put extra products (milk, juices, other sodas) in your Coca-Cola granted refrigerator or when to keep it full of only Coke baridi (cold) as the agents want on their surprise visits, balance as you navigate the hills and trenches of Kibera, balance as you walk in the shoe sucking mud. I find the most difficult balance though, for me personally, is the balance of the bathroom: when to go, where to go, how to go, for each balance is crucial.

Most latrines in Kibera are communal yet private, locked with only a few people holding the key. The toilet we use is part of Edwin's cousin's community - a five minute walk - and we need to knock on his cousin's door to get in. Taking a "long call" in the middle of the night is almost unheard of; credit the Kiberans for inventing the "flying toilet", a plastic bag behind closed doors, a strong pitching arm, and let's leave the rest to imagination and just say that looking up may be as important as looking down when walking in Kibera. Short calls you handle wherever you feel comfortable, though going on your neighbors doorstep would be frowned upon. There are a wide range of toilets in Kibera, from the clean, 5 shillings a deposit toilets developed by ITDG (Intermediate Technology Development Group) to the overflowing scrap metal shack we once visited outside Lynette's door, unusable yet still used. Edwin's cousin's latrine is simple but well built: a wooden shack over a pit with a concrete cap and a rectangular 10"x20" hole. A torch at night is useful if your balance and aim are not so good; make sure to bring your own paper. When a latrine becomes full a good landlord might send a crew in at night to dig a whole in the side of the pit, releasing the contents into a bordering sewage trench to flow by the latrine's unsuspecting neighbors; higher ground in Kibera definitely has its advantages.

That night I decide to stick with brushing my teeth and holding it, I'm no stranger to squatting over a pit toilet but the walk at night seems far and I'm too embarrassed to wake Edwin's cousin. I take the tough guy approach, if Edwin doesn't need to go why should I? After I return from brushing my teeth I find Edwin getting the bed ready. It's not a large bed for two people, but there's enough room for a little tossing and turning, though not much. Two men sleeping next to each other hardly raises any eyebrows in Kenya and physical proximity between members of the same sex is a common sight. You'll often see men holding hands or casually leaning on one another; it's an intimacy among friends that I find appealing and I'm pleased that my

new Kenyan friends show me the same closeness. I find it difficult to explain to our corporate partners, our colleagues outside of Kibera, that I actually find the close living conditions enjoyable - challenging at times, yes, but still enjoyable. Most people's first response is to be shocked that we're living in Kibera and then more so at the fact that, after our brief time here, I will surely miss it. We quickly come to chafe at the surrogate pity we receive for the people who live here, "we know how hard your work must be", "it can't be easy what you do", "next time you should convince them to let you stay at the Hilton", there's an unintended condescension there, that pity. Although many people we meet here appreciate help, few want pity, that well-meaning way of distancing yourself from another person, and fewer want an outright savior: who needs another elitist, even one with an alibi? It's ironic that we've come to this place, this Base of the Pyramid, by looking for people who live on less than a dollar a day, because if we focused only on that one aspect, on what people lack not what they have, we would miss a whole world which exists here, a vibrant city, filled with dreams, joy and opportunity. Despair too yes, but what place doesn't have that?

This night we decide to use Edwin's mosquito net, which is balled up and hanging from one of the crossbeams above, because cold season or not mosquitoes abound and their buzzing and biting are a sleep-distracting nuisance. For Jane and Alice however, two HIV patients we visit later in the week, mosquitoes and trench crawling insects can be much worse, carriers of death and disease. Bad news for the women, but potentially good news for our main corporate partner SC Johnson, whose Raid and Baygon products can be used to combat such plagues, if only the people in Kibera could afford them. But that's part of our task here, to foster new partnerships between SCJ and the community so that the company can grow into new markets and the community can benefit from SCJ's services and the new businesses the relationship generates. For now though both Jane and Alice fight diseases like malaria on a regular basis, their health and hope lying with the volunteers from CFK's medical clinic, who bring them the drugs to help their dying immune systems fight off disease. On our visits to their homes we find both Jane and Alice suffering from TB, a not rare disease among the packed living conditions of Kibera: perhaps a million people in a space the size of Central Park. Erik and I find those visits extremely challenging, we really want to learn about the women's lives, but each time they cough we tighten up our rain coats and turn our bodies a little more to the side, making comically sad attempts to remain polite while being completely disgusted and afraid for our lungs. Still, the well-used sewing machine and the burning jikos demonstrate that these women are still living, still fighting to work, pay school fees, and raise children.

As we climb into bed, Edwin slips a tape into his stereo to help lull us to

sleep. "He's my favorite," he says; it takes me a moment to realize that the soft crooning voice is Kenny Rogers singing "I Will Remember You", years later covered by Canadian folk artist Sarah McLachlan. In 2004 Ms. McLachlan used footage from Kibera, from a CFK soccer game and CFK's medical clinic, in her video "World on Fire" to demonstrate the disparity between the cost of entertainment in the Western world vs. what a bit of well placed perseverance can do in the fight against poverty. As Edwin and I lie there, shoulder to shoulder softly singing along, I wonder about how long I would persevere if I lived here - really lived here - not just as a guest who knows there exists another place for him, that out there somewhere waits a hot shower, boundless opportunities and a sure path out of the slums. One day Erik asks a Kiberan what he thinks of mzungu, of people in the Western world, to which the man promptly replies, "You are all very resourceful, how else could you have so much?" The response makes us chuckle because neither of us can imagine creating a living in the slums; we've been optimized for a world of fast cars and quick contacts. How resourceful would we be working in the mud, where every transaction requires so much touch?

The song ends and Edwin turns to look at me, "Are you ready?" I nod and so he reaches through the mosquito net to turn off the radio and the light, and then he pulls the covers over his head. I lie there for a few moments, looking up into the improvised plastic skylight in Edwin's roof and feeling the glow of the moonlight through the mosquito net. With a yawn I put on my winter cap, pulling it down over my eyes, and then I turn my body to face the wall with Edwin at my back. I hear Edwin mumble through his blanket, "Lala salama, Patrick."

"Lala salama, Edwin", I reply.

Sleep well.

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"Something's wrong", Edwin says as I sit up, my bleary eyes adjusting to the sudden light. It's 1:00 AM and it takes me a moment to recognize what Edwin is talking about, unusual sounds for the middle of a Kiberan night: shouts, children crying, and a murmuring noise I can't quite place, a muted crackling behind the din. The dead of night in Kibera is usually a quieter affair: an occasional mouse scampering across wooden roof beams, at times chased by a slightly larger creature above; some people leave their radios or TVs on all night, casting echoes of half-heard conversations and songs to influence my already vivid (malaria-medication-induced) dreams. In fact before I awoke I was dreaming of the end of the world; Edwin, I, and a crowd of humanity were on a spaceship above waiting for it to all stop. I

held a child in my arms who, in that only possible in dreams way, was both a Kenyan boy and my niece Sasa; the child kissed my cheek and then nestled into my shoulder. While we waited for the sun to die, I noticed that the people below were hiking, enjoying picnics, or watching the sky. "How can they do this?" I asked, "don't they know what's about to happen?!" "People have to live," Edwin replied, flashing his signature smile. The end came; the sun flickered, flashed brightly, and then sustained and I was awake and sitting up in bed.

"Something's wrong outside," Edwin says, releasing his hand from the light switch, which dangles down from a fluorescent tube above his bed. The light is plugged into a power strip on his bookshelf, along with Edwin's radio, and the strip is connected to a line which winds back up to the roof, across the rafters and then to the outside, where it runs hundreds of meters to his local "utility": a man with an illegal tap selling electricity for a flat rate of 300 shillings a month. There's enough current to light Edwin's house, play his radio, and charge his phone, but when he once tried to plug in the old Thinkpad from the CFK office, the lights dimmed and went out, not just in his house but throughout his compound. There were shouts and he quickly unplugged the laptop. "Maybe I can try later at night," Edwin said after the lights flickered back on.

Edwin pushes aside the mosquito net and jumps out of bed. Before my fumbling hands find my glasses he already has his black tennis shoes on and is standing in the door. "Wait here," he says, "I'll see what's happening." I don't argue. I just climb out of bed to sit on the couch, my mind still thick with dreams. I can remember the pressure of the child against my shoulder, a memory which is only deepened by the cries of the children outside. I hear Edwin speaking Kiswahili with his neighbors and then he pops his head back in through the door, "There's a fire," he says too calmly, "nearby, but I don't know how close. I'll see what's going on." His head pops out and then back in, his eyes fix on mine, "Stay here." And then out he goes again. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I have no intention of doing anything else; me, the mamas, and the watoto wadogo (little children) are all staying behind.

Fire and smoke is a part of life in Kibera. Whether from the jikos cooking the daily meals, the heaps of trash smoldering into the atmosphere, or the black dragon tails of the diesel matatus and trucks, the smell of smoke and flame hangs over Kibera always, clinging to the mud huts, roads and tracks like a shroud. Yet according to Salim, house fires in Kibera are not all that common, at least not compared to other slums, such as Mathare, where Salim grew up and once worked as the director of the now famous Mathare Youth Sports Association. Fires there might spark when one person gets hungry for a certain hunk of land: current inhabitants be damned, they're all

illegal squatters and besides, who can they complain to? A slum tenant's rights are precarious and land ownership in Nairobi's shantytowns is a complex affair. In his book *Shadow Cities*, Robert Neuwirth, a mzungu reporter who also lived in Kibera for a time, wrote this of the land ownership situation:

"...Nairobi's squatters aren't actually squatters. Actually, they are tenants of rich people who have bought the rights to construct temporary mud huts on land belonging to the government. And the Provincial Administration is adamant that the houses remain temporary. I asked one chief to imagine that I was a local resident that wanted to take down my mud hut and build with concrete and brick. 'That is not permitted,' he told me. I persisted. What if I built it anyway? 'I would knock it down,' he said. Thus the bureaucracy guarantees that the mud huts remain and any homegrown effort to make houses better will draw the full wrath of the law.

Most of the hut owners live outside the shanty towns. They are rich people, important people, politicians even. Why do these well-heeled people want to own mud huts? Because it's a fantastic investment. The up-front costs are minimal. And there's almost no maintenance expense. So you make your money back in less than nine months. After that, everything is profit, month after month, year after year. A guaranteed extra income, there's no downside to owning a mud hut."

Some of that dynamic has changed: a law passed just last year no longer allows the local chiefs the corrupt practice of granting land usage for money, but that alone won't stop the bulldozers from coming. Kibera represents prime real estate, just thirty minutes from Nairobi's city center, even former President Moi has an estate bordering Kibera. Some Kiberans fancy that every morning as Moi brushes his teeth, he can't help but look down on their shanty metropolis, onto the lives of so many who have been forgotten and ignored. That ignorance may be coming to an end however, as there are two major development projects which have their sights on Kibera. The first, the Northern Corridor Bypass under the ministry of Prime Minister Raila, plowed a swath through Kibera just nine months ago, demolishing homes and livelihoods; one morning you wake up with bulldozers at your door, there's your eviction notice, grab your things and run. The local name of the demolished area is Raila, yes, after the same man who ordered the bulldozing. Kenyan politics are convoluted; many of the area's suddenly homeless inhabitants are Luo, Raila's tribe, guaranteeing that few of them will ever speak out against his action. You just don't go against your own tribe.

The second development project, on the other hand, is more well meaning but could be much worse, "A time bomb waiting to happen," one Kiberan tells me. The project is the Slum Upgrade program, developed and promoted by the United Nations Habitat office in Nairobi, across town from Kibera in the UN's giant, beautifully landscaped, coffee shop filled, compound in Gigiri. On the surface the project sounds great, better buildings and homes for Kibera, starting in the village of Soweto East, on the far side of Kibera from where Edwin and I live. Yet not one person I speak with here believes the benefit will go to Kiberans, but rather to the rich elites looking for more ideal locations to live, with the unspoken promise that the current inhabitants will just end up as squatters elsewhere. From the local talk few if any Kiberans were consulted when the UN first launched the project, which locals say is clearly evident through the map the UN created of Kibera, marking villages with names no one here uses. Whether such perceptions are accurate or not, the UN and its partners have their work cut out for them. How do you get local participation with so many believing that the first visit to their front door will be announced by the polite knock of a wrecking ball?

It's been fifteen minutes since Edwin went out and he now returns, "Have you seen the fire yet?" he asks me. When I shake my head, he replies, "Come out and see, it's close by." Before Edwin returned I finally had the sense to put on my shoes, so now I can just jump off the couch and squeeze around the front door. I instinctively turn right towards the gate, but a glimpse of the fire reflected on my glasses prompts me to turn around and, BOOM, my head rocks back and my eyes pop wide. The sky is burning above the far wall of Edwin's compound: flames and smoke are leaping, huge fiery fingers reaching as if to tear down the sky. The enormity of it all makes me think of the Big Game bonfire during my freshman year at Stanford, the last before the age-old tradition was shut down to save the habitat of a wandering salamander that, at the time, mattered much less to me than Stanford crushing Cal. In spite of the current situation the thought makes me smile, as now I'm pretty sure I'd be on the side of the salamanders, those uninvited and unwanted squatters in Lake Lagunita, "Let's create a dialogue with them!" I would say, "Given a chance they could build a viable community here!" My smile fades though when I recall another memory, how quickly the heat from the bonfire had spread and how fast the circle of onlookers had to retreat. Edwin reads my mind, "Some people are already carrying away their things," he says, "I'm going back to help, but if it gets bad I'll send my cousin to get you and our stuff. Sawa?"

Edwin heads back out of the compound so I step back into the house, the burning sky blocked from sight by just a few inches of wood and mud. The thought of fleeing is making me panic; I'm pretty sure I know the way out,

but would I know it well enough inside a mob of stumbling, life-laden Kiberans? And which of Edwin's things would I grab? How would I sum up his life? How many Manchester posters for escaping a life on the streets, how many photos of friends and family for his commitment to community, his love of children, and how much of his well-cared for clothing to show what a responsible and likable young man he has become? Everyone we introduce Edwin to, corporate, NGO, community or otherwise, likes him; it doesn't hurt that he's a good-looking young man and that mud hut or not, he dresses better than anyone on our team. One day before a visit to SC Johnson's offices in Nairobi he asks for my advice on what he should wear; I'm only half joking when I respond, "Dress well, but not better than me."

There's not much for me to do but sit and brood, and my quickening thoughts turn to another use of fire in Kibera: justice. Police don't venture far into Kibera, and when they do it's rarely to the benefit of the slum's residents, law-abiding or otherwise. Salim one day tells us a story of how he and a friend, a member of Kenya's national basketball team, were held up and harassed in Kibera at night, handcuffed and forced to kneel in the mud, with guns to their backs and demands for money; it didn't take Salim long to realize their would-be muggers were local police. No, enforcing law in Kibera is rarely handled by the police, and when it is, locals say the criminal will soon be back on the streets, with a little chai, a bribe, to grease the cuffs free. Instead real law enforcement in Kibera is handled the only effective way locals know how, via mob justice, making sure that the thief never returns and that any other would be troublemaker thinks twice, or never thinks again. Kiberans tell me that a favorite ruling of the mob courts is to throw a tire around the accused and douse him with kerosene; the judged are often beaten senseless before the final sentencing, before becoming part of the ever pervading haze, that mixture of trash, crime, lives and hope you draw into your lungs with each breath of Kibera.

The noise outside is starting to subside but I soon begin to recognize another sound, a babbling rush, as if a river has taken up residence outside our front gate. The neighborhood taps have been opened wide, filling the trenches and ravines with water to block the fire and to provide ammunition for the bucket brigades battling the flames. As I listen to the rushing water, another thought bobs to the surface: an obvious usage for the Super MoneyMaker pump, the most popular product of ApproTEC, a local partner whose work developing "appropriate technologies" has made so many international headlines. ApproTEC's pump is a pedal powered pusher of water, and though primarily used to irrigate crops, I can imagine at least half a dozen uses for it here in the slums: fighting fires for one. ApproTEC though has more or less decided to focus on the issues of rural poverty, to slow the migration of millions from country to city through enterprise

enabling technologies for farmers; operating in the slums could dilute that focus, or worse, possibly even work against it. With the majority of Kenya's 30 million inhabitants living outside the cities, ApproTEC's strategy normally seems pretty sensible to me. However now, sitting in a mud hut with farms far and flames near, I find myself growing angry with ApproTEC's distant focus. There's a need here, possibly even a market, how can they just ignore it?

Another twenty minutes pass and then suddenly Edwin is back, a mixture of exhilaration and sorrow reflected on his face. "It's out", Edwin says, "the fire is out." Edwin steps forward to take off his shoes and I notice him wince; he's moving one foot lightly. "What's wrong?" I ask him. Edwin sits on the edge of his couch and slowly pulls off one shoe, "I stepped on a nail," he replies with a pained smile, "it went right up through my shoe." When a fire grows too large to stop at its source, people grab whatever tools are handy to knock down the surrounding houses, sacrificing the few to keep the flames from engulfing the many. So in the frantic dark, night vision lost to the fire and everyone moving quickly to contain the flames, it's difficult to see the nail seated upright in a fallen board, right below stomping feet. The nail drove in almost an inch before Edwin even felt it, through the soft sole of his black tennis shoe and foot. I rummage around my toiletry bag and pull out a tube of Neosporin and a bandage, and then order Edwin to take off his sock. There's blood on the sock, but the small wound on the sole of his foot is no longer bleeding, so I wash it with a little bit of water and some tissue, and then apply the antibacterial and the bandage. "We'll take you to get a tetanus shot tomorrow," I tell him. Edwin stays silent throughout, but when I'm done he moves from the edge of the couch to his lounge chair; he looks exhausted.

"How bad was it?" I ask, "Was it close? How'd it start? Is everyone ok?"

"I don't know," he says, "maybe twenty homes gone, about a hundred meters away. They think it was started by a candle catching on a curtain." He pauses before saying the rest, "a little girl was burned alive. I think the daughter of the woman with the candle. They think the curtain fell on her. She couldn't get out." His shoulders sag and he rests his head against the wall and sighs; silence falls over us. I lean forward on the couch, elbows to knees, palms to face; I'm starting to shake. My mind can become so active at visualizing, dreaming of new situations or envisioning past events, reliving things even if never there, thinking, always thinking. And so as my body begins to tremble, my mind is swept up with the little girl in the fire, with the collapsing walls and the rising smoke, with her mother's cry's for help, with all the helpless futility. Why did it happen? Was her mother negligent, was she not paying attention? Did she use a candle because they couldn't

afford the electricity? Or perhaps the line was cut so that their "utility" could increase his price? And where, oh where was the girl's father during all of this? Was he just another stereotypical Kenyan man, out "walking for school fees"?

Before I realize it I've begun listing the litany of wrongs that drive me crazy, those little notices that eat at me silently, collecting in my dreams night after night, day after day. That Erik or I can't go to church without becoming the center of the sermon, that we can never be sure that a friend is a friend or just someone who wants something "to remember us by", that the expectation of our worth is the dollars we represent. That so much tribalism and racism exists here, that I'll be blessed for being white, feared for being Chinese, or cursed for being a mixture that no one understands. That Salim can't even walk in his own community after dark, that he's been the victim of so many armed robberies, a man who does so much yet who's seen too often in the company of rich visitors. Or that when I walk around alone, I need to act as if apathetic to the world, or spend the whole time trying to exude the aura of some kung fu bad ass, one who will only drop his shield if called by name, and even then, only after recognizing a face.

And then I remember the article from the day's Nation, a story about three volunteers from Ireland, three girls who were attacked the other night in Kibera; one was raped. Thinking of the story makes my blood seethe and I begin shaking even worse; theft or assault, murder even, are bad enough, but rape is all about asserting power, and there's too much power already misused here in Kenya, every day. I can't help it, I begin to think of my sisters, my friends here local or foreign: Kelley, Kim, Tabitha, Farida, Medina, so many strong women that so many would prey upon. I feel my muscles tighten and my jaw clench; I know it's useless getting angry like this, just sitting here, but still my pulse pounds when I think of that faceless attacker, that surrogate for all that's wrong in this country, forcing himself on a young girl idealistic enough to want to help. Something inside me is igniting, like my mind has molted and is unfurling after a long winter, and I begin to conjure dreams of power, wishing I could do what all the children here think I can do: dive into the mob of rapists, thugs, and thieves, transform into a whirling melee of jabs, kicks and throws, dealing out punishment, provoking penance, flipping the scum into the air as the world slows into a movie-magic-like bullet time, and then delivering a spinning kick to the privates, rocketing the bastards into the sky to break against the moon.

I've spent years learning to control my temper, cultivating a long fuse after a childhood of quick explosions, but once going, my gathering anger is almost impossible to stop. The dreaming grows. I imagine myself reaching

out across Kibera to shake the slum city with giant hands, driving the corrupt into the open and forcing the idle into action, the police to actually become protectors, the residents to clean up their environment, the children to forgo the freedom of the streets and to start, just start, believing in the promise of a future. I want to shatter the mud walls that shelter the muggers and the molesters, expose the cheaters and the irresponsible, those whose unprotected promiscuity spreads Africa's deadly population killer, HIV. With a superhuman heave I imagine hurling out the briefcase NGOs: those recipients of donor money, residential palaces, and acronym branded SUVs, those that draw dependence to themselves and plunder profits in the name of poverty. And I dream of tipping the world on end, Kenya's politicians fall into Kibera and are humbled in the mud, the presidents, the ministers, the parliament, those who incite ethnic violence here every election, bloody self destruction to distract a quarter of Nairobi's population from ever uniting and changing everything.

My jaw aches from the tension and even Edwin, obviously slumped in his chair after his twilight heroics, even he doesn't escape my raging judgment. Edwin who will so easily jump in to fight a fire, who so well grasps what we are trying to do here, yet who can also protest when asked to do just a little more, to translate one more time or to contact one more group, to understand a task and to own it completely. Can't he see that for the world to change, a man must take initiative and accept greater responsibility, to keep going after all others would stop? He's an intelligent man, a compassionate man, why can't he see that? Does he not want to? Does he take comfort in the way his world is, in its imperfections and inequities? Is he afraid? And how can he just sit there and not notice my anger? Suddenly my rage seems uncontrollable. I can't take it anymore, I can't be kept in this mud hut any longer, I need to go outside. Let the dangers of the Kiberan night find me, just let them. I need to let my frustration roar, a dragon's cry to eclipse the dark and to awaken all that slumbers in this sleep-plagued land. With a sudden jerk I move to rise, to open the door and spring into the night, but then just as suddenly the words pop into my head: a memory to cool the flame.

"Polé polé, my brother," comes the voice of George Ngeta.

I first try to shake it away - to continue my leap into the night - but the memory of Ngeta's voice is like a calming hand on my shoulder: it gently refuses to let go. I notice Edwin glancing a question at me as well and I realize how silly I must look, half up out off the couch with teeth clenched and fists curled. And so with a deep breath, a slow sigh, I give in to the memory's soothing effect and sink back onto the couch. I close my eyes and try to listen past the pounding of my heart. Polé polé. "Slowly, my brother,"

Ngeta said to us one dusk, as we sat beneath a magnificent African sunset and on the doorstep to our first night in Kibera. George Ngeta is a program officer at CFK, a local pastor, and a man who has created an art out of the Kiberan stroll, that slow moving way of experiencing the world around you. If asked to pick a Santa Claus for Africa I would think of Ngeta, not just because of his fleece-clad belly which begs to be rubbed, but because of his deep laugh and slow wisdom; I imagine careful consideration to be a critical skill for a man deciding the Christmas morning fate of billions. That evening we lounged in front of the CFK offices, deep in their Carolina blue, plastic chairs, while trying to relax, to mentally prepare for the nights ahead. To distract ourselves we discussed Ngeta's work with Taka ni Pato, with the youth groups collecting and harvesting trash throughout Kibera, some of whom were now experiencing income for the first time.

"We had to go slow on the marketing of the trash," Ngeta explained, "because we realized that too much money too soon could destroy the groups." Ngeta paused to remove his wool cap and rub his shaved head with a thick hand, "And that would be no good at all, my brother." Instead, Ngeta explained, CFK increased its focus on the groups' development, teaching them leadership skills, conflict resolution and planning, guiding some through writing a constitution, elections even. From the outside it appears like a painstakingly slow process, especially to someone like me: an American trained MBA and refugee from the rapid to riches dot-com culture; the flow from solution to success is not something I was conditioned to wait long for. Not that there's much to show for my past impatience, not at Apple, Rockwell, nor any of the companies I've started and finished; no, at the places I've worked, most people have just ended up fired.

My dubious history at promoting new businesses makes me laugh silently at myself, because to accomplish that very task is why we're here! My mind calms with my inward chuckle and I reflect again on what we're doing in Kibera. I know the principles of the Base of the Pyramid Protocol well, the tenets we champion to create truly progressive and lasting change, to become more than just another development tourist, more than a peddler of just another business fad. I know these principles well, but I know them in my head, not in my heart. I'm just beginning to live them like Salim, Ngeta, and so many others here already do: day after day in direct contact, feeling the texture of poverty, living amongst it, working with it.

A novice dancer like me needs to mouth steps as he goes, "step, step, rock step, turn" and is easily frustrated by a partner who refuses to move as she is *supposed* to, losing patience when she wants to create her own steps, her own path. Yet the best dancers I know understand that you need to begin up close, body to body, skin to skin, tying your motion to her motion, feeling

the rhythm of the world around you, until... flip, you shift, you turn, you twirl, your energy and her energy flow together to create something unique, something that is both of you yet not either one of you. And the best dancers I know recognize this also: that you need to start a new dance polé polé, intimately, patiently, respectfully, and firmly yet with little force.

Sitting there on Edwin's couch, in a mud hut in the heart of Kibera, in the midst of a reality that is poverty, yet a reality I never before imagined, I finally accept that I'm only beginning to feel the rhythm here, to understand the dance and to know the partner which I've talked about for so long, and yet have only seen so little. And with the acknowledgement of my own limitations, the frustration of these Kibera nights gives way to an awakening anticipation of the days to come. In just a few hours the twilight will end, the sun will rise, and Kibera will wake. Wandering roosters will crow their morning call and hardworking women will rise to prepare the day. Jikos will light, sweet mandazi will fry, and thousands upon thousands will begin the morning migration, a sea of Kiberans winding outwards to be the backbone of Nairobi's working world. And down the train tracks, over the hills, and through the mud alleys and paths will come the children in uniform, wave after wave of matching red shirts, blue shirts, and green shirts: Kibera's dreams for a better tomorrow, laughing, skipping, and stumbling their way to school.

And as he sits there across from me, half-asleep and half-awake before the dawn, I am reminded of something else about the day to come, something important. Today is Edwin's birthday. He's turning 22, and at the office awaits a cake, a brand new Manchester United baseball cap and a host of friends and colleagues to surprise him, to provoke him into sharing his gorgeous smile and his heart-deep laugh. So with a smile of my own I allow my head to rest back and my eyelids to close. I take another deep breath and inhale Kibera, letting the rhythm of the night enfold me. Through my mind strolls our most important lesson here: the world is full of opposites and reversals, that to find something new you must first admit that you are lost, that it's the hard ways that lead to a new future and the easy ways to repeating the past, that ignorance allows you to attempt the impossible but that familiarity is the birthplace of respect, and that finally and most importantly, in an increasingly frantic world without walls, with fast jets and superhighways for body and thought, to speed up you need to first slow down.

To speed up you must first slow down.

Polé polé, my brother.