



Neal Raymond

*From somewhere in the deepest recesses of that
black place with the shining star,
I heard her. My little one, my little darling.
She called to me. I struggled to hear. And when I did ...
whoosh ... I was back in my body*

to the BRINK ... and BACK

*"A true story, not based on a true story
not inspired by a true story but
THE STORY AS IT HAPPENED"*

a memoir

To The Brink and Back

A Memoir by Neal Raymond

Dedicated to my 3 musketeers without whom there would be no long, delirious, burning blue.

Preface

The events described in this book are true in every detail. This is a TRUE STORY. It is not based on a true story; it is not inspired by true events. It **IS** the story as it unfolded beginning on July 10th, 1999 at 1:10am.

I have changed names where I feel I should; in most cases I've used initials (fake ones) to name people that were involved in the story at that point. I've not changed names where family members are involved nor those of some of my very closest of friends. There would be no point in that exercise: You'd figure it out anyway just from the context. I circulated this book to all who are named in here (and to those whose names I've disguised) asking them to read through and get back to me with objections, ideas or suggestions and that process, having been carried out over the year-long period that this book was being written I now release it to you and the public space.

The events depicted describe a phase of my life when I was presented with a fork in the path that brought many new roads less traveled by others. I grabbed the bull by the horns and chose the paths as they were presented to me. In most cases I took the paths that I had to take not out of choice but because life 'forced' me down those paths. I have not regretted for one minute the way things have unfolded. From the trauma of the bullet wounds to leaving the country of my birth to the return of the prodigal son, these have been the things that made my life what it is today.

My greatest wish now is to record these events for my readers, my friends, my family, my daughters and my soulmate. If even one single person gets one single thing out of this work it will be made a road worth traveling. If one of my musketeers gets anything out of it I will have toiled to great effect and it will have all been worth it.

On the 9th of July 1999 I would not have suspected that something would come at me out of left field and that the next morning I'd be fighting for my life battling two bullet injuries, a shattered right arm both radius and ulna bones broken into more than 33 pieces and an inch-sized hole in my chest just above my heart. This is the story of that day, the immediate aftermath and the

longer-term struggle I went through and what I learned from the saga. From the actual traumatic events of the attack on my family by a group of seven thugs, to dealing with post traumatic stress disorder to leaving Kenya, the country of my birth, through my transformations from my Buddhist leanings to my non-theistic, science-based, transhumanist and singularitarian stance I will pour it all out. I do this because you my readers have asked for this time and again.

Yes, I have been through a lot but I have been lucky to have learned a ton via my journey. There are terrible, terrible things I've been through and then there are triumphs, great moments of deep happiness and joy and power that has come from it all. My wish now is to share these thoughts with my friends and readers, to keep my fingers crossed that there is something in here, even one single little thing, that you will glean from these words that will help you in some way. Something that will trigger in you even a part of what has happened to me and will bring to you the wonderful and fabulous changes that this journey has brought to me.

So with that intro out of the way welcome to my life, my thoughts, my struggles laid bare before you. I trust you'll enjoy this and hope that it will become an inspiration for somebody 'out there.'

I start with this poem by John Gillespie Magee, Jr. a fellow pilot, a kindred soul therefore. A pilot who died as a result of a mid-air collision over Lincolnshire during a training mission in World War II. His words have been a constant companion of mine even before I took to the air. Since getting my flying license they have taken on ever greater meaning.

High Flight

*"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, --- and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of
--- wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air ...*

*Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
Where never lark, or even eagle flew ---
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
-- Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."*

John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Preface | 2 |
| High Flight | 3 |
| Table of Contents | 4 |
| Out of Left Field | 8 |
| It begins | 8 |
| Confrontation | 11 |
| Heading into the light | 13 |
| The big brute | 16 |
| A castle in a key | 21 |
| The Killer Ride | 23 |
| Doctor in the house | 25 |
| Into Battle | 28 |
| From under the knife - the first time | 28 |
| Comminuted fractures | 30 |
| No Wheelchairs! | 33 |
| Commiserations | 35 |
| Into the butchery ... AGAIN! | 38 |
| A seed is sown | 40 |
| The shadow | 45 |
| Catching The Buggers | 49 |
| Chup -- reloaded | 49 |
| Ultimate Security | 52 |
| Evenings heading home in chup | 54 |
| Acacia's night fright | 55 |
| The police ask us to help | 56 |
| EPIRB | 58 |
| Identification - being swayed | 59 |
| The lineup | 63 |
| Court Cases | 65 |
| Court Case 1: The Irate Magistrate | 65 |
| Court Case 2: The Smarter Magistrate | 69 |
| The Hanging | 71 |
| PTSD | 73 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 'Chup' | 73 |
| Deep Dark Places of the Mind | 77 |
| Gun On The OR Wall | 82 |
| Drains | 84 |
| The Loop | 87 |
| Metal fatigue | 91 |
| Non-union | 92 |
| India | 95 |
| This too shall pass | 95 |
| Thick Smoke | 98 |
| I say old chap! | 101 |
| Lilavati | 105 |
| Dr Aggarwal patient 'AND' surgeon? | 109 |
| Waking up yet again! | 111 |
| Down The Rabbit Hole | 114 |
| Return to Nairobi. Boarding: 'Kenya Inchi Yetu' | 114 |
| Landing - home at last | 115 |
| The first X-Ray | 116 |
| the second X-Ray | 117 |
| The third X-ray | 117 |
| Depressed on the driveway | 118 |
| Deserted: The lack of support | 119 |
| Healing well | 121 |
| Sunny days on the driveway | 122 |
| The gap is closed! | 122 |
| The Cybercoll Backstory | 123 |
| Jeeps, mainframes and stoned viruses | 123 |
| I QUIT! | 130 |
| CyberCollege - Ami builds | 135 |
| The Q&A session | 135 |
| Immigration | 137 |
| The Mole | 142 |
| Hostile takeover | 147 |
| White knight | 150 |
| Clawing at sanity | 153 |
| A last goodbye | 153 |
| Lets emigrate! | 153 |
| LSD Australia: Look, See and Decide | 154 |
| A chance encounter | 155 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Gold Coast | 155 |
| LSD New Zealand | 156 |
| Winding up | 156 |
| Exploring Western Australia | 158 |
| Perth | 161 |
| Teaching Again! | 164 |
| Employee Stock Options | 167 |
| Burns Beach | 172 |
| Last days in Perth | 175 |
| The Long Haul | 176 |
| The Cameron debacle | 176 |
| Bankers | 180 |
| Setting up Shop | 184 |
| Buying a car & then another | 185 |
| A college for sale | 187 |
| Buying a house | 188 |
| Moving in | 189 |
| Kiyosaki | 191 |
| Neighbourhood Watch | 192 |
| John Bosco board | 194 |
| Investors Forum | 197 |
| The shunning | 200 |
| Dr Global, Open Source, Ubuntu | 204 |
| The beginning of the end | 206 |
| The beach incident | 206 |
| Legalising prostitution | 209 |
| 4 seasons in a day | 212 |
| Winter! | 213 |
| Losing our health | 214 |
| HND | 218 |
| Trikes! | 221 |
| Whanganui | 225 |
| Trev | 229 |
| Maiden flight | 233 |
| Colin | 236 |
| Return of the prodigals | 238 |
| Wildes on NatGeo | 238 |
| Consolidation Flying | 240 |
| Packing up | 242 |
| There are no loos on this aircraft | 243 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Kissing Kenyan soil | 246 |
| Coming home | 247 |
| Killing the Buddha | 250 |
| Foxholes | 253 |
| Mr Chairman | 258 |
| An X-ray to beat all X-rays | 261 |
| Teaching pigs to fly | 263 |
| Vinod comes to visit | 268 |
| Lions in the night | 272 |
| Buffalo waterhole | 274 |
| Beware the pundit | 275 |
| My Veganism, vegetarianism and other neuroses rant | 281 |
| Bubble! | 284 |
| And then came Lehman Brothers! | 286 |
| Life anew | 287 |
| Epilogue | 289 |
| Lessons Learned | 292 |
| Find something you love to do | 292 |
| Hobbies, hobbies, hobbies -- get 1 or 20 | 293 |
| I talk in these sections here about reading but don't forget music. | 293 |
| Be in nature -- really [BE] there | 293 |
| Get a tractor (a landy will sub) | 294 |
| Develop a reading diet | 294 |
| Develop a rational mind | 294 |
| Eat a healthy diet | 295 |
| Go to a gym & walk your way to health | 295 |
| Learn to defend yourself | 296 |
| Get house-help | 296 |
| Never EVER get a driver | 297 |
| Learn something tough - sit an exam, build something | 298 |
| Care about something -- become an activist | 298 |
| Secure yourself | 298 |
| Dogs, Alarms, Guards, CCTV and Robots | 299 |
| Medical Insurance, Snake oil and Politics | 300 |
| Beware the snake oil salesman. | 300 |
| The Moving Trap | 301 |
| PTSD | 301 |
| Colophon | 301 |
| Please support this work | 302 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Thank you for supporting this work | 304 |
| I would love it if you'd send me some Bitcoin or Ether at: | 304 |
| I thank you in advance for your help and encouragement. | 304 |
| Closing Remarks | 306 |

Out of Left Field

It begins

"Neal, wake up!"

"What?"

"What?" A little annoyed at being so rudely awakened.

Shaking the sleep from my eyes.

From 7 pm six-month-old Gaia has been crying incessantly. We had both checked and rechecked. No colic -- at least no amount of burping seemed to do anything for her; no fever; no abdominal tenderness. Then as the crying continued to 10pm we'd gone a little crazy and pulled out the stethoscope -- breath sounds clear on both sides, stomach gurgling away happily -- not too much and no deadly silence either. And then finally she'd dropped off just before eleven and we'd both collapsed into our bed. It did not last -- an hour and a half later at 1230 she's up again and Ami has coo-cooed her upstairs, downstairs, walking to a slow rhythm to try and capture that which had made her sleep earlier. But now coming up the steps to our bedroom Ami has stumbled across a blood curdling sight through our upstairs landing windows.

"There are guys on the roof!" I hear her say.

"What do you mean?" still unable to reach a closure on this new and strange data in my sleep-filled mind.

I jump out of bed and thinking about this months and years later I still cannot figure out how and when I got my glasses onto my face. I head for the door in a daze, some sort of autopilot running between my ears. As I get there I hear scrabbling sounds and the upper garden door being pushed open. This door always stuck a little and made a characteristic noise as it opened. I hear that noise now. I throw the bedroom door shut but immediately it comes back at me, someone pushing from the other side. I throw my weight against it and jam it shut with my right foot.

At 226 pounds (102 Kg) lean and with a six-pack that I'm very proud of, it's easy to hold the door shut though it bounces inwards every few seconds as whoever is on the other side thuds against it trying to push against my near-immovable bulk. Ami appears alongside me pushing also at the door. Between the two of us we easily hold the door shut and the pushing on the other side weakens and eventually stops.

I manage to slide the door bolt shut.

Talking --- in Kiswahili.

Suddenly -- a loud bang and then another.

"Shots fired!" I melodramatically shout Hollywood-like to Ami pushing her away from the door and from me. "Get back."

Something wrong with my right arm -- my fingers no longer work -- no they *are* working only they're in a very odd place. My fingers lie too close to my elbow -- OF THE SAME ARM! It's like I can reach down and hold the elbow of my right hand with the fingers OF MY RIGHT HAND. And there's this black liquid squirting out from somewhere hitting the wall above the door and great big blotches of red (blood?) are on the door ahead of me. That's when it hits me: no pain but I've been shot. And I smell it - barbecue - burning flesh -- and looking down at my chest I see the ripped shirt. Incongruous -- such a large tear in the shirt and and and great gushes of blood coming out of my chest and flowing down the outside of the black shirt I'm wearing. And there's another smell -- a metallic sort of smell -- the kind I had got used to in hospital work -- the smell of fresh blood and mixed into that the smell of cordite. I can't place this latter smell a fleeting thought -- 'Diwali? -- Fireworks?'

My mind closes in on the presented data: "I've been shot! Ami I've been shot."

The shock hits me like I walked into a wall. I sink to my knees my mind unable to complete closure on the fact that I've been shot; that my life will soon be ended. All hospice training in the moment of death and how to handle it flies away to some remote place seemingly outside a mind unable to accept that at any moment now my life will end; that things that we only read about in books and see on TV are happening to us; that things that only happen to others and that we think are exaggerated so much are right here in this moment happening to US!

I sink to my butt and look up at Ami.

"I've been shot,
I've been shot,
I've been shot."

I don't know how many times I say this to her. I give up all sense of who I am. I cling to life, I lose my grip. My mind rent to bits I feel myself come apart at the seams of my innermost core. It doesn't take long and does not last long. Probably milliseconds but in those moments a flood of emotion, a sadness; a deep, deep, deep sense of regret. Inwardly I cry. It's an inadequate description but I have no other words for it. I cry for the loss of my life; I cry for my beautiful arm that lies so horribly mangled at my side now; I cry for my baby on the bed strangely silent but wide awake. But most of all I cry for my soulmate, that stunned look on her face that I know will never leave me.

But then looking at my best friend -- dazed -- herself unable to open her mouth, her mind reeling, something awakens in me and I 'step up to the plate,' grab the situation by the reins and take control of a situation morphing into a medical emergency, in my customary way. A creeping energy appears from deep inside. It becomes a rushing torrent, a surge of energy, a strength that flows out of the deepest recesses of my mind. Mental fortitude returns with a near-palpable stab and with it comes anger. A level of anger I cannot believe has lived in me hidden all this time now comes to do it's bidding and set me on the path to recovery. I don't know what to call it but for a fleeting moment there I did not have what I now have flooding into my consciousness; for a moment there Neal had left the planet -- a phrase I'd hear so strangely later only it would be an anaesthetist in India uttering it -- not something echoing in the recesses of a collapsing mind.

And Neal is back in control!

"Ami, they might have a machine gun and will start spraying the door with bullets. Don't let that happen, let them in. And with that we commit our first mistake while I justify it with, "We can survive this but a machine gun? I'm going to lie down by the cupboards." Perhaps that mind is 'not all there' yet; in control - I think not; not yet; not for a while yet.

First mistake committed to we are about to meet 'our' thugs in what will become one of many meetings.

Confrontation

First mistake -- unbolting the door.

We'd managed to bolt the door shut so why open it now? Let them rot out there they couldn't break the door down with me holding it and now even the bolt is keeping them at bay. But she follows what I've told her to do and after I've sat down leaning against our bedroom wardrobes Ami throws the bolt and a big brute comes charging in grabbing her by the hair and slapping her about, a gun in his hand. From where I lie I watch that thing, that ugly, ugly, terrible thing that has torn my body apart, my beautiful, muscular arm shredded.

I don't know enough about guns to recognise the CZ75 that he carries and it will be years before I'll get training in the handling of guns and other weapons and develop enough of an interest in the things to recall from memory what I have been shot with.

Another thug shouts at her "Give me money, give me money."

Then at me "Give me money -- I kill you."

Anger flares up -- that same anger that had just recently taken hold of me, "Look at what you've done. Look at this," I shout pointing to my chest where just above my heart a huge gaping

wound lies gushing blood at every heartbeat as I try to stem the flow with my practically useless right fist that is moving in directions I'd never have thought my hand capable of going to. I remember thinking, even as I defiantly shout at the brute, that my arm is broken -- both radius and ulna broken and that at the rate I'm bleeding out I have but minutes to live. The brute looks at me with eyes wide open -- he looks panicked too.

"Shoot me you bastard," I shout.

They grab Ami again by the hair and start slapping her across the back. "Give me money!"

"Usipige yeye!" I yell (don't beat her in Kiswahili).

"Come I give you money," I hear her say.

Then they're gone, she's taken them out of the bedroom and they're gone. I hear them go downstairs as the pain hits me. Waves of it washes over me. A deep-seated pain in my arm and a throbbing from my chest. I can hear my heart in my head. And with each beat there is this oozing sensation. It feels like thick gear oil coming out of the many gearboxes I've repaired in my time, each spin of the gears massaging the oil out of some crevice or other.

Taking my right fist in my left and pulling against the pain I get my right thumb into my chest wound and shove deep. I feel a hard rhythmical beat against my thumb. Damn I think, "the bullet has gone right through and the throb is my heart beating against my finger and with every beat it's pouring out all the blood in my body."

"Goner."

But I fight on and shove my left thumb into the hole going clean through my right forearm. Pain! Angry washes of pain. Still, "push harder" I think as I shove.

Now with no functioning arms with which to hoist myself into a sitting position I lie there on the floor the pain continuing to worsen. Medical knowledge and training kick in and soon I'm doing all I can to stem the bleeding and save my dying body and yet doing that has trapped me and rendered me more vulnerable if they come back. I am suddenly conscious of this thought creeping through my brain: that with both my arms tied up trying to stop the bleeding I have no means to protect myself if they do come back.

I now became aware of little Gaia -- all of six months of age -- on the bed. Crying as she has been all evening. Then my attention is drawn to the burglar bars on our windows. We've painted them white and now I can see that white and I think "how very clean, how very white."

But there is something happening -- the white is getting whiter! As I watch the pain seems to subside a little and the burglar bars seem to brighten ever so slightly. Then the pain is dulling even as the bars are brightening by the second. Brighter and brighter they get until the black

night between them shrinks to skinny black lines. Soon there is no black at all and the bars have gone too leaving a wall of brilliant glowing white. To this day I can feel the horrible pain receding and dropping away like a long-running headache finally taken away by a powerful painkiller.

Suddenly I am floating noticing my body on the floor of the bedroom. It is somewhere below me; I can see it somewhere down there, outside of me. All pain seems to recede into the distance. A feeling begins to wash over me; a feeling of great peace, one of great command over my life, omnipotence almost. Then I see it -- a thin, silvery grey thing, a line, an umbilical cord and I think. "How strange, I'm back with a cord attached to my mother." I have read about this far too many times having studied near death experiences, out of body accounts and writings of so many people that I wonder now almost aloud - is this really happening or am I just willing a previously-read story into my failing brain?

"Someone's going to have to cut that soon," I think. Aloud I grunt as the last of the pain dies away.

A motion begins. Slowly at first then faster and faster. Soon I am spinning wildly, not out of control but spinning and falling head first into a deep, dark abyss. No fear; I am going somewhere -- and I've always been "going somewhere" in this life. Going into nature, traveling, camping, flying -- always going. And here I am once again -- going somewhere and I'm always greatly at peace when I "go" into nature. From the moment that I leave home and head off into the wilds of our world I'm at peace so here I am now at peace again feeling I am heading out on one of those solitary trips I make into nature, into the wilds. As I rush forward I think to look for the cord and sure enough -- there it is -- still attached to me.

The rushing slows a little and in the distance I see --- I see --- a star! It grows brighter. Ah! Thoughts triggered -- this is in my Buddhism readings -- this is in the bardo teachings -- I've already gone through the bardo of pain and am entering the bardo of --- must be heading into the bardo of luminescence. This is the bright white light they talk about. I'm dying now; final stages. And there's no pain, indeed there's this utter peace. I am not afraid; indeed I am in a place so very peaceful I cannot describe it. I let go of life and fall into the embrace of this peace, this place without demands. No rules to adhere to any more; no appearances to keep up; no people to be responsible for; no money to earn; no food to put on tables; no school fees; no savings plan.

Heading into the light

"Hey! This is not so bad," I think, "I've been through the pain and it's not that tough."

I know it's hard to accept this -- a bullet through the arm shattering both bones and another in the chest blasting an inch-wide hole just above my heart but it's the honest truth folks. It's not as bad as some will have you think. Certainly there's none of that being flung back or lifted-off-your-feet nonsense that they show in Hollywood or in even worse, tacky ways via Bollywood. At this stage I had bled out quite a bit, I'd say at least two litres down already, but I was completely

clear-thinking and was just lying on the floor my back to some wardrobes so that the thugs would leave me alone and perhaps allow me that chance to stem the bleeding to live yet another day. I was thinking, thinking, thinking medical training coming flooding in. Fast-action movies in my mind. No time to have my life flit before me; concentrate on how to keep that life running on after this day.

The star comes closer.

The light brightens -- "here we go again," I think, "the whitening bars are coming back."

But they don't. Instead the white light, seemingly the star I had seen earlier, becomes brighter and brighter so much so that I fret for a moment in the thought that I'll soon be burning in the heat of fusion. I love stars, love physics, love astrophysics even more. Knowledge is the only thing to me but in these circumstances it is a trying thing.

Fear can come from knowing things and even more from knowing that there are things we don't yet know the answers to. Fear can be compounded from knowing that we can lose our minds. Fear can come from knowing that we can lose our composure in the face of not knowing what is on the other side of the veil of darkness that envelops so many parts of our minds. Our knowledge never being complete enough to dispel all fears present at the moment in question, makes it of little help. Now suspended in that veil of darkness fear comes-a-calling from having no knowledge of where I am or where I am headed. Fear of going where all men have gone before but from where none have reported back with good science-backed experimental data. Fear of the hocus-pocus that has from time-to-time threatened to run my train off it's rails but that I've resisted so successfully while of able mind and body.

Brighter --- blinding.

No heat.

Brighter still. Now I can't see for all this white light.

White heat?

No heat, no thermal suffering.

"There's someone in here with me!" I suddenly realise. Before the hair on my nape can rise there is a voice only this isn't any voice. Someone speaks without saying anything. The voice seems to come from inside my head. And yet, it isn't inside me -- it's *out there*."

In the blinding light I begin to make out a form. Something is here. I feel drawn towards it; it calls out to me without saying a thing. Though it seems to seek with reaching tendrils it hints of peace. Peace from the tiredness that the daily grind of life has left in me. It seems to say, "All will be right. Fear not. Just relax. Let go, let go."

I feel movement, strange movement. Like the movement one feels on a big ship out on a calm sea: I am familiar with this movement. A lazy flight on a clear sky; a wallowing sloop on a flat sea; a gentle rocking in a tree branch swaying in the wind -- these have been the things of my life. An almost imperceptible 'drawing' forwards. No throbbing, no engine noise just that silent, slow, stately pull somewhere forwards. And then I 'see' him. My Riques, the grandfather I'd never had and that I yet called my gramps; the man who had more than ably filled the shoes of what should have been my gramps; a man not even of my family yet who had been with me from the day of my birth. The soul that had been a priest of the highest order -- a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church who had refused the position of Cardinal decrying any pomp and glory; the man who would have no part of having to leave Kenya not even for fleeting visits to the Vatican. The man who was as my own flesh and blood, who taught me so much of what I know, who guided me in the direction that brought me to where I now was, who never once pushed any kind of religion on me. The man whose inner psyche I shared in ways no one could truly appreciate whose inner struggles of his own I had been given the gift of sharing. A man who when terminally ill I had held in my own arms and inwardly cried when my medical background coupled to our emotional ties had been strained to breaking point to 'make the call' and refuse chemo- and radiotherapy to spare him the kind of needless suffering only modern medicine can inflict on a person. That man who I had let leave us with his dignity intact and now here he is: my true teacher, my master, my priest, my guru. One of the few in my life that I can call worthy of that highest of honours -- that of deserving to be called "human."

"Not yet Neal," he seemed to 'pipe' into my head.

I will myself forward longing to be embraced by him, longing for him to hold me in turn. The embrace comes; back in his arms again; that little kid once more. A kaleidoscope of images flashes by in rapid succession -- camping together on the banks of a river in a high place, mists rolling towards us, a trout on a line, and then in a pan, aromas, tastes, shared adventure.

"Not yet Neal," he whispers across the chasm, "not yet."

Movement.

A sensation of turning.

And then another being, another shot of peace.

"Hi buddy."

It came so naturally to say to him, "Hi Trev."

He had given me the gift of flight and he'd been taken from me so tragically. Three years to this very day, he'd gone to this place that I was now entering and I thought, "Opening the way for me," while not believing it for one minute. "Simply gone," I'd said, "Life ended for what? For such

a stupid reason -- for having nothing to do; for having moved from my, our, beloved Kenya, from our life of flight together. A life lost to the sheer boredom of living in a country where he was hemmed in by laws that prevented him doing the very thing he had lived all his life loving --- free flight in open skies; that life which he had infected me with. And yet he had given it all up for a life in 'the West' in the UK, in a country from which he'd written to me about this stifling, about his loss of a will to live. And yet I'd do the same -- I'd go out to 'the West' -- I'd give my soul up to the devil of boredom though that was yet to come, far in the future as of this moment but lurking out there, waiting to swallow me.

"Trev?"

"Yes buddy -- I missed you. I'll miss you still but there's more to do."

"Daddy? Are you going to die?"

From somewhere in the deepest recesses of that black place with the shining star, I heard her. My little one, my little darling. She called me. I struggled to hear. She called again, "Daddy?" I struggled feeling so much like in a bad dream where I struggled to hold shut a door against a thug that was trying to get in and yet seeming unable to simply shut the door, limbs feeling like dead wood. I almost wanted to scream "Let me go, leave me alone." With a monstrous effort gritting my teeth I exhaled hard against closed lips and then ...

Rapid rumbling. A whooshing. And with the loudest bang I have ever heard then or since I am once again awash with pain, white burglar bars rapidly taking on colour, my pain-wracked body here lying all around me. I am back in my body and little Acacia is lying on the bed saying:

"Daddy? Are you going to die?"

"Not today sweetheart. Not today."

The big brute

Holding Ami by the arm the biggest brute comes into the bedroom. He looks at me and I think "Alpha male baboon." Ami picks up little Gaia and talks to Acacia. I can't hear what they say. "Close now" I think, "Exsanguination soon." My head swims and vision shimmies. Or perhaps I'm already gone? Where's that white light? Where's the peace?

They leave the room.

Silence. I'm alone. I am confused again at one moment thinking "I know I've gone" and at the next "Pain. There's still pain here - I must still be in the bedroom." A strange thing happens: I resign myself to leaving this Earth forever. It's been a tiring journey this life of mine, this struggle against the 'status quo' this 'travelling the road less travelled by.' It will be easier to simply let go, let the thinking stop, let the peace descend. Whatever is 'out there' is surely better than the

constant struggle I've put myself through all these years. I let go and it all seems to suddenly get so, so much easier.

The thoughts come crowding back and I think "It's not so bad actually -- I've had a good life, done all the things I've ever wanted to do and have never allowed life to live me but have instead lived my life to the full." I studied medicine but saw no hope in the long hours regurgitating a medical database of disease from between my ears. I saw well ahead of the completion of my studies that doing that regurgitation for the rest of my life would have led to a life of sheer boredom. So I searched and thought that I'd found my calling when I dug in with management books and business theory eventually arriving at the thought that managing health care facilities would be the ticket for me. Went to accounting school and studied there advancing rapidly, getting a lot of exemptions because of my twin medical degrees. Completed my financial studies in record time because studying what I still call 'glorified document layout' turned out to be a far, far easier task than the five years it had taken to put thousands of mostly useless facts about disease into the space between my ears. Heading back to the Aga Khan Hospital, Nairobi, after the finance studies I found that I could handle the management problems but the politicking and personality clashes were too much for me. Then it had hit me driven by a course I'd taken while pursuing my financial studies: Data Processing --- Computers! I had been the first person in my school and perhaps even the first person in Kenya to build a computer from scratch. My friends had laughed at my creation but it worked, it computed in the true sense of the word. Given that I had no access to the treasure trove we now have at our fingertips -- the internet -- it was more than I could have hoped for. To build a computer from simple AND gates linked up to form NAND logic gates and from there to build adders, multiplexers, RAM, Arithmetic and Logic Units and all the bits that go into what we still put into computers today. That was a dream I had lived. I'd done it all and done it my way and now it was clear -- my time to rest had come. Let go. Relax. Head back to the light.

But no light was a-coming and I started to think again. Damn this mind of mine - always thinking, thinking, thinking. A thought began to form - what if I could make a real, individual and unique contribution? What if I could discover something that no one else had seen thus far in human experience? What if I could take my skills in building computers from raw transistors and revive that, add to it all the current knowledge I had amassed already and come up with a machine that could think for itself: A true thinking machine? What if I was able to accelerate the glacial pace of human evolution and take us the next mile?

BANG!

A loud bang from somewhere below. Seemed to come from the office. No screams, no other sound. I think "They've shot her." Rage comes flooding back into me. All 'idle' thoughts banished I feel energy course through my veins again. Anger drives me. I stand up and though I'm a little dizzy I find I'm still strong. 'FIGHT BACK' gels and grows and I look around the room. My eyes hunt and fall on a spear I'd been given by a Masai chief for living in his boma for twelve months and doing my research on their diet while treating them for various ills. It rests in the corner of the room against the wall. I had placed it close to my sleeping self and it had lain there for years

the idea being that I'd use it one day to defend myself and my family. Now, NOW it would complete its own character arc by doing my bidding and skewering these bastards.

SUDDEN DARKNESS!

Power failure? Typical of Kenya -- even the thugs can't count on electricity being available to make their thuggery easier! Before I can think of the advantages the darkness renders to me.

Murmuring ... the crackle of radio static.

"Ngoja (Kiswahili: wait)," whispered irritated, angry.

More radio crackles. Hiss of a squelch being triggered - he seems to know what he's doing whoever is handling that radio. "Must be cops," I think. Knowledge can make you more frightened, more confused. I think "they must be police. They have radio and it sounds like police radio." Quickly I push that thought as far from me as I can. In the direction of that thought lies overwhelm, getting swamped-under, quitting.

"If they are police, we're done for - how can we compete against an organised lot; plain old thugs are bad enough let alone a trained paramilitary-like unit." I struggle to force my mind away from such thoughts and back onto the 'fighting-for-my-life' road.

I get up and head to my side of the bed and reach out for the Masai spear. It is pitch dark but I can navigate as though the lights are full on. "Must be dead already." I think as I grab the spear with my right hand.

"Arrrggghhh!" my arm. Hurts like hell and it's next to impossible to get it to do my bidding. It flops all over the place.

I switch hands and hold the spear in my left.

Out of the bedroom onto the upstairs landing. Darkness below me; pitch black. And then I see them. Several moving shapes. Murmuring. And I think to myself "What are you trying to do you fool? You're only going to make things worse. What if Ami and the kids are OK? What if they've killed Ami and the kids are OK? They'll surely go off the edge and shoot everyone if they catch you here."

I back away from the railing and go back into the bedroom putting the spear into its allotted space making my way to the wardrobe where I lay just minutes earlier. There is blood here -- a lot of it. I can't see it in the dark but I can feel it. I slip and slide a little and the smell almost overwhelms me. A metallic smell; a hospital-familiar smell. This is a lot stronger though than anything I've smelled at work. Putting my left hand down on the floor to take my weight, I lower myself onto the same spot my butt was on just a few minutes back grimacing as my right hand brushes the floor. Hoping that I've found the exact spot I was on and no one will figure out that

I'd ever moved I settle myself down thankful that the pain tolerance I had taught myself all those years back is now my ally -- my best friend in this battle to survive.

Drip, drip, drip.

A steady dripping.

Do I really hear this or do I imagine it? I certainly do not imagine what spreads out from behind me as I lie there. I would learn later that Ami herself scooped a congealed mass as large as a jelly dessert for four from this spot. Ami had not wanted the house help to do the job. She had stopped friends from doing it for her also. She had felt a 'tie' between me and her through this blood. She had felt it kept us together somehow and would bring me back to her. I don't know what rituals she had subjected herself to but to this day I wonder and try to put myself in her shoes. What if the roles had been reversed? What if it was her blood I was carefully scooping up not knowing if my soul mate had already gone to a place from which I'd never be able to retrieve her?

"HEY!" You're at it again. Going down the rabbit hole of no return. "STOP!"

I look down - a large black pool is forming and spreading out from under my left armpit. Black shiny liquid. 'Bleeding out,' I think. Bullet must have gone through the large group of vessels above my heart and passed out of my back. 'Not long now, I'll soon be up there in the light again.' I'm peaceful even welcoming of the light, looking for it.

A scuffling.

Sounds like someone coming up the stairs. I dip my left hand in the blood pool and smear some blood onto my lips and across my left cheek. For the second time this night I think: 'How melodramatic!'

I close my eyes.

And then I can hear his breath; smell his ugly smell! His body odour like I've had to contend with in staff not knowing how to tell them to sort it out or face dismissal. His face is close to mine and I force myself to relax my eyes, relax my face; not to make any movement; not to appear to be alive. My chance might yet come. 'Still calculating huh Neal?' Must still be alive! "There's a brute of baboon right at your face and you're calculating? Idiot! Can't grab him though - he might have the gun and my arm is useless; my dominant arm is useless!"

A light dims and he heads away from me. I can hear the sounds of his pull-away. How heightened the senses are under this sort of stress. I crack open my eyelids and sure enough he's gone to our dresser and soon has one of Ami's top dresser drawers open. He goes straight for the drawer where she keeps her jewellery -- all fake of course. I think, "How does he know to look in there? Inside job?" She does not have much gold and what she does have she does not

keep in drawers that are open to the staff. He does not go through any other drawers or cupboards. He seems to think he knows where to look for loot. "Fat good it will do him; we don't have anything worth stealing!"

He starts rifling through the drawers stopping now and then to put something in his pocket. Suddenly he looks in my direction. 'Quick! Shut those eyes,' I think. The flash light lights up the insides of my eyelids and then I can HEAR his breath again. His face is REALLY close to mine this time. 'Feeling for a breath.' I hold my breath and try to relax my chest. My heart is not pounding; the only thing going through my mind is cool calculation. Again I am thinking of how I can grab him and choke the life out of that thick neck. Could I get him with just one hand? Something makes a small thud close to me on our terracotta tiled floor. He tugs on my shirt. He's looking at my chest wound. He lets out a little heavier breath. Shock? Remorse? A small rapid exhalation that reeks of him and flares up anger in me. It sounded like a laugh, a short, sharp, quiet laugh. It takes all that I have to steel myself not to act, not to blindly grab him with my good arm.

The light dims and as he pulls away I open my eyes fully now not knowing what I'd do if he's looking at me but thinking "I'm not going down without a fight!" But he's looking away and then I see it ... the spear ... lit up in the torch light, standing in the corner of the room blood smeared across its wooden grip! And even a little blood on the wall where my hand must have brushed against it. Surely if he sees this he'll guess at what I'm intending to do and then another bullet will roast its way into me. How incongruous -- self preservation instincts even as I know my time here is now counted in mere minutes if not seconds. Act NOW! Grab him and be done with it; at least die able to say 'you took one with you.' But I don't act. Reason gets the better of me but reason that I will come to regret wallowing in doubt, torn by my psyche's assessment of me as a coward, bolstered by the numerous well meaning but sissy friends that remind me time and again of how soft our Kenyan-Indian people are. Rejection of that softness and weakness means I should act now. But I don't. Is that why I hold back? Is weakness built into my very genes?

I put my head down and as I do I see the gun, sitting on the floor where he must have put it when he was looking at my chest! That little thud I'd heard. It's close enough that if I stretch just a bit I can reach it ... and shoot him with his own weapon! Funny how things happen now in compressed time. Must be on my final legs, exsanguination close. Going to take him down with me. I study the weapon - it's a GUN. How stupid: I've been living in a world of guns, violence and thuggery and with friends that are armed but not taking advantage of the situation to learn more about this 'tool.' I study it. I don't know what type or model it is. From my reading I know that it must have a safety lever somewhere. Must be that little lever I can see on its left side. The one with the little red dot above it; the one a right-handed thumb could get to easily. I study the grip and the slide - these are things I've read about. I could get the safety off and fire it; I'm pretty confident about that but it would be in my left hand and the safety would then be on the 'wrong' side. Then statistics, a favourite subject of mine for as long as I can remember, come flooding into my mind and I hear a police officer at a shooting range on YouTube saying "Remember most thieves don't have a real weapon just one that looks reasonably real. Those

that do have a real one have only one or two rounds in it."

I push the thought of using the gun away realizing that there probably aren't any rounds in the weapon. The flash light swings my way and I shut my eyes again. He's back, moving but the pace has quickened now. I feel him stoop and sense him pick up the gun and then the light fades quickly and I can hear the sound of his steps receding towards the carpeted stairway.

All goes quiet. I keep sitting there.

Drip, drip, drip. Surely, there can't be more to let out?

The silence goes on save for the drip that runs like an irritating old clock ticking away in the dark.

Time passes by. It seems to me like several minutes have passed. Did I pass out? Has more time gone by than I think? Slowly I get to my feet gingerly at first and then with more energy when I realise that I'm quite steady on my feet. I head out of the bedroom. A little light-headed but my feet find the carpet-covered steps and I head down to the study. On my way there I pass the door to the roof gardens at the top of the stairway and carefully pull it shut with my left hand. It makes that characteristic noise - the noise that had heralded this entire evening. I cringe and stop waiting to hear if they're still around and have heard me and are coming to 'get me.' My right arm hurts as it dangles at my side. Once the door is shut I use my left hand to stuff my right into the pants of my boxers. It hurts like hell but once it's stable I know it'll be better and it is.

Pitch black!

I head into the office. I don't know where anyone is. The silence is deafening My family? Where are they? Have they killed them all? What was that shot that I heard? Have they locked them up somewhere? How will I find them in the state that I'm in? Will I fade soon and pass out? Could I drive myself to the hospital?

A castle in a key

What's this? So much stuff underfoot. I can hardly take one step before I'm close to falling off something or the other. I grope about gingerly stepping forward and slipping off bits of plastic, CD cases, books, maps, various equipment items. I try to get to our phone -- we only had land lines in those days. I get to the opposite wall of my office-study and reach for the phone. YIKES! My arm screams at me as I try to pick up the cradled phone. Quick switch to the other arm and up to the ear with the hand piece. No sound; no tone. 'They cut the wire.' This is becoming more and more like some crime movie out of Hollywood not something happening right here inside my own life story. I let the hand piece fall from my left hand grip. This is not something that I am wont to do. I have a 'near-and-dear' relationship with all sorts of equipment and will never damage anything nor let it fall into disuse. Now to drop the hand piece like that is uncharacteristic of me and the clattering sound as the unit hits the ground as it's spring-like

wound wire unravels makes me cringe.

"Neal, is that you?" The voice is familiar -- my Ami -- from somewhere far away.

"Yes, it's me."

"We're locked in the library."

They're alive! My heart does a little hop-skip-and-jump. THEY'RE ALIVE!

"Get us out," she says.

"Uh ... how?" After a bit of a silent pause; too long a pause. I stagger over to our little library door try the handle and find they're locked in.

"Go to the filing room. Go inside and shut the door. Behind the door there is a spare key in the glass cabinet. It's still there - they didn't ask me to open the cabinet. They didn't even see the cabinet behind the door."

I trip back over all the debris and remember wondering again what all this stuff on the ground is. I find the filing room door and remembering to use my left hand, remembering because the throbbing in my right is mounting angrily once again, I get into the room. Shutting the door behind me I turn to the cabinet - one of those slim, wall hung jobs where people usually display photos or notices. I open the cabinet and reach up for the keys. There are several bunches here. Which one? I remember thinking that it's a pretty big bunch and the first one that my hand grazes that feels big I take off it's hook and cradle in the palm of my hand. But is this the right one? How will I figure this out? It's pitch black in here, I'm a little dizzy and there are so many keys!

Then it comes to me -- something that I've always done ever since I was a little kid. Keys have always looked to me like they hold certain images in them. A little hut; a PAC man robot; a shovel. Now I dig deep in my mind and frighten myself mightily. I can see images of keys flitting by but that's all they do --- they FLIT! I can't seem to hold onto any of them. I can't seem to concentrate on any one word; can't seem to focus on the image. I feel a shuddering and the world, my black, pitch black world spins. I'm losing it; going to faint. I fight hard willing myself not to lose consciousness, fighting through a fog that threatens to envelop me. I see a moorland draped in swirling fogs. I recognise the Aberdare National Park -- a spot above Chania Falls -- my favourite place on this earth. Peace descends onto me as I feel the cold air of the Aberdares. I'm tempted to stay in this place -- this place that has always brought me so much tranquillity. The mind though is a powerful thing and mine is more trained than most. The drive to live is relatively easily conjured up in my mind and I'm focusing once more on keys, images of keys, little pictures that keys make in my mind.

"The one with the castle on it," I say out loud.

"Are you OK, Neal? What are you saying? Have you found the keys?"

"Got the keys," I say as I stagger back to the library over crap all over the floors.

I find the castle in the key and with my left hand struggle to get it into the lock. In it goes after what seems like a very long time and then I can't turn it; my left hand is not accustomed to this kind of thing - this rotation in the 'wrong' direction - this pronation instead of supination confused in my mind as supination overpronation, left over right, dominant arm and support arm. But it works out and it's done, the door opens and Ami is rushing about taking over the situation in her customary way. She disappears out of the office and the lights come back on. Ah! So it was the mains switch they used to turn off the lights. Inside job for sure or how else would they have known where the main switch is? Then I hear the garden doors clanging shut and suddenly she's there next to me and then gone again this time with Acacia in tow, Gaia on her hip. Within what seems like seconds she's back and leading Demi - my aunt - my very elderly aunt - out of the library and into our sitting room. I follow along now looking at my office floor strewn all over with so much stuff. My books lying on the floor, plastic bags ripped open, CD covers piled up here and there. The scene looks like the aftermath of a tornado visit in those pictures one sees on the news channels.

"Let's go," she says and before I know what's happening she's leading me out of the house and into our little Toyota Starlet. She puts me into the front passenger seat and heads back to the house slamming the front door shut. Then we're on the road my arm killing me with every little bump. "I'm taking you to RG and we'll see if he can come with us to the hospital."

"Good," I say wondering what awaits but confident that I have my life in my hands now and I'm going to make it to the next page.

The Killer Ride

RG has been a great friend of mine for too many years to count now. I remember the time more than fifteen years ago now when I was walking along my driveway arm-in-arm with Ami and a couple walking by on the road outside our house stopped to say "hi!" I could not tell who these people were; I could not compartmentalize them in any way. The guy was fair, very fair and had Persian features. The gal looked like one of our sweet Kenyan-Indian gals a touch homely, a touch sisterly. They both 'felt' within the first few seconds of meeting them, very easy to talk to. Years later they still feel that way to us. RG told us that he was trying to get the neighbourhood to meet and greet and to see if we could put our heads together to work on helping each other make Nyari an even better place to live in. We agreed to come to 'his' meeting which was to be held on the other side of our lake at another friend's house. That meeting led to the establishment of the Nyari Residents Welfare Society with me taking up the Environment Office Ami acting as the first Secretary of the Society. RG's house is eight hundred metres from mine on the other side of the lake. A tarmac road leads to his house though it was a little broken up at the time of my 'incident.'

Ami heads to the gate, hops out of the Starlet, does 'the gate thing' and we're off. The bumps and potholes are killing me but I welcome the renewal of pain which serves to remind me that I am STILL HERE! At RG's gate we stop and she toots the hooter. It takes a while and then she's out of the car shouting over the gate to let RG know it's us.

A sleepy RG comes staggering the gate. It's now about 2am. I've been bleeding for fifty minutes but the bleeding has stopped held in check by my measures of applying pressure to the bleeding artery in my arm. The chest wound stopped too -- cauterisation by the hot bullet it would seem. A quick conversation between Ami and RG and then the gate is open and the Starlet is rolling to a stop in his driveway.

Ami, we go in my Subaru," I hear him say.

"No, no. The Starlet will be fine," I say, "your car is going to get so messed up by all this blood."

"Just put him into the Subaru Ami. I'm getting my keys. "

I don't resist too much. The Starlet is a great little car but the Subaru has some real muscle to it and I want that muscle for the speed that the little 1000cc Starlet engine just will not develop. I'm in a hurry now; I feel OK but I don't know what my real underlying status is like. I want an operating theatre, I want an emergency unit, I want to inspect 'the system' in great detail and to have the professionals around me to deal with all this mess I'm in.

"Irony isn't it? Just last month I was wailing about how we need a radio network in the estate and now it's me that could have benefited most from such a network," I say.

"Are you still bleeding?" he asks.

"Seems OK now," I reply. "RG, please get me to Nairobi Hospital, I don't want to go to MP Shah or the Aga Khan."

"No problem, let's go."

"Neal, are you OK?" MrsG asks.

"I'm OK, I'm OK." That came out a little weird I think to myself as I climb in onto the back seat of the Subaru.

In short order we're off and headed out of the estate. We had no guards in those days, no radio network, no barriers on our entry points. We just headed out, RG driving fast but controlled.

Actually nothing at all seems OK and soon every little bump is killing me; every movement makes me want to move my arm into some more comfortable position and that very movement

hurts -- it really hurts. It hurts more than it has this entire night. It's more pain than I've ever had to endure. I can feel the bones rubbing against each other - it's a gritty sensation accompanied by stabbing, sharp pains that radiate from the injury site to the tip of my elbow and then up into my shoulder. Luckily I have taught myself to handle pain so I can look at this in quite a dejected manner observing what my body is trying to tell me as though from a distance.

The first part of the road is rough, murram (dirt) track and the car bumps each little bump jarring and causing me to clamp down my teeth against the pain. I clamp down and shut up.

Then we're through that and racing up the asphalt towards the city CBD.

"Are you OK Neal?"

"I'm fine, just drive, quick please."

It goes on like this Ami looking at me from time to time asking little 'nothing' questions with me answering back in the affirmative. Sometimes I even manage a little joke to the effect that I'm a tough bugger and not about to give up my life any time soon. I notice that RG is quiet, driving very fast, very controlled. We could not have asked for a better rescuer. It takes about twenty minutes and we're pulling into the brand new Accident and Emergency unit of the Nairobi Hospital. The car comes to a stop, Ami out almost while it's still rolling. I'm lying on the back seat sleeping (slipping in and out of consciousness?). The back door opens after what seems like a very long time and I see white coats.

"This one is DOA," I hear. That gets my goat. Opening my eyes I look at the white-coated nurse.

"NOT ON MY LIFE" I shout as I struggle to get out of the car.

And then all mayhem breaks loose.

Doctor in the house

"Get me a gurney," I shout, anger rising up in me tsunami-wave-like. "My name is..." Before I can answer RG is by my side and telling the nurse I am a doctor. That gets their attention! A male nurse appears shoving a gurney along in front of him. He looks panicked. Ami is busying herself with something. Her voice is strident, pushing to get things moving as quickly as things can move in Kenya. They help me onto the cold metal of the gurney. Everything's again running in slo-mo; I notice the gurney is painted white and the paint has chipped off here and there. I recall stinking medical wards in far-off places, trying to sort out some medical emergency or other. My mind dissociates from it's time tracker; I see wet floors, bloodied sheets, a filthy baby I've just delivered, a very pregnant woman, lying on a road verge, in deep grass, a car rolling over on a road headlights playing in the sky. It plays backwards - it's the scene where I delivered a baby when a car rolled in the middle of the night at the Athi River - Mombasa Road junction. As notorious a place as any for car accidents in Kenya. I hear Ami's voice; I snap back

to the present. Is this really me -- on a gurney? Cold metal against my near-naked butt my boxer shorts barely covering my lower body.

They wheel me into an emergency room cubicle and leave me there. I wait a few seconds and in that time the tsunami grabs me fully. I feel like jumping up and down on my gurney. Instead I shout 'Someone get in here. NOW.' The male nurse shows up from behind a curtain. He's got a bent scissors in his hand. He starts cutting away my shirt and then gets me to hoist my weight as he pulls the shirt off my back. He moves to my boxers and I suffer the indignity of suddenly finding myself butt-naked on cold metal. I couldn't care less. I'm back alive and kicking. I'm euphoric. I went to the edge and through dint of sheer gumption and grit I'm alive and kicking! And what I saw peering over that edge. What I saw!

"Exit wound I shout," looking over my shoulder at the nurse.

"What?" he asks.

"Roll me over and find the exit wound," I say holding my tongue from rolling into "you idiot."

"Get me a pulse-ox, a splint. Stabilize this arm. Get me a painkiller -- Voltaren 100mg will do, IM." I'm on a roll now. "Hurry up, I'm in pain here. Who's the attending? Who's the attending surgeon? Do we have an ortho around? C'mon, c'mon. Hurry up. I'm in pain here." Now they move into gear. It's taken them more than 15 minutes to get going but now the white coats are arriving and pouring in from every doorway. Soon there are more than a dozen people in the room and I start to relax a little. 'They're here for me; they're here to make sure all goes well.' Like a well-oiled military unit that has suffered a fallen comrade they give me the sense that there's something different they feel about this patient; this is one of theirs; one of the troops. I'll feel this feeling over and over again through all five surgeries I'll undergo over the next year or so but right here and now it's a level of comfort I allow to envelop me and take over my worries.

They get a splint -- a plastic thing -- white in colour -- 'like a large slab of white chocolate' I can't help thinking. I'm looking at the corrugations and little square depressions in the bloody thing as they tape it to my arm. The pain is nearly intolerable but I don't even wince as they tape it on -- I'm so angry. Then over the shoulder of the nurse doing the taping a face appears. A white face, freckled, furrowed with the wisdom of his years.

"Neal," he says, "what have you done to yourself?"

The drawl is all too familiar.

"Imre! Thank the stars you're here tonight. I've been shot."

"I can see that. How did you manage it?" A smile creeps across his face.

Imre was a surgeon friend of mine from way back. He's now long gone having passed away

more than 5 years ago but I remember our times together well. He had been a lecturer, a professor of mine while I was in medical school and a friend. He had taught me a lot of the general surgery that I still hold between my ears. Then he'd become a flying buddy and I'd shared in his joy in acquiring a STOL (Short Take-off and Landing) aircraft and had ridden in that when at one of the air shows he had brought her in shuddering, right on the stall - to make a nigh-impossibly-short landing that won him praise and accolades for so short a landing -- a 'handkerchief-landing' as the cognoscenti call it. Today he'd keel over if he saw us land our trikes in less than sixty metres. Then it was an amazing feat. Imre barks orders and laughs with and at me as he chides the staff in the ER about how they had a patient taking over their ER and ordering them around like a 'bunch of chickens.'

"Get him over," he's now saying moving towards my left shoulder. "Roll him over. Come on, quickly now. I want to see that exit wound."

He struggles - I'm a very, very big man and most of my bigness lies in my upper body - it's difficult to get me over but he manhandles me even as my arm kills me with every movement. I groan in pain. My 44-inch chest missing a one-inch diameter piece of muscle rolls around in an uncoordinated manner and my arm bends against the sling. I yell out in pain.

"Sorry doc, I have to find the exit, try to stomach the pain."

I groan and groan all the more when he probes my back but can't find any exit wound.

"We have to get you up to the OR ASAP and find the round," he says. He comes round to the other side of the bed and says, "This is going to hurt."

He pulls off the tape that is holding my arm in the splint and gets the wound exposed. Each pull of tape sends cascades of blinding-white-light-pain through me. He probes around with gloved fingers exploring the wound. More waves of pain. The Voltaren in my butt cheek has started to take effect but the pain is indescribable. I clamp down my teeth, screw my eyes shut and shudder uncontrollably.

It's so bloody cold in here, shock setting in now.

No, they won't let me go into shock not now that I've got here. Stabilized in the ER I'm prepped to make the short trip to the hospital's operating theatres. Another doctor; another familiar face shows up. ST ambles up to my bedside and asks how I am then tells me that I'm heading to the theatre where another friend is going to be my anaesthetist and that the orthopaedic surgeon, while new and young, is known to be competent.

"Don't worry though," he says, "It's just exploratory stuff and to get the bullet out of your chest. We can get an ortho of our choice onto things when we come to setting the arm. I've told the family and they're on the way."

"How did they take it?" I asked.

"Your sister fainted," a wry smile creeping across his worried face.

"She fainted and I've held tight through all this?"

Theatre was uneventful. I just remember the dark room and wondering if the theatre had inadequate lighting or if my vision was constricting due to lack of blood. DrM, my anaesthetist, joked with me through his face mask and then said, "You'll taste a metallic taste now."

And I was gone - on the second now of many adventures where Dr Aggarwal would leave the planet. But my arrival back on earth in my hospital room was to prove to be another gruelling prelude to the adventures to come.

Into Battle

From under the knife - the first time

A strange euphoria. It sweeps over me. A rolling sensation; a pleasant dizziness. A sense of floating. No thoughts of events recently past; none of events distant. A calm place devoid of thinking. I wallow in it. I smile - at least I think I smile. Slowly, slowly - thought processes begin. I see a distant shore, waves lapping gently on silver-white sand. It is warm and there is a strong smell of the sea. I will myself forward -- to the shore. Clear waters, rock pools, corals. In amongst the corals there are small fish. Some neon coloured, others black and white banded. With effort their names come to me -- Humbugs, Moorish Idols, Damsels. Anemones, their tendrils wafting in the gentle waves, their Clown fish swimming in and out of the tentacles their banded pink and white bodies mingling so perfectly with the anemones colours. They duck and play in the safety of those tendrils. Beautiful beckoning little dark 'caves' adorn the sides of the tidal pools. The water is warm, the wavelets tiny and the sand oozing between my toes.

I pull back my viewport and find I'm standing at an aquarium. It fills the room with the smell of the sea. It's the marine aquarium Ami and I built and placed by our bed in our first bedroom in 'The Crate.' That's what we called the first 'home' we ever had. Through the stormy times of parental neuroses -- the insistence on marriage within communities -- we had survived and managed to get married against the odds, even while I was still in my second year of medical school. With no money to speak of my parents had insisted that we live with them. We had built a small 'banda' -- a little cottage all of two hundred square feet total floor area. It had but a little bathroom attached to a bedroom and a mosquito screened veranda where we sat and read in the evenings. We ate with my folks; we had no kitchen for a long time. We had built The Crate with our bare hands putting down a concrete slab and building up the walls and roof with timber. It was all we could manage with our life savings and it was the most peaceful, soul-rooting thing we'd ever had. In it we'd let all our worries go, chased away all fears and embraced each other

and lived life like we've never done since.

The view changes again.

Our little Austin Mini sits on a gravel driveway under majestic Jacaranda trees. As in every year around the end of September these trees are full with their usual profusion of purple flowers. Ami would often say that they were colouring her October birthday, the whole city awash in purple. Each year the flowers heralded the coming short rains, thousands of bees rushing this way and that producing a light, golden honey whose smell wafted from the hives I kept making our garden heavy with the scent of nectar being fanned to honey concentration. I smell this scent now and that of the approaching rain -- the smell of just-wetted earth.

The Mini stands there as though looking at me. Our little Mini. Undemanding, easy for us to repair, spare parts cheap and plentiful not that she needed them much. From a trip to Moyale on the Kenyan border with Ethiopia to near-weekly camping trips to a few off-road rally wins she did it all and never complained. Rarely did she break down and she sipped fuel with a frugality modern motor manufacturers still seem to be trying to rediscover. I look past her at our twenty foot shipping container and relax in the knowledge that this big green metal box is all we need to build savings of gargantuan proportions or to put food on our table should we decide to leave the embrace of mum and dad's safe haven. I luxuriate in the thought that I taught myself to repair cars, started a business doing just that then moved to my sisters college to teach computing all while still working at the Aga Khan Hospital as an SHO -- Senior Health Officer. A feeling of invincibility pervades my thinking -- a thinking that is still waking up to it's usual hectic machinations.

I glimpse my room through half-open eyelids. Green. Hospital? It comes rushing back. The machinations begin. Multiple thought streams seed and gel and take off down their various threads.

An accident? No a shooting. I was shot? Yes you idiot. But I'm ALIVE! I'M A FIGHTER. I've come through this!

I open my eyes fully and see my family - my sisters, my mum and dad and 'embedded' in amongst them - my Ami. I groan. Anita rushes to me mumbling "He's awake."

"Neal, Neal. Thank God," she says eyes brimming, "You're OK."

"I'm OK Anita."

Then Sheila, mum, dad are all around my bed talking at the same time and from the foot of the bed Ami smiles at me.

"Sheila, don't you go fainting on me again," I say. She grins and I can see the wondering going on between her ears at how I might have discovered this. "I see all," I say, "I travelled out of my

body."

"Always pulling my leg," she mutters but I can see the relief that threatens to put her at gravity's mercy once more for the second time in under 24 hours.

I look at Anita and through the fog that still envelopes my mind I say, "Anita, we must stop this. We must stop fighting. Please don't hurt me. Hurting me just hurts all of us."

Comminuted fractures

Through the fog, family swimming in and out of my vision, I utter something. It will be at least another 24 hours before I'm told what I said and even then the telling will come from a quite-unexpected quarter. Faces turn towards me. There is a momentary pause in conversations, a dead and embarrassing silence but I'm the quintessential salesman. Once my arrow is cast I won't budge knowing only too well that the person who makes the next move loses the sale. Perhaps it's not even that -- perhaps it's the drugs; perhaps my tongue is not under the control of my brain. Still, old training dies hard and I hold my tongue and wait for a response.

Ami saves the day and shakes us all from the bind.

"He's still very groggy from the anaesthetic," she says.

I'm not letting go. "This in-fighting has got to stop." I say. "What's happened in the last months." I pause the drugs taking hold of my head once again. "What's happened in the last few months has to stop. No more attacks on me, no more no more. Please."

"No one is attacking you Neal." Dad says.

"You've always stayed out of it Dad when you should have stepped in and put an end to it by not taking sides. So stay out of it now."

A pained expression flits across my father's face. He opens his mouth as if to say something then thinks better of it and stops. I feel bad for him; I feel bad for myself; I feel bad for all them in this room with me. This is my dad here by my bedside looking at his mangled son. He looks like he might break down at any moment. I smile and he watches me. The moment stretches out dilating into an interminable pause. His smile freezes in space and time. I watch from a high vantage point. I'm riding as though on a horse and it's GREAT up here. The horse sways from side to side but I'm held securely, a large hand attached to a massively muscled arm holding my right upper arm my butt riding on a padded shoulder. I giggle relishing the ride looking at my dad's arm as he holds me firmly in place on his right shoulder, walking towards his office -- the sports pavilion of the Jamhuri High School. Then I'm back in the hospital room the darkness pulling away as my eyelids open.

The awkwardness that lived here in these moments is awkward in the extreme. Again I hold my

comments in check, my tongue in cheek. I wait. The silence grows and I even have time to reflect that I can't have been out of it for long as they all still look pained by something I said? Then with big booming voice barging bodily into my room

"Neal, Neal, Neal - pole mate." Pole is Kiswahili for 'sorry' and a common colloquialism among us Kenyans, "This should not have happened to you but then again it could have happened to any one of us. Damn near happened to me." Imre is big, brash and washes away all trace of my earlier discomfiting words. He busies himself with my charts, sticks his head out of my room and beams his big voice out towards the nurses station.

"Nurse -- get in here. NOW!"

They come running, two or three of them, a vital signs trolley in tow. Surprising at this time of night -- or morning. It's now 4am; three hours since I was shot. Perhaps it's the private rooms part of the hospital -- this is St.Luke's ward after all -- a private patient's wing -- perhaps that is why the extra care. Having the nursing school in this hospital also helps I'm sure. Is there an element of managing "one of our own?" If I don't detect it at this very moment it sure is going to surface in the next two days.

Imre busies himself with me. He wants to see the vital signs for himself. He's not taking any recordings on the chart as competently done much less as gospel. He watches the nurse take my blood pressure. She calls out "120/80 doctor." He peers over his spectacle lenses and seems to relax a little though the oddly round and perfect figures clearly perplex him.

"Exactly?" he says and receives a nod in the affirmative. "Haemoglobin 16. You're a bloody ox, Neal. You should be fine now." Then he lets me have it.

"The arm is broken as you know. The bullet tracked precisely through both radius and ulna. Exploratory revealed comminuted fractures of both with lots of small pieces. GK has gathered up the pieces and stuffed them around the bones and done what he could to stabilize things but there isn't much he could do. We'll wait and see. You know the protocol."

I know that the wound must not be closed. A bullet is a dirty thing and bullet wounds must be left open for at least 24 hours better 48 with the patient on parenteral (intravenous) antibiotics the doctors watching to see if any infection develops. If no infection comes to the party then the wound can be closed at the next surgery in 48 hours time. That word 'comminuted' is a let down though. Several pieces; a gap between the broken ends; a nightmare healing process ahead? You know the protocol. YOU KNOW THE PROTOCOL. Yes, I do; it means shut up and bear it - we'll see what happens. I stay shut up though a heavy weight slams against my mind. "My beautiful arm," I think to myself.

Imre moves on quickly. The implications are dire and I know he'd rather focus on the positive aspects. "The chest wound gave us a helluva fright and it's what we were most concerned about. There was no exit as you know."

This is positive?

I remember only too well now the events in the emergency room.

"The round is lodged just above your heart but in the pectoralis." Pectoralis is the muscle of the front of the chest; the muscle most men dream of having as big a one as they can get; that uniquely male symbol that says 'I am young and still able.' Mine is particularly big at this time. I've been in training for several years at this point and I've honed my body from a flabby 200-pounder to a lean, muscled machine of 226 pounds. My chest size at 51 inches is something to be proud of and proud of it I am -- er -- was. I don't know what to make of the mangled mess now even as it is hidden under bandages.

"It seems like the muscle is so well developed that it stopped the bullet. I understand the bullet went through a door before hitting you - your wife told me," glancing over his glasses again at Ami. She nods almost imperceptibly. "Either you're damn lucky or more of us should heed this and go to the gym."

"Can I see the round?"

"No, because, as I said, it's lodged in there. GK and GM decided that it would be better to leave it where it is. They used an image enhancer to take a peek at it and it's right in there between the nerve fibres of the brachial plexus. They'll take another look in a couple-a days with the enhancer and decide. You think about it while you rest here and decide for yourself if you want to get it out. I'd say just leave it in there, it must be well cauterised and will probably be there through your entire life. If you try to remove it who knows what kind of damage will be done to your axillary nerves. We don't want that now do we?"

I'm dazed. This is a disappointment. I don't want that foul thing inside of me a minute longer than it has to be there. What comes out of my mouth though is unexpected, even for me.

"Whatever you say Imre. You know more about this than any of us."

"Yes, yes. I've seen enough bullet wounds. You've gotten away lightly. Take the gift and don't look the horse in the mouth. Run with it. The bullet will probably never bother you."

"OK. What's next?"

"Well. First you rest up. Tomorrow morning ... er this morning you'll go down to X-Ray and get a proper image. The portable chest shots we have are not that great. Let's get a good clear X-Ray that will act as a baseline for us. Then you can keep that and if the thing starts to migrate you'll have a baseline to compare with."

"And after that?"

"After that you just rest up. Build up some blood volume and in two days time GK can set the bones and suture you up and then you can head home to recover and visit GK in his clinic so he can monitor the bone healing. OK?"

"OK Imre. Thanks for all you're doing."

"I'm sorry again Neal. This should not have happened to you."

His noisy entrance that had filled the halls with activity and life evaporates as quickly as it arrived. A complete contrast descends once he's gone. I barely hear his booming voice as he heads down the hallway. He's probably woken up every patient in St.Lukes by now. I think, "X-Ray later this morning. Now I can sleep." I look around the room. The ghost of Imre lingers on. People are shell-shocked. The silence is deafening.

"I'm alive gang. I'm alive." I manage, bravely.

Smiles break out all around but before much can be said a senior looking nurse is pushing open the door and shooing everyone out with words to the effect that I should be getting as much rest as possible. Ami says she's going out with the folks but will be back soon. I shut my eyes and ride shoulders again. I'm a little guy in the care of THE big guy. Not a worry in the world.

No Wheelchairs!

Deep sleep holds me for five hours and then I'm woken by a petite, pretty little nurse who seems too shy even to touch me. She gently gets my brain working again and I look around my room as I shake the sleepy fog from my mind.

"Daktari -- we have to go to X-Ray now," she says.

"OK," I manage, unable, nay unwilling to say more.

I'm exhausted and lack all desire to get up and head out of my room. I try to sit up in my bed but the arm hurts, my back hurts, my brain hurts! With effort I manage to get my legs over the edge and for the first time see the 'prison-suit' that I'm stuck with and will be stuck with for the next few days. It's depressing and over the next days it's going to become more so. I wonder at why we put patients into this crap and for the first time see things from a patient's point of view. A wheel chair is wheeled in and my bed lowered electrically. That's when I notice the rather nice, modern bed that I've been on with it's controls and remote lying on the bedside unit. An orderly helps me off my bed with a nurse at my other shoulder.

The anger-tsunami swells up again and suddenly I find myself saying a little too loudly -- "No wheelchairs!"

"But daktari we cannot allow that." It's the orderly speaking now. He looks quite 'spiffy' in his clean, new hospital coveralls and I think that this is not what I had come to accept in my hospital-work days. Those were the days of filth and a poor country that was happy to just get by. Now this? This is like any modern hospital anywhere in the world. Little do I know that 'anywhere in the world' is going to come bite me down the road.

"No wheelchairs -- no X-Ray." I sit back down into my bed. The orderly glances at the nurse and then heads out leaving her to keep trying to convince me to get into the wheelchair.

"Daktari you must get into the wheelchair," now we have another nurse -- a big woman with a very fancy uniform, some sort of emblem or badge on her white nurses 'cap.' I sense a badge of authority.

"Matron, I don't care. The ward might be yours, the patients belonging to the doctors but this patient -- this patient belongs to ME! No wheelchair -- if you want the x-ray there is only one way it'll happen -- if I WALK there."

She glowers at me the impasse clear, but within seconds I see the things that have made her the leader that she is. A momentary decision-making and

"OK doc. Off you go then, walk down to X-Ray," and without missing a breath, to the orderly, "You follow him close with the wheelchair and you nurse Rosemary, you go with them and walk with daktari."

I set off out of my room, my hospital blues open all the way down the front 'everything' showing. Why do they make bloody useless things like this? Of course I know the utility value to doctors and hospital staff but the indignity to the patient, why hasn't someone told them yet? I brush off nurse Rosemary's hand as she tries to grab mine to steady me as I falter, the occasional drunken slip threatening to take over."

At no time do I feel faint but I do stagger now and then and the orderly and nurse start and flinch as they accompany me down to X-Ray and back again the 'photos' having been taken. I don't ask to see those photos for I know what lies beneath the muscle. I'm still not resigned to carrying what I'll later call 'my jewelry.' I'm still 'turning my mind away' from the round in my chest and my shattered arm though that will all change later.

We arrive back in St.Lukes and as the orderly pushes open the spring-loaded ward doors I pause and look around behind me and there's blood all over the floor behind me petering off a little way behind to become a series of little dots reflecting sunlight that's streaming in through the east-facing windows. Then coming up the alleyway a couple of young doctors are making a beeline for me and I suffer the indignity of having my hospital blues unbuttoned while I stand there and they examine my chest wound.

"OK, OK -- it's just old blood. No fresh bleed here," and they're gone as quickly as they

materialised ghosts in the alleyways. Were they really there?

Then matron is back and scolding me while a smile creeps across my face. I start to shake as the laughter gets a hold off me and is replaced by a full-bloodied guffaw shooting forth. They look at me, incredulous. Slowly smiles start at the corners of their mouths and then we're all howling hysterically. Not one of us stopping to figure out what we're laughing at; no one needing to articulate what it's all about. One of those moments that I'll treasure forever; we all knew what it was about without having to say it. We knew in our bones that it was about the strength of the human spirit -- about discovering that inner strength -- about the realisation that life is what you make of it and that we were all witnessing a unique moment -- that we had, all of us patient as well as 'his' team of helpers, been lucky enough to be a part off and that from this day on we are all changed --- all of us --- in way that cannot be put into mere words.

Commiserations

Back from X-Ray and still euphoric, a wonderful feeling lingering on from our laughing bout in the corridors of St.Luke's, I lie on my bed content to simply luxuriate like I'm in some nice, warm bathtub. I drop off from time to time until around 11am when my first visitors come by. Students --- dozens of them. Some from my recently sold business -- the first internet based Information Technology College in the region -- we had called it CyberCollege -- but many from around the country. Most are people whose lives I have touched in one way or another. The support is almost overwhelming.

Matron starts to chafe at the bustling in her ward; nurse Rosemary is even more put out when she wants to give me a bath but is overwhelmed by the discomfort of bathing a male patient while his numerous visitors wait for him in his room. We eventually get that job done and I even manage a shave, without as much as nicking myself once with the razor, while using only my left hand. My arm pain has decreased enough that I do not worry about it but at the back of my mind linger the doubts about what lies ahead. Will the comminuted nature of the fractures prevent them healing? Will the bullet in my chest migrate much sooner than anyone thinks it will? Will I be left with a golf-ball sized scar on the front of my chest?

Then at 11:30 my best friends Ami and Don walk in and our students have even more reason to celebrate as many have not seen Don for a number of years. Don has been my business partner and best friend for too many years to count and that morning Ami had gone over to his apartment to let him know what had happened. Without batting an eyelid he'd silently packed a bag and insisted on moving into our house to help us through the times that lie ahead. Little do we know what lies ahead! Don eventually ended up staying with us for six months before my own ratiness got the better of us all and he ended up leaving Kenya to find his way in the world after having spent the better part of seven years in the land of my soul. While Don is there in my room we have a strange and troublesome discussion with some students and their parents

GP: This is an inside job Neal?

Neal: Of course it is.

GP: Can you guess who?

Neal: Not right now.

JP: Don't know how to say this but there's been a lot of this kind of 'stuff' going on in Kenya now.

Neal: What do you mean by 'stuff'?

MG: Vendetta. That's what you're getting at aren't you? - looking at GP.

GP: Yes, a lot of that is going on.

JP: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

Neal: What are you guys saying? That someone organised this to have me killed?

Don: You guys are going off the deep end.

Ami: Yes, this is ridiculous. Why would anyone want to harm Neal?

JP: Just saying.

It's too uncomfortable to continue like this but just like my words earlier about in-fighting, once said there's no way to take words back. The words are now 'out there' and we just have to let them live and develop a standing of their own. They'll either go away, swept under the dirty carpets of our lives or they'll slowly develop a life of their own and we'll have to deal with that, regrets, euphoria or whatever comes off it.

Family comes and goes; friends come and go. I make acquaintance with a reverend next door who has been beaten up by the cops and that too on television. We commiserate with each other about the unfairnesses of life. A prominent minister comes to visit. He sits on the edge of my bed and I almost burst with pride feeling all-important due to his presence. Later I realise that he probably came to see the reverend, not me, but dropped in to boost his popularity brownie-points score.

My doctors visit and make their notes. We discuss my progress -- not really much to say there -- I am an ox after all. The day passes as does the next one and I get more and more bored by the minute. Two days after the shooting I'm almost pulling out my hair and it's a welcome relief when Imre bustles in to let me know that surgery is scheduled for the next morning and that I should make sure I eat nothing after dinner that night. The next morning I'm anxious. Having twice left the planet I'm not too eager any more for that 'switch' to be thrown when my mind just turns off and I come back unable to figure out where a few hours have gone.

I toss and turn through the night and whimper when I accidentally lie on my arm. I don't have a plaster cast immobilising it yet so it hurts like hell when I move it. Fortunately though every time the docs come in and open up the bandages there's a clean, fresh-pink wound underneath, gaping wide but clean. Any puss would spell doom but that never comes. I look on dispassionately when they expose my wound. It's strange that I don't seem to feel anything and yet it's my own arm I'm looking at. This will crop up again after my surgeries in India where I was able to look at my arm in the same dispassionate way even in the theatre while it was being operated on. And it was never for lack of nerve supply -- there was always plenty of that!

Surgery day rolls around and I'm given no breakfast. Ami is with me early as are my other family members but they all suffer the same frustration I do and leave when 11am rolls around and I've still not been carted off to the OR. 2pm and I'm still in my room on my own now, the others having left when nothing seemed likely to happen. Famished now. 4pm rolls around and now I'm starving. I get up to go sit by the window in my room. An hour passes and I've had enough of that. I get up to go back to my bed and

The room shimmies a little in my vision. I notice it but put it down to just lingering weakness. As I reach the foot of my bed the entire room swims before me and the next thing I know I'm waking up on the ground almost 'under' my bed. "Now what?" I think. "What's going on? Am I going to die of my wounds now? After getting this far?"

I try to move my feet to get up but I can't. I'm so weak I can't even wiggle my toes. I lie there unable to get my mind to work. I'm practically under my hospital bed for what seems to me to be a very long time. Surprisingly I really don't care though I'm aware and somewhat alarmed by this nonchalance in me. The longer I lie there the less I care. I feel like an idiot having come through so much only to be lying here on the ground probably dying because my mind just quit trying. Finally the cold floor starts to hurt me where my elbow rests on it. That jolts my mind back into gear and I yell as loudly as I can for help. No one comes. I wrack my brain and then hit upon an idea. With my broken arm I coax the telephone cable closer to me, gritting my teeth against the pain as I transfer the cable to my good arm. I yank on it and the phone comes crashing down to the ground next to me. I can hear the dial tone! Great! I dial zero and struggle to get the hand-piece up to my ear. Sure enough zero works! The hospital receptionist has trouble understanding that a patient in St.Luke's is calling asking him to call the St.Luke's nursing station to have them look into room 225 where they have a patient lying on the ground.

The call ended Imre is into the room within a few minutes and he's hopping mad; poor nurses to have had him around at that very moment. Imre and some nurses help me into my bed and cursing the staff much too loudly he examines my wounds, especially the one on my chest. The shirt overlying the wound carries a spreading red stain. Suitably dressed down the staff cower as Imre tells me this must have happened because I've had nothing to eat the whole day on top of which I'm also dehydrated. What with all the blood loss and this dehydration I must simply have fainted. Surgery, he tells me, was delayed because of a road traffic accident from which there were many patients that needed immediate attention. I'm quickly wheeled off to the

theatre where GM once again utters that famous 'metallic taste' phrase of his and I leave the planet yet again!

Into the butchery ... AGAIN!

This second surgery is uneventful. I'm wheeled into the theatre, only Ami there to give me a send-off, and then it's the now familiar and expected interminable wait in the corridors. Of course we understand why a patient has to be left in the corridors while the theatre is readied. Of course we understand that the surgeon is still scrubbing-in and the anaesthetist is finishing up in the other theatre down the hallway. Try to see it from the patient's viewpoint though and remember -- this -- me -- is a patient that has seen this from the other end -- the surgeon's end -- and is capable of understanding better than most. Or perhaps of frightening himself more than most! This is not accounted for by professional medical staff -- at least I've never heard it mentioned nor was I ever taught to take this into consideration in all my years in medical school. That injured or ill doctors and nurses need to be handled with kid gloves and given extra support and guidance seems to have gone clear out of the [un]conscious minds of all those that provide that sort of care to lay persons. Perhaps they think that 'we've seen it all' and so we don't need any special care.

White walls and ceilings, antiseptic smells and beeping machines. Devoid of any decoration, cold and impersonal, an operating theatre seems to invade even the staff with a coldness I've yet to see anywhere else. No paintings on the walls, no cheer, no voices that greet or console. Green scrubs hustle by in both directions through this passageway that seems to shrink with every passing minute until I'm almost embarrassed to be here. I don't suffer from claustrophobia but boy did those walls feel like they were going to come crashing down on me!

It's cold and getting colder by the minute. I'm rendered increasingly alienated as time passes. Not a single person comes to ask if I'm all right. They pass me silently; pressing on to whatever task awaits them. Some have faces covered with masks; all have a head cover. It confirms my long-standing feeling that theatre is more like a butchery than a high precision chamber of knowledge. This had been a tremendous let-down to me in the days when I had dreamed of being a neurosurgeon. Then I'd seen my first surgery --- a caesarean section done in an outlying hospital in Thika just north of the capital, Nairobi. It had been a horrible affair. Caesareans are always emergencies of course -- at least in my settings at the time -- no one elected to have this done by choice; it was forced upon them because something had gone wrong during their labour. In this particular instance the surgeon had been a dark-skinned fellow from India who had graciously agreed to let me work with him for a week and to live in his government-provided hovel. It had been terrible; he had come in and greeted me perfunctorily, patient groaning on the operating table. Then he'd glowered at the anaesthetist and barked, "Why isn't she under?"

The whimpering anaesthetist had done 'his thing' and put her under so quickly I had wondered how much of an extra dose of drugs and gases he had given her. Then hell had invaded the space between those dirty theatre walls. The surgeon's face had darkened -- at least it had

seemed to me as though his already dark complexion had taken on a glowering, other-worldly appearance. He had changed from the man that I had talked to outside of theatre -- a gentle almost soft-spoken person -- into a shouting, panicking, rushing storm-harboured being. The way he had sliced her open, well controlled by any judgement, but something distinctly un-zen-like to his actions -- it was not what I had imagined the OBGYN-God would be like. He had got the baby out in under 60 seconds and had proudly announced this fact through his monstrous sang-froid. He'd turned to me and said, "Close up doc."

I'd sutured a number of patients up prior to this day but the immediately preceding events had left me mentally shattered and now he'd gone --- just left the theatre. I did not know if he'd come back, if I was to complete 'the job' or wait for his approval at each step. Not having any other choice -- our patient under anaesthesia and every minute in those depths not being conducive to her immediate future well-being -- I'd begun with the deep sutures to hold the muscles of the uterus together and then had reached the abdominal wall and was starting a mattress suture when he returned. Using my spectacles as I usually do -- a trick I taught myself a long time back -- I'd watched him in the reflections of my glasses, rear-view-driving-mirror-like. He was ungloved but still gowned; not going to assist but all the same there to check and approve or to belittle and ridicule? He came close to me and peered over my right shoulder. He reeked of cigarette smoke -- a smell which even today spins my head with nausea.

"Ah! Very good he said." Soft spoken but coming as suddenly as it did it had made me jump. "Where did you learn to mattress suture like that?"

"Books, another medical student, some training videos."

"You guys are lucky - in my time..."

The 'in our days' spiel. Aren't we all so fed up with this? But here's the soft-spoken-one-minute, devil-the-next character praising me? At least he wasn't barking down the front of my surgical gown as so many of my professors at university had done. So many in fact that they had killed any interest I could have developed in the profession. That I was here now proved testament to the gumption and grit that carried me through the shooting and that had kept me coming back time and again for more and harder punishment.

That week had been terrible but I'd learned a lot. Mostly I'd learned that surgery is dirty, you can't see what you are doing, and most of the time these guys are groping in the dark, hit-and-miss and getting things done through dint of guesswork and sheer luck. It would be years before I'd be able to bring my own brand of professionalism, cleanliness, controlled, measured, deliberate and accurate actions to all that I did. That week in Thika changed me forever. From putting together a car engine to assembling a computer motherboard I now do everything with my whole heart in it not with a get-it-over-with-and-let's-go-home attitude that I witnessed time and time again not just in Thika but in so many places that I travelled the world over. I guess I owe my medical studies that much! That they showed me even in the so-called highest profession in the world that there is much that is glossed over, done on autopilot and plain

messed about with. Luckily I opted to take it in my stride and tell myself that I'd never work like this; that I'd be in control; master of my game. Friends like a Japanese rally driver that I eventually got to be very close to even remarked in deep frustration, a little too often for my liking, that I am pedantic in my approach to life. Perhaps I still am. Has it kept me on a narrow and sane path? Has it kept me alive? I think so.

So, I left the planet on my second journey -- starting to get used to this -- and returned to it in my room once again another couple of hours gone by without a trace. Ami was there and presented me with the news that my arm had been set and exploration of the bullet in the chest showed that it was well settled and not migrating. I had opted for and instructed that any attempt to remove it was not to be made. I'd come to this decision via medical knowledge not my innermost feelings which still reeked of something foul within my previously-loved temple of my soul. Only later would I come to accept my jewellery; for now I would merely tolerate it. Only much later would I come to the realisation that there is no soul as people the world over claim. After all -- if a brain is damaged the soul sometimes even completely disappears. Think of a bed-ridden Alzheimer's-wracked wretch. Is there a soul there? No? Or is it there but you think altered in some way? How can it be altered then? Only if what I had been calling a soul to that point in time had been something generated by the mind which in turn is only generated by the living axons of the brain. No 'soul' was not for me and the giving up of this falsehood helped me greatly accept 'my jewelry.'

Ami had gone off for lunch and to make sure the kids were OK saying she'd be back with Don a little while later. I had lain there still groggy from the anaesthetic fitfully dropping in and out of sleep. In one of those waking moments there had been two guys in my room; two white men --- Australians? Had I imagined it? Had I thrown them out or asked the nurses to throw them out? It seemed like a dream but it would come back more clearly later -- especially on their second visit -- and it would come back again months later -- come back to haunt me and to make me take steps that would separate me from my beloved Kenya, the place of my birth, my home, the place where

...the roots of my soul go down to the centre of the Earth

A seed is sown

He's sitting on the edge of my bed.

I awake but can't seem to shake the sleep out of my head.

I don't move an inch.

Keeping my eyes shut.

My mind gathers itself together and a battle begins then rage wake up and see what's going on or just lie here and wait for whatever they'll do?

A gun, it wanders through my mind.

A red dot stands out on a black metal frame.

It's pointed at me.

A face hovers close; bad breath.

I see a finger -- it moves in slo-mo towards a trigger guard.
I see it draw back on the trigger.
There's a flash and a resounding bang.
Pain makes me stir.
I struggle to control my mind; to become aware of what's going on around me.
The pain abates and my mind wakes.

There is no sound from him but I can clearly feel his weight where it depresses the mattress.
Suddenly the thought invades the other wandering thoughts he's going to pull the trigger.

I'm up with a start to find someone sitting on my hospital bed. His mouth moves but for a few seconds I can't hear what he says. Then it begins to make sense

"Hi there Neal." That accent, I can't place it then the words I'd become so familiar with and would utter myself countless times, "G'day."

"Hi." Still a little dazed.

"Hi, my name is Mark." Getting up from my bed he's now over at my side extending a handshake.

I take his hand and manage to utter, "Hi, Mark."

"And this is my friend, Pete." The way 'friend' is said it sounds more like 'franed' and 'pete' becomes 'payt.'

Ah! These are the Aussies I dreamed off. Or did I dream them up? They're here now. Did I dream these guys up earlier or or was that a premonition? Am I dreaming now?

Before I can stop myself, "Were you here earlier?"

"Yes we were here yesterday but you weren't in any shape to talk to us."

Ah! That's it. They were here earlier."So what's this about?"

"First off we're so sorry about what happened to you. We wish you a speedy recovery."

"Thanks."

"Yesterday we dropped in to see you but you did not want to talk and we left. We're back though and wanted to tell you that there's a lot of people rooting for you."

"Thanks." I say beginning now to wonder at who these people are and what this intrusion is all about.

"Tim sent us. You remember Tim Archer? You wrote that gunny bag software for him?"

I remember only too well. GunnyBags: Gunia in kiswahili is gunny bag -- a bag made of hessian and strong enough to carry 50 Kg of macadamia nuts to market from the fields. We'd called our software GunnyBags and laughed at the incongruous name even as it had become a flagship product for which, though we had earned little, we'd garnered a reputation for tackling tough problems. We -- meaning Don and I -- had been getting 'ratty' with the countless hours of teaching we'd been doing when a software design project had come along. We'd found the opportunity presented numerous challenges, some seemingly insurmountable and yet we'd overcome all of them and built a piece of software that managed 30,000 outlying farm stations. These stations collected macadamia nuts from more than three million farmers. The nuts were gathered in gunny bags that were each worth about a dollar and the company that supplied these bags to the farmers wanted to carefully account for their three million dollar investment in bags.

It came back to me now. Tim had waltzed into our offices one lunch time. We had been working at the company we helped start in Westlands, Nairobi and had been munching on some sandwiches. We'd been a little dismissive of Tim letting him sit on a stool in our kitchen-turned-office and listened to him gush about his bags that were being torn, stolen, peddled for cash and what have you. Could we write a piece of software that might be a key part of a system to control where these bags were, who had them and could we come up with a way to prevent them being stolen?

Initially it had been another pain in the side; yet another thing to deal with. Then it had morphed in our minds into something that would alleviate the mind-numbing boredom we both felt with teaching the same old thing over and over and over again. There is only so much one can say about Random Access Memory and after six years of classes of this both Don and I were ready to pull our hair out or quit this company and go looking for more challenging pastures. It had not taken too much to convince each other that we could find time in our marking schedules to take on this job. We put together a desktop computer, loaded dBase IV onto it and got down to work. Several months later the software was

demonstrated to Tim and his colleagues and was a huge hit. It not only counted bags but assigned them to stations and to individual farmers, calculated penalties for lost bags, did bag inventory management, reported replacement schedules and more. It made it a simple matter for an operator to input a Kenya National Identification number and instantly have on his display a photograph and outstanding number of bags to use to check stock by. By the time it had been running for three months Tim's estimate was that it saved several thousand dollars a month. We were a huge hit.

All well and good but what has this got to do with Tim? "How is Tim?"

"He left the country a while back and went home to Perth."

"And you are here because?"

"Look we've talked a lot about you and Tim said there's something you could do for him."

"I thought you said he's left the country?"

"Yes, he's in Perth now and he's started a software company there. He's based in Perth and he thought that given what you did for him while he was here you might give it a thought and go have a look-see and perhaps join him there?"

I reach for the phone by my bedside pressing '1' with my left forefinger. "Nurse please come here."

"OK OK. We're going. We just thought."

"Doctor? Any problem?"

Wow! That had been fast. Must have been my fainting episode yesterday. They're all on edge now responding to me like I'm going to pass out on them at any moment!

"Nurse, throw these people out and don't allow anyone in here unless I tell you to. Didn't I go through this with you yesterday?" Where did that come from! It hits me I did throw these guys out yesterday. It wasn't a dream after all!

"No need for that Neal, we're going but do give it some thought. The company in Perth is called Funzi Software and you'd love working for them, you'd just love it."

There there seed planted. A seed that will slowly germinate, take root and overtake my mind, my thinking, my very psyche. A seed that will take me away from Kenya, away from my life, from my place of birth, from a place that gives meaning to my life. Planted now but silent it will soon grow in all proportions.

The Aussie drawl is not enamouring of itself to me at this moment. The rage in me is still there. There's no way to put into words the blind rage that courses my veins. It sustains me; it stops me thinking about what has been done to me: how much has really been taken. That will come later; that will tear me apart in due course. Bullet injuries? Bah! Those are minor compared to the wall we're hurtling towards now.

I think of my lifelong stance against all and sundry but especially against my paternal uncles -- my father's brothers. Those that abandoned Kenya at the Ugandan, Idi Amin crisis of 1972 and ran from my beloved home. Ran mostly to the UK where they lived their lives leaving my family, my mum, dad, two sisters and I alone in Kenya. Leaving us all and now that we live through a crisis just one call from one of them; the rest silent as always. The abandonment my dad felt hits me now his anger at 'them' seeking, and finding explanation and understanding in me. Dad

would have none of this moving to the UK nonsense. This was and is our home, this is where Dad's roots were - where his parents grew up, where he grew up and now where I had grown up. I remember Dad's small clucking noises whenever the question came up about us leaving Kenya. That he had studied in the UK for a four year university degree at Loughborough College had been enough to tell me, by example, where I should stay. Then of course as I grew older I'd come to love my life, my niche here, my home. Kenya had got under my skin. I'd achieved enlightenment here -- under blue African skies, watching a elephant drink at a swamps edge in the Amboseli National Park. That enlightenment had set me free from the dogma of religion and my spirit had soared on the African plain. It had suddenly hit me -- that connection that all things have to each other. In that moment I had seen something -- my place in the universe, my relationship to all the things that crawl this planet and my psyche had altered in ways I still cannot describe. I'd 'found' myself and my soul had rooted it's core into the ground of Africa and would never be 'whole' if taken from this base of its existence. This had been reinforced by the numerous cases of uncles, aunts and friends that I'd met over the years in so many other countries: One had met me in Hounslow in the UK and during my entire stay with him he'd whined about Kisumu, pined for days gone by, cried for the land of our collective birth. The land where he'd been born and he'd described to me how in his dreams that very night he'd been there, walked the streets, played with friends by the lake. Ominously he'd added:

"At least in my sleep I was back in Kisumu."

This had shocked me and the look in his eyes had been haunting and haunts me to this day. I'd not known then how to tell him that even at his advanced age and with his commitment to look after my blind and crippled grandmother, he could still move back to Kenya, to live out what little life he might have left; that perhaps he'd live longer than he thought possible just by being back and rooted like me. It had been impossible though, and he had seen it then, saying so in as many words. He'd passed away a few years after my visit, waiting on the UK National Health Service for a second cardiac bypass surgery, and I'd wondered what hell those years had been for him harbouring his secret, looking south in the evenings dreaming of his childhood in the land of my dreams. Dreaming, where my dreams come true each and every day where his are but that only --- dreams.

So a seed had been sown though I would not realise this for many months. It would take root and fight with my African core. And it would displace that, core take me close to losing myself, pull me back then lose me all over again. Only through monumental struggle thousands of kilometres from my home would I come back passing through the fogs in my mind to find home waiting for me. Waiting as though smiling at me, as though laughing at my folly in thinking that I'd be able to subtract myself from this the very root of my existence. The only place where *the roots of my soul go down to the centre of the Earth.*

The shadow

Discharge is quick and painless. They don't even ask for money -- a first for Kenyan hospitals! I guess it's because Ami is ex-staff and I'm a doctor. They trust us to pay later and Ami completes

the paperwork in double quick time and comes back to St.Luke's to find Imre talking to me uncharacteristically resting in a seat by my bay window into which I've also set my behind.

"OK, Neal. Here's the little lady."

"So, you were saying, I should rest the arm? What about exercise?"

"That all depends on how much pain you feel. If you can't feel much pain you should exercise as much as you can tolerate. No weights mind you."

"Surely I should start with low weight and build up the arm?"

"OK, do that but don't stress out the arm. There is a large gap between the bone ends -- as much as one centimetre. You need to get that to close with callus formation so try not to disturb it but of course the rest of your body you need to keep up."

"Drugs?"

"Oral antibiotics, I'm giving you Zinacef 'coz you've been on that so far parenterally. So take 500 mg orally twice a day for two weeks then see KG. He'll probably continue your dose for another two weeks and then see him again and decide with him what to do next. If you need pain killers I'm sure you know what to get."

"Don't think I'll need those. The trip home will be the hardest but after that I don't think there'll be too much pain."

"Ox!" smiling then shaking his head, "You've made me think about going to a gym but I'm too old to start that now."

"You should. Don't compete with anyone but yourself. Don't be shy. Just get in there and heft some weights and stop telling all your students about the value of weight-bearing exercise when you don't do any yourself."

"OK, OK. Stop playing doctor with me."

We shake hands, me using my left hand, he being awkward with his right holding the back of my left, and he leaves. At the door he stops and looks back at me.

"Good luck."

"Thanks Imre. I'll be seeing you soon."

"I sincerely hope not!"

And he's gone.

Ami gathers up my things and we head out to Don who's been holding our little Toyota Starlet in a double-parked spot. The trip home, though the road is so well known, seems to go on forever. We come to the dirt road and the bumps and ruts are killing me. I yelp every few seconds and feel the car slow each time but manage to blurt out, "I'm OK," and then she's driving too fast again and I want to howl once more. I hold my tongue and grind my teeth against the stabs of pain. That's when my tongue picks out the broken teeth for which thought I have only a shaken head. "What else is wrong with me?" I think. Aloud I say nothing and try to control my yelps. Little do I realise this early in the game what really is wrong with me.

Finally we're home and I sink into the living room sofas. I feel like I've climbed Mount Kenya again on one of those interminable, exhausting mountain rescues. Still the silence, smells of home, Demi, babies, they all help me come back to Earth! A journey has come to end; there is a sense of coming back into myself; there is no ill-feeling towards the house and the anger that's been in me all this time seems to abate. I take a tour of the house; Ami tells me about friends that came and welded the upstairs door shut, the door through which the thugs came. It was the only thing they could do given the emergency state that we were in. They wanted to secure the family in the shortest, surest way possible. I want to see the door I was shot through; I want to do a little of my own forensics. At the door I take a close look at the hole just above the lock and another mark higher up in the middle upper part. This is where the bullet went through and into me on the other side.

"So it appears they tried to blow the bolt off?"

"Yes," says Don, "Did you see what sort of gun they had?"

I describe the gun and Don thinks it was a Beretta. Don is a gun collector so we contemplate this.

"What sort would have a Beretta?"

The answer is not something I want or need to hear, "Cops." He pauses, "Or military." Nonchalantly said but carrying the weight of ages and hints of fear.

"That would explain the radio's and the professional way in which they handled them."

"And the big brute in the black jacket. Maybe he was the only cop?" asks Ami.

"Maybe. I got a good look at him."

"Perhaps that was not a good thing," says Don.

"At this moment Don, I really don't care." I blurt out. "If they couldn't get me then they won't ever

get me."

He gives me a strange look but says, "That's the spirit."

Of course we've had a lot of discussions about 'that night' while killing time at the hospital but we still pointlessly go over it again now. Over the coming months we'll go over this again and again and I'll go over it countless times in my head. Not good but inevitable. I can say this now that I can look back at it from the distance of fifteen years. I should have sought a friend that had experienced this sort of thing himself and not dwelled on it 'alone' like I'm doing now. Where would I find such a friend? There was no one I could have talked to. Years later I'd write this book after I'd sat and talked to dozens of others that had suffered in this way not just via thuggery but from car accidents, mountain mishaps and even one who fell from the roof of his house and suffered the same sort of symptoms. Some of them would have been through a robbery in which they suffered no injury but looked down the barrel of a gun. Some would have had a bullet pass clean through their chest missing all vital organs. One had a bullet tear through his throat and lodge itself in his spine incredibly not causing any spinal defects. They would come from all walks of life and from three different countries. Some became religious, others gave up religion. Some left Kenya; others took to the hills and spent more time in nature. I'd help many mostly because I had found no such help when I much needed it. I would walk many through the trauma and in turn they would help me see my own trauma for what it was. This would only come after this physician healed himself and that healing was far away at this point in my story.

I sleep all afternoon. My arm is throbbing when I wake. I realise it's starting to swell and send Ami off hunting in our camping gear for a webbing strap and some rings and carabiners. I jury-rig my plaster cast so that I can tie my arm up to an electric bedside light. With my arm held above my body like this the swelling abates and the throbbing disappears. I become remarkably pain-free but put my arm down by my side and within minutes it starts hurting again. I don't realise it at the time but I'm going to have to sleep with my arm above my head, tied to that bedside lamp, for over a year. A horrible year that will be. A year of tormented questioning in which I will descend to depths of my mind that I never thought existed. For now though I'm content to sleep, eat a little and exist in a kind of no-man's-land, a place between 'here' and 'there,' a kind of suspension of the normal animations of life.

Later that evening family gather around my bed and we chat and laugh about inconsequential things. Mostly it feels like we laugh about 'death-cheated.' Sometimes I feel like an airplane close to the stall, juddering a little from time to time but spending a lot of time wallowing in the air not knowing where she goes next. Then RG's face appears in my bedroom door MrsG following closely. After the customary meet-and-greet RG sits on my bed and fumbles in his pocket. From there he produces my wedding ring and beckons for my ring finger. I had forgotten that he took it off my finger in the emergency room and that I had asked him to keep it for me. This is the first time since Ami and I got married that a ring has come off either of our fingers; it's been on my finger for all of seventeen years at this point.

RG now places it back on my ring finger and asks if he should say a short prayer. Prayer and I are not the best of bedfellows but at this juncture it seems appropriate that someone of any faith might want to enjoin me in some belief system of his. I don't begrudge him his kind thoughts and the prayer touches the others in the room. I watch as Anita's eyes brim and Sheila chokes back her thoughts and the questions that stalk her mind. The thoughts shine through to me from the depths of her dark brown eyes. She looks like she aged several years from this episode. I feel like I got younger and yet there's something that does not sit 'right' within my psyche though I cannot put a finger on it yet.

The prayer over and the ring securely back on my finger a gaiety pervades the room. The doorbell rings and Don goes to see who it is. He's back in a bit to say he thinks we should go down into the living room as we have a number of guests coming to meet me. 'A number of guests' is an underestimation. The house fills with people and I learn about MrsMK who took over the house in the wee hours of the morning of the 10th of June, 1999, and made tea and coffee for everyone till our pantry ran dry. I learn about a complete stranger who had made sure Demi and my kids were warmly tucked into blankets and sleeping where everyone could keep an eye on them. I meet this stranger and we realise we've lived as neighbours for years. I hear about RG's sister who went from house to house at 2am ringing doorbells and spreading the news, calling for solidarity in that hour of need. I hear individual voices wish me well as they ask how I am. I hear praise for my strength and anger at what I had to go through. I hear grand plans about securing the estate and discussions on how we must 'get' the thugs and set an example so that this does not happen in Nyari again.

We laugh and joke but at the back of my mind a dark shadow starts to form. I notice it. A passage from one of my favourite books -- Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* -- *The Loosing of the Shadow* -- comes to mind:

'At the Stone's command, he did speak to raise up a dead spirit out of the realm of the dead, but his wizardry being bent awry by the Stone's will there came with the dead spirit also a thing not summoned, which did devour him out from within and in his shape walked, destroying men.' But the book did not say what the thing was nor did it tell the end of the tale. And the Masters did not know where such a shadow might come from: from unlife the Archmage had said; from the wrong side of the world, said the Master Changer; and the Master Summoner said, 'I do not know.'

I push the shadow away and bring my mind back to the room full of gaiety and laughter. I look at the faces one by one. I am happy one minute, distant the next but all the while I feel as one who is suddenly startled by something that seems to frighten but that is not really there. Or is it?

Catching The Buggers

Chup -- reloaded

The chup-laden stories mount up now in earnest. This person and that was molested, Sushila-ben was raped, thugs made off with everything. Positively EVERYTHING that Mitul and family had in their house was taken, even the wall sockets! The really bad ones were the ones in which a person was hacked to death gory details being eagerly provided -- "After she was dead they cut off her arms!"

It did not help to have a Nyari radio by my bedside every waking moment and every sleeping one too. My 'flying mind' would be on a kind of background processing mode which I had learned to employ in my excursions into the sky. One learns this after flying for a while and it is an essential skill that, until learned, is a stumbling block in any flying career. After a number of hours 'in the circuit' the chatter on the radio suddenly disappears into the background of ones busily processing mind and yet is not gone for good, not ignored. By some little-understood quirk of our minds we are able to put the stream of messages on the radio into a kind of 'side channel' and not let it intrude into our present thought stream, then when our call sign is uttered we immediately switch to the radio and start paying attention to that. This skill rhymed a great deal with me from my computing knowledge; a CPU -- Central Processing Unit -- does essentially the same thing -- listening on a 'port' for an incoming message and processing that when it recognizes it. But while in 'listening mode' the processor is still busy carrying out it's many other tasks not just sitting idly by waiting for that incoming message. A web server waits for an incoming message on its Port 80 and when you type the web address of the server -- say www.ubuntu.com -- the server 'wakes up' and handles your request for a web page sending you what it has been designed to send. As it does this by divvying up time into very small time slots and paying attention to them turn-by-turn I guess this is what the human mind also does. Maybe it tunes out the radio chatter but keeps sort of pinging that channel very quickly but for a very short time *slice* - just enough to figure out if it was you that was being hailed on the air waves.

So, the radio sat by my bedside and chattered away, albeit on a low volume so as not to wake Ami, but chatter it did. And therein lay a massive problem: I had designed the entire network as well as all the callsigns that we used in Nyari including my own call sign -- Charlie One. Rarely, if ever was this call sign heard as the guards would try their best not to disturb me but all the other call signs, Delta One, Delta Five, Alpha One played in my mind like beacons on a hill on a stormy night every call sign pulling me out of my 'side channel mode' and putting me on high, nervous alert. And if Charlie One ever floated out of the radio I'd be up like a rocket my nerves tingling my fingers fumbling for the volume knob. Following some particularly busy nights I'd wake up exhausted after sleep that was interrupted innumerable times by that very radio system that I'd built to secure our own peace of mind.

One evening we came home and settled down to watch some TV. The radio sat by my seat in

front of the TV. Around 9 pm it hissed into life and this time I heard, clear as a bell, "Charlie One, Charlie One from base." I fumbled for my handset answering before base had a chance to call me again. Apparently one of our members had had a break in. I immediately contacted my head of security.

"Alpha One from Charlie One."

After a wait of about thirty seconds.

"Alpha One from Charlie One. How do you read?"

"Reading you five by five. Go ahead."

"Also reading you five five Alpha one. We have a break-in at HP residence. Your location?"

Needless to say TV watching was all but destroyed as the entire family was all ears little 6-year-old and 1-year-old included. We decided that Alpha One and myself should meet at the HP residence and I headed out of my house in a rush driving our little Starlet at a good clip using my left hand to both hold the steering wheel and shift gears my other arm still in a cast. Arriving at HP's house we found the place in relative darkness but the lights came on seconds after we rang the gate bell. The electronic gates opened and we poured in us senior management accompanied by four Nyari guards. Talking to HP he told us that he had come into his yard just before 9 pm entered his home and only then realized that the burglar bars on his front windows had been cut and lay prized up at an odd angle. He had then immediately called Nyari Security who had rapidly dispatched four guards to his house who'd gone into the house with him to find nothing amiss. Nothing had been stolen. HP and family of four were unhurt so we posted a guard to sit by the front of the house until morning when HP would be able to get his staff to come over and weld back the cut security grill.

We went our separate ways and the next day liaised with HP to confirm that he had repaired his security measures and that our guard would not be needed that night. All the same we posted two guards on his street and they patrolled all that night and for several more nights thereafter. No one was too bothered by this incident being, as it were, the typical attempted burglary one encounters the world over. So it came as a great surprise when Ami's Dad and Mum came home one evening, two cousins in tow, to visit with us with this to tell:

Ami's mum: "Did you hear about HP?"

Me: Not offering my 'horses mouth' version I asked "What happened."

Ami's Dad: "We were at Sushila-bens house and they told us HP was attacked and he is very badly injured. Shouldn't you people from Nyari go visit him in hospital."

Me: "Oh. Which hospital is he in?"

Cousin: "He's in M P Shah. I don't know which room."

Me: "Are you sure of this?" Sidelong glance at Ami to signal her to keep silent about what we already knew.

Ami's Dad: "They say he's quite badly hurt and the wife also."

Cousin 1: "The kids were also beaten up and the daughter was raped."

There it was -- Chup -- hatched, enhanced, reloaded, regurgitated and spat out back at us. It came with its usual vengeance and it *assaulted* my mind at levels I didn't even know existed in there. I came out with both guns firing from the hip my anger levels rising rapidly. "This is exactly the thing that I've been asking all of you to stop doing to me and to all the others that have to endure such nonsense. It does not help us at all in our mental stability. Don't you realize what you are doing?"

Cousin 2: "We heard this ourselves. It's the truth Neal."

"Even if it's the truth don't you think you should KEEP it from me?"

But in typical fashion they heard me not at all and went on like this sparing none of the tons of detail they had about the rape, how HP himself was facing a gun when he was bludgeoned with a large stick and left bleeding from multiple injuries. Then to make their point the thugs apparently not satisfied with having disabled the home-owner took to hitting him in the head with a machete leaving a huge wound that nearly bled him out. They added that HP was fighting for his life his daughter in the ICU bed next to him dealing with the physical pain, anguish, stigma and more of rape and her own PTSD now wending its way through her mental circuits. Of course this is what I interpreted. They just provided the fuel and added more by the minute ...

Cousin 1: "The guy who raped her has AIDS so now her life is over."

Me -- unable to contain myself any more: "Spreading this kind of rubbish has got to stop. How do you know the rapist has HIV? They have not been caught so who's tested him for HIV?"

Cousin 2: "They tested HP's daughter, she's positive."

Me -- now really losing it: "Now you are talking rubbish. In Kenya today, in fact the world over, there is no test that can detect the AIDS virus before an incubation period of several weeks. You're talking through your butt. What nonsense. I've never heard such rubbish. And HP is a member of our estate, our community here. We've been over to his house and there's nothing, NOTHING, N O T H I N G, wrong with him. He came home to find one of his grills cut and I went there that very same night and saw the damage. None of the family had been home when the grill was cut. This is exactly the kind of thing I've been asking all of you to stop doing. Stop this

rumour-mongering. Stop scaring yourselves silly. All of you are such cowards and you're making cowards of the entire community. What a bunch of sissies. I've had enough of you lot. I'm getting away from you as you're determined to continue this nonsense even after I asked you to stop. I won't be down to say goodbye so let yourselves out when you're done scaring the daylights out of each other."

With that I left them in the living room with Ami and headed up to my bedroom stomping my way up the stairs a little too loudly fully aware of the silence I had left downstairs following my outburst. I slammed my bedroom door shut staring at the bullet holes still gaping through the wood and telling myself that I really had to deal with those soon for the benefit of visitors as much as for my own sanity.

Ultimate Security

As the chup stories grew in number, the severity of the mangling growing with the retelling, we sought to employ a security company. Researching we considered price, reputation and availability in Nyari and settled on a company called Ultimate Security. They proved to be a good lot coming to our house gate within two to five minutes of our panic button press. Within fifteen seconds of pressing the button I'd receive a phone call from their HQ asking if we were OK and they'd make the visit to the gate even if I said all was well.

In the evenings on our way home, mainly on Friday evenings when I'd visit my folks about five kilometres away from our Nyari home, I was able to stop at a petrol station near their home and talk to the driver of the Ultimate Security vehicle parked there telling them my membership number, and they'd make their radio calls and follow me home and wait at the gate until we got into the house.

It was all very reassuring but at the same time a little disconcerting. A friend came over one evening and urged me to get some training and acquire a weapon. I considered this and talked it over with the family.

"Neal, I don't think you should do this," said Sheila.

"I agree with Sheila Neal. We know of so many cases of people who have got a gun and the thugs have come to visit them for that very gun," Anita adding her bit. Her bit of chup!

Many more such sessions followed and they went neither one way nor the other. Those that were already armed talked about how it made them feel stronger to be trained and to know how to defend themselves. Those that were not armed talked about how your own weapon could and would be used against you. Those that were armed talked about the confidence it gave them and the many more advantages. The unarmed talked about how if you just kept your head down the thugs would take what they wanted and leave you alone. I could not help but think that if I had been lying in bed that night with a nine millimetre semi-automatic by my side my own story would have been quite different. Would it have been a better story? That I could not figure

out but it certainly would have felt better to have been able to do something about the situation than to just wait there holding a door shut only to be shot through it.

This conversation got to me:

"Neal, what would you do if you woke up one night to the sound of someone breaking your front door down with a big rock? All you could do is hide in your bedroom waiting for them to get in and hoping that they would not succeed."

"That's what we have a remote alarm for Anil."

"Alarms are known to fail Neal. What happens if the power fails and there's no backup power?"

"The power can't fail on this house remember. We are off-the-grid. Our power comes from our own solar system and wind turbines."

"That's all well and good but it's a mechanical, man-made system isn't it? Systems can fail and they usually do at the worst possible moment. A gun is there as backup Neal. You have it to defend yourself if all else fails."

"Ultimate are here within two minutes Anil. We've timed them many times just to check and we run those checks regularly."

"Two minutes is their best case scenario Neal. What happens if their HQ radio is down, or they have an accident rushing here or a puncture? Even in the US -- check on YouTube -- the cops can't respond within at best five to ten minutes. In ten minutes the thugs have killed you, raped your girls, got the loot and gone."

CHUP but he had a point there. I watched a few YouTube videos and my mental state sank. Finally I decided to go for a firearm license. I asked around and one of our estate members said he'd ask his contact at The Firearms Bureau. We found the right guy but the first thing he asked for was the fee that was so high there was no way I'd be able to afford it especially not after the massive bills I'd sustained in getting my arm sorted out. After building myself up to the thought that I'd have a way to protect my family I had to accept defeat and dejection at not being able to afford the license. I resigned myself to living as I'd lived right up to the attack. And I was left with that resignation but now from a deeper sunk down level.

To make matters worse we woke one evening to Anil and his wife screaming across the valley for help. Our neighbour called me on the phone, the radio crackled with panicked voices, Ultimate and KK security company car sirens shattered the night and then two shots rang out and we heard over our radio that a thug had been shot dead and another was on the run bleeding badly. This latter one was later found dead in the field across from our house. But the clincher? As Anil's door was being broken down with a large rock, his German Shepherds tied up in a dog house, he had had been able to do nothing but shout out from his bedroom window

into which room he and his wife had barricaded themselves. His gun? He'd never had one! His story and push for me to get one had been just that --- a story! Why? Chup of course. The shots that had rung out had been from a Administration Police officer that another neighbour had been assigned due to his political standing! That AP had shot a thug dead while the second thug had made a getaway. I didn't head over to Anil's to commiserate; I didn't talk to Anil for many months after that.

Evenings heading home in chup

Visiting my folks on Friday evenings started to take on mental nightmare proportions. All would be OK until the time to depart, usually round about 9 pm, started to draw closer. Within 30 minutes from leaving for home I'd be fretting and looking out the windows of my folks' living room. After what seemed an age the time to leave would arrive and we'd say our goodbyes and head to our car. Now every step of the trip back home would be agonizing. I'd reverse out of their gate climbing the awkward step to the main road. That step would jar the entire car and it's occupants most of all me and so innocuous a thing to many a fellow human would put me on edge and start a cascade of gradually growing panic that would culminate in our final stepping over the threshold of our house. I'd shut the door in a kind of semi-panic that someone might be following me in.

On the way home, about two kilometres from my Dad's house we'd pass a petrol station. Ultimate Security usually had an emergency response vehicle stationed there. We'd pull up next to them and ask if they were able to follow us home. Never once did they hesitate or refuse to follow us. They'd just have to call in to their HQ to say they were going to my house with me and then we'd be off. The problem would arise when they weren't there at the petrol station. Then we'd really be on edge. I'd drive fast, way too fast, up the road to the International School and through the coffee plantation still the rough dirt track that I'd bounced over that night with the bullet's still freshly inserted through and into my body. The road through the coffee had earned a reputation through many cases of people being dumped there, sometimes injured, most times not knowing where on earth they were, sometimes dead.

One particularly bad incident was a member of Nyari who had been dropped on a corner, with her husband, in the coffee, just after midnight on a Friday night. Her husband, being elderly and somewhat confused, had at first refused to get out of the car and then delayed too long prodding his ageing joints into action. The thugs had shot him in cold blood dumping him on the roadside his life ebbing away as his wife watched in horror and helplessness. Then they'd thrown her out to join him on the embankment. The thugs took off and she'd sat there not knowing what to do sobbing over her mate's dead body. Finally she'd headed down the road in the dark no shoes on her feet -- they'd stolen even those.

All these details had trickled down to us through the Nyari grapevine and we'd rushed off to sit with and console her in her living room her house suffusing me with that feeling, that emptiness that mine came only too close to living with themselves. She'd been distraught of course and helping her, although it did take my mind off my own troubles for a while, did not do much at all

to calm my increasingly fraying nerves.

Acacia's night fright

One night as we headed home Ultimate were not at their station. We hung around a little but then decided to take a different road home, past my sisters house, to avoid going through the coffee plantation thereby avoiding the dark, unlit road. The drive was uneventful if a little faster than usual. We got to our gate and Ami hopped out and opened it and we crossed the threshold in our now accustomed urgent style. We put Gaia to bed managing not to wake her all the way from the car through the main door opening, locking and up the stairs to her bed. Acacia was a little more troubled than usual and would not climb into her bed so we made us three some hot chocolate and sat in our living room talking. Eventually Acacia dropped off and Ami carried her to bed tucking her in and heading off to our own room. Sometime in the night, I think it must have been around that dreaded 1am hour, a blood curdling screaming filled the dark night. I woke with a start unable to figure out where the sound was coming from wondering what it was all about. Ami woke with a start too and almost fell out of bed. We listened, both of us confused and filled with sleepiness. Then it dawned on us and we simultaneously shouted:

"Acacia!"

We ran to her room, bursting in to find her sitting up in bed, staring at the window.

"What is it?"

"There's someone outside my window," she sobbed.

I gingerly peeped through the crack between the curtains and then pulled them apart violently.

"Look sweetheart, there's no one there."

"I saw someone there," she nearly screamed at me climbing into her mother's arms. "I saw someone there. There was a man there."

Reaching for the Ultimate Security remote that hung around my neck those days, even as I slept, I pressed the button and looked back at Acacia. "I've pressed the alarm baby, they'll be here soon. Watch -- they're going to phone and they'll come. Don't cry."

The phone in our office rang and I bounded down the stairs telling the controller that my daughter thought she'd seen someone on the roof. He calmly informed me that their response vehicle would be with me in a minute or two. A minute later the doorbell rang and I headed out to bring the guards in. Hackles raised on the back of my neck from the walk to the gate in the dark, I told them what Acacia had said and apologised that it was probably just my little one's mind playing tricks on her. Not for a moment did I spare a thought for how my own mind was tricking me every waking moment of each day and night. The guards insisted that they take a

look around the house and then asked me to take them up onto the roof. Once we were satisfied that there was no one around and had even checked very thoroughly for scuff marks, broken grass stems, bush branches or footprints in the roof gardens I asked the guards to indulge me and brought Acacia out in her jammies and made a round of the house. Thanking the guards for their quick response and help I shut the gate and headed into the house. I noticed they did not leave and felt a warmth towards them that I directed towards Acacia impressing on her that she had been around the house herself and not found anyone. We then went up to her bedroom and looked around at what could have been the cause of her imagining someone on the roof. We looked at the shadows on the walls and found one that looked like it could be confused for the shadow of a man especially as it waved about in the light coming into her window from across the lake.

Acacia slowly settled down and finally fell asleep. Ami and I headed back to bed and fell asleep too to wake in the morning with a lingering dread though we'd found nothing to alarm any of us.

The police ask us to help

Adding to the chup came a new twist. A neighbour of mine, a government minister, popped in one evening and joined us in a cup of tea. He requested that he remove his weapon so he could sit more comfortably and then proceeded to remove a semi-automatic pistol from his belt and place it on our coffee table. I looked at it quizzically but made no move or request to handle it.

"Bwana Aggarwal there are some guards and other members of our community here that are saying they know who did this to you."

"I've heard that Anthony a former Nyari guard says he can identify them, Bwana M."

"Yes he is one of them but there are others too. I wanted to request that you assist us to catch them."

"I don't know about that. I've heard a lot of stories about thugs seeking revenge and coming back to hit a house again if they have been identified."

"These thugs will never be able to come back to bother you or anyone else again, I assure you of that."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"That is my assurance. If we can catch them -- I know we can -- they will be hanged. I will make sure of that. We are very powerful in Nyari, I don't have to tell you."

"Not powerful enough to prevent my near death huh?"

"We are sorry about that daktari but now we have a chance to put an end to this string of

robberies. The police are also seeking our help."

Stories of revenge cascaded through my mind. There were tons of these. I worried about bringing more wrath into my home but also worried about the state of my own mind. I was thrown about this way and that as though in a stormy sea the waves giving me no quarter. I wondered about my anger at chup and the stories that I had been telling others not to spread. Could I be the victim of those stories --- could they be only that --- stories? Revenge really or just the opportunity to attack the most cowardly community in the country --- the idiots that go out and buy more stuff for you to steal and hand it all over with little more than a few squeaks.

"Bwana M, let me think about it and I'll get back to you."

"Fine, fine. But don't take too long. We might miss our chance at catching them."

Ami and I debated the value of catching the thugs. The OCPD -- Officer Commanding Police Division -- of Gigiri Division called to ask us to come in and talk to him. I was very rude and refused to go in to the Police Station. That evening accompanied by the Nyari Chairman, he came to visit and impressed upon us the need to identify the thugs, to let the police do their bit and bring the buggers to trial. He told me that it was a clear cut case if only we could catch them. Trying to allay our fears he said they'd be hanged for their crime -- robbery with violence -- which in Kenya carries the death penalty to this day. Finally we gave in and agreed to help the cops catch the perpetrators.

EPIRB

Things began to move very quickly. Two police officers showed up within a few hours of the OCPD leaving our home. I explained to them that I had lost an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon -- EPIRB -- in the robbery and that the thugs had probably turned it on and seeing it's flashing red LED might be thinking it a pretty sight or perhaps were wondering what kind of device it is and were turning it on and off from time to time. Or perhaps a child has it and is playing with it. I told the cops that if it was active it would soon run out of charge hence an urgency in my finding it. The detectives produced the Nyari guard who had agreed to help catch the thieves and he led us to a dump of a house in the nearby Gachie shanty town. I asked the cops to hand me the air band radio they'd brought at my request and turned this on tuning it to 121.5 MHz the international emergency distress frequency. The EPIRB -- an old obsolete model by today's standards -- was designed to warble on the international distress frequency if turned on.

And what do you know! As we approach Gachie 121.5 comes alive on the handset. Our informer guard leads us through narrow lanes between the shacks -- very slum-like. The place stinks from the open sewers. "Sewer rats," I think. I put on my headset so that my radio warble, a distinctive and odd sound in these settings, will not be heard. The warble stops sounding, still our informer guard leads us on. We cross a open drain full of grey/black stinking water and ascend up a small slope. Suddenly the guard stops and motions with finger-to-lips that we must

keep quiet. We get right up against a shack wall. The cops look at me a question clearly in their eyes. I shake my head from side-to-side to indicate that I have no warble now. They signal to each other and I am surprised to see that they know tactical hand signals and are using them now. Clearly the 'modus operandi' has suddenly changed the situation taking on very serious proportions. I think of that surgeon all those days back in Thika and how his demeanour had changed so drastically once the patient had been 'put under.' These guys here have no bullet-proof jackets, no helmets, none of the pizzaz that we see on TV. Here and now though 'this is OUR SWAT TEAM,' I think, a smile creeping across my face. In suits and looking like your everyday businessmen we confront whatever lies behind that door -- no one can guess at what we are about to face -- the distinctive dreaded shape of an AK47 swims in my mind? "Open the door Ami, we have no chance against a machine gun," I hear echoing in my head. Another mistake about to happen?

One detective puts his hand up to his ear in a clear 'listen' tactical gesture. We all hush up. Guns are drawn now and the first detective motions for the second to go around him and wait at the door. #2 goes round and stops at the door. He moves his head right up to the broken wood that the nasty thing is made of. He seems to be peeping in then he turns and makes a hand signal that sinks my heart. He flashes 4 fingers of his left hand and a full right hand! NINE thugs in there and we are going to face them at any moment -- three of us, one unarmed and disabled, one armed with a radio and two with hand guns?

Suddenly my radio warbles in my ears. It is so loud that I think everyone must be hearing it. I curse and the 'shit' that I utter is heard by everyone. #1 turns to me with a very stern look in his eye. We stand stock still Impala gazelle like, frozen in headlights. From inside the shack talking continues unabated and I signal #2 that I had the warble in my ears. He nods vigorously making the sign for 'enter.' #1 roughly pushes me to the rear and crowds his partner. As #2 reaches for the door handle I cringe.

I watch the cop turn the handle ever so slowly then speed up his actions suddenly flinging open the door and there is shouting and then the loudest bang I have ever heard. And then it's all over almost in the blink of an eye. I can see our guard pinning someone to the ground, #2 cuffing someone and #1 was doing the same. #1 tells me to stay outside and I scamper further away from the dingy shack. He tosses me his radio shouting "call." Call whom? I have no idea so I just trigger the radio's push-to-talk and ask if anyone is monitoring this frequency. I get an immediate response.

"Papa 1 your status?"

"We have caught the thugs, please send help."

"Say again. You need help?"

"Affirm"

"Roger vehicle on route. With you in one."

"With us in one copied."

My radio skills surface automatically and elicit the professionalism born of those 'in the know' recognising another of like mind and training, recognising a team player in danger and in need. Action to render immediate support is taken. In under a minute four burly police officers carrying G3 rifles are in the shack and cuffing perps. Four thugs emerge. The cops volunteer answering my unasked question "There were nine people in the house. Six have run away." I do not comment on the arithmetic thinking instead of an attack by the ones that got away to come back and help their brethren. We get the four to the squad car and I look from one to the other. They keep their heads down. I think that I recognize one of them. Can't be sure though.

Identification - being swayed

Now the police start to visit us more often. They are obviously thrilled that we have managed to catch the thugs. Then comes the day that I have to identify them.

"Daktari tomorrow morning we are arranging to have you and your wife identify the people who attacked you." Two detectives have come home again -- different ones from the guys that had taken me to the house in Gachie to grab the buggers. This is the bigger of the detectives speaking -- a very friendly-faced Masai chappy with pierced ears incongruous against his smart suit.

"Where do I have to go to do this?"

"Parklands Police Station as the perpetrators are there."

"What time?"

"If you can come to the station early it would be better. We want to get this work out of the way before the daily routine of the station starts. Can you be there at nine sharp?"

"Will you guys really be ready for us at that time or will you keep us waiting until lunch time or afternoon?"

"Daktari this is a matter we detectives are handling. This is not a traffic police issue. They are the guys that can keep you waiting, not us. We assure you, you will identify the thugs and be back home within an hour or two."

"OK, we'll be there."

After the detectives leave I call KC our neighbour from across the lake and one that has provided us with tremendous support throughout the search for the thugs, the reloaded chup

times and more.

"KC we've been asked to be at the police station tomorrow morning to identify the thugs."

"What time?"

"They want us there at nine so we're going to leave at eight thirty."

"You need me to drive you Neal?"

"Ami is going to drive. My arm is still pretty useless."

"They want Ami also?"

"Yes, they said we both have to identify the thugs."

"Did they tell you the procedure?"

"I did not ask. Is there anything special?"

"Not really, just the usual thing. They'll line up the thugs and some other people in the courtyard in the station -- you know the one I mean -- and then you'll just look at them all carefully and point at the one that shot you and perhaps the others that were in your house if you see them in the line-up."

"What do you mean in the courtyard? Will the thugs be able to see me?"

"Yes bwana, that's how it's done here."

"We won't be behind a one-way mirror?"

"This is not Hollywood mate."

"Whoa! I don't think I want to do that. They will have full view of me and will know that I identified them and then there might be trouble after that."

"Neal, don't overreact, they'd know you had identified them anyway. Their lawyer will tell them and anyway they'll see you in court one of these days won't they?"

"KC I did not expect this. I don't want to come face-to-face with them again. Let's just scrap this. I'll call the cops and tell them I don't want to go through with this if they don't provide a one-way glass."

"Neal, I really think you should go through this. Identify them, stop this happening in Nyari. It's

time us muindis (Kenyan-Indians) stop being such chickens and stand up for ourselves."

"I'm not a chicken KC but but sorry I can't go through with this."

We talk a little more. I am vaguely aware that KC tried again and again to persuade me to go through with the process but my mind is already in turmoil and I do not hear what he says until...

"OK, Neal, let me make the call. Give me the detectives numbers and I'll call them and see what I can do."

I dictate the numbers and then talk to Ami. We both agree that the confrontation will be traumatic and scary. We have a troubled lunch in which the food barely seems to screech past my dry throat. Afternoon siesta is a welcome reprieve from the mental torture and we spend the evening together on the driveway. At 4 pm the phone rings and it's KC.

"Neal, Detective Sereni is coming to visit you. He just wants to talk. Please listen to him. If you like, when he comes, give me a call and I'll also pop over, OK?"

"OK, KC, I'll call you." I am not happy with this but don't feel I have much choice. Sereni is already on his way!

I have hardly hung up the phone and got back into my deck chair on our sunny driveway when our gate bell rings. Ami opens the gate to a silver grey Toyota Corolla which rolls down the driveway giving me a friendly flash of it's headlights behind it coming a dark green Land Cruiser. I recognize KC's Cruiser.

"Daktari, so good to see you again." Sereni's greeting is friendly, very friendly -- a little too syrupy for me. "Bwana KC called us and told us your concerns."

"Both my wife and I don't want to go through with this any more." I explain our reasoning delivering a full five minute mini-speech. The gate bell rings during the speech and another car comes in -- a jet-black Mercedes. Out of that vehicle pops a Minister friend and neighbour of ours.

"Hey doc. How are you?"

"I fine thanks mweshimiwa (minister)."

"Don't get up. I heard about the identification tomorrow and that you and the misses don't want to go through with it."

We get into a long discussion in which they try to allay our fears pointing out that the thugs already know who we are and also know that I have helped to catch them in Gachie and that at some point I'd have to go through an identification process pointing them out. The persuasion

goes on for some time before the clincher comes.

"Daktari -- as your friend and neighbour -- you have an image in your mind of who these guys are don't you? You said that they had a weapon, they talked on radio and wore long black kabutis (cloaks) didn't you?"

"Yes I did."

"So then with that in your mind you must have conjecturing going on in there that tells you something about these fellows. Are they police officers, were they sent by some enemy of yours, was robbery not the main issue but were they there really to kill you? For what? Business competition, family feud? What?"

"Yes I do have a lot of theories floating around between my ears."

The detectives laugh at that and mweshimiwa says, "See you still have a sense of humour. You are strong -- in fact you are the strongest person I have ever met. Imagine, if you don't identify these fellows the case will fall apart and they will walk free as of tomorrow morning. They will then be back around here and will go back to robbing homes again. That will be something for all of us, including you to worry about. Is that what you want? But more important, you will not be settled in your mind. You will be growing demons in there. We are all going to be behind you. I will also come to the police station if you like but we really must get these fellows behind bars and send a clear message that Nyari is not to be messed with."

Something snaps. I actually feel it 'go' in my mind, almost an audible click. All fear drops away from me and a calmness seems to cloak me in a protective embrace. I look from detective to detective, from minister to neighbour and last from Ami to Don. I feel the warmth of the day infuse itself into my mind and when I next look at Sereni he is smiling. It is a knowing smile. He knows he has won. No, we have won. We have climbed out of some hole and are now embarking on a new road.

I look at Ami as I say, "OK, let's do this."

The lineup

We pick KC up in our little Starlet and head to the station Ami driving like a rally-driver and impressing KC no end when she negotiates a steep downhill with sharp right-hand bend on it without as much as lifting her foot off the throttle one bit. Arriving at the station we find it quiet, park the car near the main entrance and head in.

At the front desk a uniformed constable: "Daktari, we are expecting you. Thank you for doing this. Don't be concerned about anything at all. We are here for you."

I have never been treated this well in a police station before and it comes as surprise. It has not

yet struck me that catching these thugs has put a very large feather into the cops caps and they're gunning for brownie points even perhaps promotions via this case.

"Doc, please come this way." I am led with Ami and KC in close tow, to an office across the station courtyard.

"Have a seat."

We sit on hard benches. The officer leaves us but is soon back.

"Come please. Doctor first."

I get off my backside and follow the officer out of the cramped room. KC gets up as though to join me. "You please wait here. Doctor only first."

I step into the courtyard to find a group of men being lined up on the far side.

"Simiyu -- bring Mrs Aggarwal first." They never get it right -- it sounded more like 'hagawal' than our properly pronounced surname.

I head back into the room saying to Ami that they want her first. She heads out and following what seems a very short passage of time I am being called out again. I head out once more to find a line-up of eight men on the opposite side of the courtyard. A police officer beckons me to that side and explains: "Take your time. Look carefully at each man and then come back and touch the one that shot you." Lowering his voice he says, "Choose only one man."

I look at the line of men feeling no fear, no coldness, no malice just a blankness pervading through me. I walk slowly from one to the other stopping in front of each the police officer at my side. When I have reached the end of the line I start to head back up to the head of the line the officer staying at the end. Man 8 -- no recognition, 7 -- nothing there either. 6 -- familiar. I hesitate and glance at the officer. I think I detect a disagreement in his eyes but I can't be sure. I move to man number 5. My arm in it's cast hurts as I look at him. He keeps his gaze averted. A little shorter than me he looks up into the sky. I rise on tip-toe and catch his eyes in my gaze. He does not expect this and looks at me sullen. For what seems an age I stare at him and he stares back. Then his face twitches and I see it a slight pull of his face to his right side. I look at the police officer. "Can I speak to him?"

"Please no. I can ask him for you."

"Ask him to smile."

Even as he smiles a wet patch begins to appear on the front of his crotch spreading rapidly through his worn blue jeans. And then it comes over me, a dark wave, a glowering storm. As I reach out to touch him I lose control of my senses. The next thing I know I have rotated on the

ball of my left foot simultaneously bringing my cast-clad right arm up to face height. Pivoting, speed increasing, I swing the cast forward. I see the thug flinch just as the cast catches him across the left temple. I feel a surge of pain in my arm that causes me to lose sense of where I am. Time dilates as I continue to pivot following through as my Dad had often told me on the tennis court. 'Keep your eye on the ball and follow through Neal. Let the racket go where you want the ball to go. Keep your eyes on the ball.' I keep my eyes on the ball -- on the thugs head. The cast follows inexorably through.

The resounding crack that I hear thinking to be the thugs skull cracking is actually my cast breaking. The thug goes down onto the ground like a stone the others moving away from the falling body. I continue the motion stepping forward with my right foot as the pivot on the left foot ends and I plant my right foot squarely into his belly low down almost at crotch level. He doubles up in pain. Almost losing my balance I fall forward and have to quick-step to find my footing as I pass over him. With a fluidity of motion that I did not at that time think I possessed I turn on my left foot, now lying just past his right ear and kick him with my right boot squarely in the head. Then I stomp with all my might on his chest.

The cop is soon at my side saying, "Tosha daktari." (Enough doctor).

Court Cases

A month after the identification process Sgt. Sereni calls to inform us that we are required to appear in Milimani Courts on a Tuesday morning. KC calls soon after to say he'll be with us through all the court appearances. By this time all paranoia about the thugs has disappeared from my mind replaced instead by a deep curiosity to see what sort of people have disrupted my life in such a crude way. The beating I had meted out on the thug has left a lasting impression on my mind and some retributive injuries on the bugger. I have learned that it is better to be angry than to assume monster mental proportions for my nemeses. I've learned that listening to the 'chickens' around me only gets me deeper into mental seas of torment. I now look forward to the trials almost revelling in the fact that as a police witness I'll be treated like a king, questioned like an expert witness and generally made to feel like the star and centre of the show. So when the day rolls around to appear in court we pick KC up from his house and head to court Ami driving our Starlet at a leisurely pace my brand new cast, replaced after I broke the old one on the thug, gleaming a clean white in the warm sunshine of the day.

Court Case 1: The Irate Magistrate

"The prosecution calls Dr New Hagawa to the stand."

How melodramatic! How Hollywoodish! I'd never thought I'd hear that sentence uttered and that my name would be in it somewhere even in that awfully pronounced manner. One of the detectives gets me and ushers me into the court, we've been standing outside for over an hour waiting to be called. I enter the mahogany panelled courtroom glistening in it's deep red-brown opulence and marvel that we have such 'halls of justice' in Kenya. The magistrate, a pretty,

middle-aged woman dressed in a bright but very befitting yellow outfit that ridiculous curly white wig atop her head, watches me as I walk to the witness box. I am only too aware of her piercing gaze and conscious of the other stares directed at me from the packed audience.

"State your name and address for the record." The bailiff says.

"Doctor Neal Aggarwal, Number 15 Nyari Estate."

"What is your religion?"

I hesitate thinking 'he wants me to swear to tell the truth under the usually invoked fear of a god that I have reasoned on my own years prior, does not exist. I do accept though that I have to have, for them in this room, some God in order to be held by the kind of fear that will bind my tongue to the path of truth and that without said God there will be a confused moment that they'll have to sort out. But I cannot resist and I blurt out

"None."

There, I'd said it -- in a public forum. I watch the magistrate. She bats not an eyelid but a murmur goes up from the crowd and the bailiff seems to falter his mental processes brought up short. Conscious of a smile spreading across my face and trying to control it I watch him keenly.

Turning to face the magistrate he says, "My lord?"

She smiles at me and her eyes almost wink the mischievous internal dialogue going on in her head. There follows a pregnant pause and the intelligence of the lady in yellow clearly holds the court in pause. I am well aware of the way she runs 'her theatre.'

Finally, "It's OK, just swear him in without any book." It appears that they might not have come across a secular person before but her control of the proceedings is clear, impeccable. No wonder she occupies that seat up there like some queen bee with her workers running this way and that all day, every day, answering to her every beck and call.

"Do you swear to tell the truth," the rest disappears in a mist and from somewhere my mind takes control of my lips and I utter the customary and well cliched, "I do."

"Dr Aggarwal, please tell us in your own words what happened, we'll dispense with the detectives side of it and hear it from you as we are fortunate to have you here." I notice that she looks straight at me and then at the thugs in the dock as she utters the last of that sentence. She positively and unmistakably glares at them.

Now for the first time I look at the dock to see four men in there. They look frail. The one I had experienced as the 'big brute' now looks smaller than anyone else in the courtroom. I wonder if it is an illusion borne of the lower level of the dock and relatively higher position of the witness

stand or have they been subjected to a hard time in the prison? No doubt that that must be the case but the illusion seems much more powerful than a mere starvation stint could be causing. I glance quickly at the other three. Kids -- mere kids. I recall them from the line-up at the station when I'd been concentrating on beating the daylight out of the big brute. I spill my story for the umpteenth time and as I do so the magistrate looks at me her face growing darker with the telling. I come to the end and stop. A hush falls over the court.

"What do you have to say?" she says turning to the dock.

The big brute is apparently going to defend them all. He stands up and clears his throat. His voice when it does come out is feeble and he speaks in Kiswahili. His words are translated for me by the court interpreter.

"Did you see who shot you?"

"I was shot through a door so I did not see the person who pulled the trigger."

"So how do you know that you were shot?"

Sniggers, soft but clear, rise from behind me.

The magistrate steps in, "What are you asking? Ask proper questions. This is a court of law. Can't you see the daktari has bullet injuries?"

She's very kali (aggressive) I think.

"Did we shoot you?"

"You came in holding the gun and threatening me with another shot." I spoke in English and quickly. He had trouble understanding what I said and the interpreter translated into Kiswahili for him. I listened to the translation understanding and vetting it for myself ready to complain if it was not done right.

"But did you see me shoot you?"

"I've already answered that -- you came in holding the gun and put it to my head and said you would kill me if we did not give you money."

"Tell us in truth. You did not see us shoot you so how do you know we are the ones?"

I look at the magistrate and she shrugs at me. Certainly the faintest of shrugs but clearly communicated. What to tell this bugger? "I saw YOU, I already said I saw YOU in my house and just before that I was shot and you came in holding a gun and put it to my head."

The magistrate looks irate, very irate. She glares at the thug. He continues

"In truth you did not see us shoot you so how can you recognize us?"

This I do not understand so I look at the translator and he converts it into English for me once more but the magistrate cuts him off and gives her own version.

"I think he is saying that you did not see him pull the trigger so he did not do it."

The thug butts in annoying her, "How do you know it was me?"

"Smile," I said.

"Ati?" (what?)

"Smile. Give me a smile."

The magistrate looks puzzled and the thug just stares at me.

"My lord I want him to smile and you'll see how I recognised him. He has a facial palsy -- a paralysis of the facial nerve of the face. It's on the right side so when he smiles his lips will pull to the right. It's a condition I've seen often enough, as a doctor, and it's characteristic."

"Smile for the daktari," she orders pre-empting the translator's attempt to render my words for the perp.

He grimaces more than smiles and his face pulls all the way to the right in a leer that throws him down a deep pit of guilt. He just sits down, plunks himself onto his bench.

The thug to his right stands.

"I see doctor," she says and turning to the dock, "Ask proper questions."

"Was I there?" Asks the thug next to the brute slumped onto the bench.

"Yes." I not going to say any more.

"How do you know?"

"I saw you. My wife saw you. We both identified you in the police line-up."

He sits down too; the thug next to him remains sitting. A brief discussion between numbers 3 and 4 ensues, then number 4 stands up.

"In truth I was not there."

"You were. I remember you as the tall, skinny one that took my wife down to my office."

Number 1 jumps to his feet with renewed vigour. "If the gun was on the other side of the door you could not have seen me use it."

"So you did use it?"

He pauses, standing stock still. The whites of his eyes stand out in the dark of the courtroom. "Did you see who shot you?"

The magistrate loses it. "I have warned you, all of you. Ask proper questions. You refused representation and elected to defend yourselves so ask proper questions. You tried to kill this good doctor here and I will not hesitate to send you to the gallows if you are not careful. Tomorrow if I can. Ask proper questions."

Wow, I think. She's pissed off the theatricals tickling me now.

"Did you see who shot you?"

"That's enough. Doctor you are free to go. Next witness."

And that is it. I'm on my way out of the court and soon waiting on the bench outside while Ami answers her questions which turn out to be more of the same and then we head home. The detectives do not come out to meet us and we do not hear from them for several days. When Sereni calls the news is disappointing.

"Daktari, the news is not good. The hearing was declared invalid because the magistrate was too hostile."

"What does that mean? Are they going to walk free?"

"No, no. Not at all. There will be another trial. I will let you know when you have to appear again."

And with that short --- all of one minute conversation --- my day takes on the dark tones of the continuing roller coaster ride. Up one minute, down the next.

Court Case 2: The Smarter Magistrate

It was deja vu all over again as Yogi Berra once said. The drive to the courts, meeting Sereni and his junior detective assistant, the wait for my turn, taking the stand, confusing the bailiff with my non-religious stance, telling the story --- again, the questioning by the thugs --- the whole

nine yards. Then came an exchange that dismayed me. I was through the dumb questions the thugs asked yet again -- the ones about my not being able to see through a wooden door and therefore not being able to identify who shot me. The magistrate was another lady this time dressed in a checked black and white dress that same goofy wig atop her head. She spoke with a British accent and was very particular about her procedures. She let the thugs ask the stupid questions over and over not interrupting them except to say that a question had already been asked and answered. Suddenly the big brute:

"Daktari, please -- we have no money."

"So you came into my house to rob me and not content to take things which you could sell or the school fees we had that my wife gave you, you had to shoot me also?"

"Our baby is hungry. We have no food to feed her."

"Your baby is hungry because of your actions, not because you have no money. We work very hard to earn money for our families and now you've stopped me working."

This went on for a while and then they ran out of questions and I was let go off and Ami called to the stand. I was able to find a seat in the courtroom and sit through her questioning noting that the thugs were acting in a very resigned manner, resigned it seemed to the fate their obvious guilt had all but impugned upon them already.

Finally the magistrate said, "I think we've heard enough. I'd like to hear any closing from you detective Sereni and then we'll hear what the accused have to say."

Instead of Sereni standing up he tossed a quizzical look towards me and standing said, "My lord, I'd like Doctor Aggarwal to say something."

I was not prepared for this at all and said as much. "My lord, I was not prepared to say anything."

"Daktari, we are very fortunate to have you here. It is not often that we have a survivor of such heinous crimes and your view on what you've gone through, what it has left you with will be of great value to the court. Please, if you can find it in you, please say a few words."

"My lord, I'll try."

"Please go ahead doctor," she said in her polished accent.

"I feel very badly about these kids who entered my home and robbed me because they have nothing and I have more, much more than they have. I feel badly that a child goes hungry while mine go to school and we worry about their clothing oblivious to the fact that there are many millions that go without food each and every day. I feel that life is unfair. But at the same time, I

feel that they shot me and left me to die. Perhaps they had been shooting at the door lock in the hopes of breaking it and getting in. Perhaps they did not mean to shoot me but they did and when they entered my bedroom they saw only too clearly that I was lying on the floor dying. They did nothing at all to help me. In fact they put the gun to my head and threatened to finish the job. Then they took my family away and locked them in a room. Had I not been able to get my wife out I would have bled to death. My lord I help countless people every day. Had I come across one of these thugs on a road somewhere and he was injured in any way I would have not hesitated to stop and render any assistance I could. I can forgive anything but this deliberate leaving me to die. That I cannot forgive."

The magistrate looked at the interpreter and my tirade, being long, he had to consult his notes and read back into Swahili what I had said. The thugs listened and increasingly hung their heads as he prattled on. When he'd finished madam magistrate spoke:

"You have heard what the daktari has said. I could not have put it in better words. Do you have anything you would like to say?" She stopped for the translator.

No one moved. The court hung in silence, the thugs just sat there. Finally, after a pause that seemed to go on forever the magistrate cleared her throat and said:

"It is clear to me that you are guilty and the laws of Kenya say that robbery with violence carries a death sentence. I cannot pass that sentence until I have consulted with the Attorney General and discussed this case with him. Until that meeting you will be held in custody in Kamiti Prison where you have been these past months to await his decision."

With that the court cases came to an end and we too headed back home to await the future decision. I still had no confidence that these thugs would face the ultimate punishment but would instead walk free. But the ordeal was over and now that we'd been through it, like most things in life that seem so much bigger and more difficult when first contemplated while the actual doing of the deed was not that big a thing. At least it was all over for now.

The Hanging

Three months go by and then another three. We hear from our friends, police officers and detectives that the case is progressing well, that we should be patient. It frustrates us to wait like we do and the inevitable chup reloads itself several times over. Some come a-visiting and engage in talk of revenge by thugs, others shrug their shoulders saying that nothing will be done and the lot will be quietly released. Then we hear that one of the thugs had been a boyfriend of a house help that had worked for us some months before the shooting. Ami had fired this woman after she had refused to carry out a task she had been given. We hear that she has become the gang leader and has orchestrated, with her boyfriend, three robberies in Nyari Estate one being ours. A few weeks after this news item comes the revelation that she has been arrested in Western Kenya and is now in the Kamiti Maximum Security Prison and soon after that news that her baby has died while in prison with her. I feel a dejected and cruel person by

what I had said to the thugs in court. We had had no idea that our ex-maid might be pregnant. It hits me like a brick wall. That child had been guilty of nothing and yet had suffered and died probably a horrible death through no fault of its own. Grimly I think about how there just can't be any kind of benevolent God or creator of this universe that allows a child to suffer like this. I don't hang around moping for very long though as we soon after hear that a decision is in the offing. Coming six months after we had made the identifications it will be a welcome end to this episode in the unfolding saga.

The day arrives that one of the detectives calls to tell us that the Attorney General has decided that the thugs are to be hanged. The detective is euphoric; I am downcast the whole day but do not slip into any depressive moods. That is to come later. I want to know more; I want to know if this is real or just a smoke screen to throw all of us off the trail and release the gang. Four are named in the sentencing and the Attorney General has been consulted and apparently after not very much soul-searching, put his signature to the order. Death for them. As the days progress I begin to feel a nonchalance about the whole thing, find myself less and less moved by the finality of it all. Worn down by the months of waiting for the decision it now seems like this is not happening to me any more. Until

"Doc, you want to be at the hanging?"

"Can I?"

"Yes you can. There will some observers. They are chosen from the public and you can be there if you like."

"I'll think about it and get back to you if that's all right."

"Yes that's fine. Just give me a call by the end of the week and I'll reserve a seat for you or if you don't want to be there we'll select another person."

We talk about it, Ami and I, not involving others in this decision now only too aware of the mental conflict that they'd put us through with their ridiculous twists and turns. We do not even let Demi -- my aunt -- know what is about to happen. We sit in our bedroom and only allow Don into our conversations. That they will now be hanged is inevitable; that's what the law calls for and that's what they'll get. I am none the worse for thinking of getting these scum off the face of the Earth and out of my life forever but when it comes to the question of whether I should attend the hanging Ami is not for it. Don though thinks that it will give me full and final closure on the events and might help me overcome any doubts I've harboured. I think hard about this and then decide to let Sereni pass the news back to me instead of being there myself to see the deed done.

"Doc, it's done."

"What's done?" I ask recognizing M's voice on the phone.

"I called to tell you that I was there this afternoon and four of the thugs that invaded your home were hanged before my eyes and I signed the witness book and it's all over now. The other three are being watched and if they step out of line they'll be in very big trouble."

"In a way I'm glad it's all over and in another I feel bad for them."

"You should not feel like that. I can understand that you are a human being but you must think that this kind of thing has to be, HAS TO BE, stopped. You did well you and Ami to see this through to the end. Now Nyari has sent a message that we are not to be messed with. The crime in Nyari will drop to nearly zero now."

"Thanks M. I'll try to remember that."

And he was right. Crime in Nyari dropped to zero for many years after the hanging but I was not to experience that for just over the horizon lay another journey for me, another, new set of challenges, traumas and reckonings.

PTSD

Wikipedia: *PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that may develop after a person is exposed to one or more traumatic events, such as sexual assault, serious injury or the threat of death. The diagnosis may be given when a group of symptoms such as disturbing recurring flashbacks, avoidance or numbing of memories of the event, and hyperarousal (high levels of anxiety) continue for more than a month after the traumatic event.*

‘Chup’

The next few days become a blur one day running into the next seemingly without end. The hanging now done a chapter in my life has come to a dramatic close; mundane living goes on. I work at life but my arm up in the sling attached to the wall light prevents me turning in the night and given that most people roll about up to seventy times per night, this immobility interferes with my sleep patterns breaking my nights up into so many pieces I don't know where one day begins and the following night ends. I sleep in forty minute bursts then I'm up again wondering what woke me only to find the arm in the sling cramping, itching or tingling, but at least not swelling. Sometimes I wake to find my arm has 'gone to sleep' and I get a fright when this happens either because I can't feel it at all, or that it feels wooden in places or that I can't move my fingers no matter how much I try. That latter kind of paralysis, temporary and reversible though it may be, is scary and causes a panicked attempt at trying to make sure human level machine-equipment really is working right. At other times I have a crick in my back or neck and need to work that out of my system. This is hard to do; it means laboriously taking off the carabiner, unthreading the webbing from around my arm and then using my left hand to hold onto the bedside cabinet to get enough stability to lift myself up out of my bed. It's a drag to do

this and at night it gets Ami up asking if I'm OK -- and that leads to short conversations that wake me fully. It then takes an hour or so to fall asleep again.

My sleep patterns in that first week home are so damaged that I end up sleeping all day long in these short bursts. So disturbing is this that I begin to feel that I don't sleep at all winding myself up into a frenzy.

Well meaning friends and relatives drop in each and every day but by the end of the first week these visits come down in number to perhaps one family visiting each evening. The visits become the bane of my existence. I know they mean well but the conversation usually ends up more distressing than helpful:

Visitor X: "Did you hear about Sushila-ben?"

Visitor Y: "What happened?" I don't add that eyewitness testimony is the worst kind for I don't feel that my audience is able to take on board such thinking, their level of understanding being incapable of this degree of sophistication.

X: "Thugs got into her house and shot her husband. They shot him three times. He died."

I look on and wonder at the stupidity of these people. Do they think they are helping me with this gossip? Sometimes I counter:

"Is this true or did you hear it from someone?" Again I resist screaming -- EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY FOLKS!

"Sushila told me herself man. They even wanted to rape her."

Sushila is a 70-year-old hag and I wonder about this. Phantasmal, ludicrous, risible images course through my mind. I'd laugh out loud but for the anxiety that is being triggered in me. Couple this with the lack of sleep, the tending-to of my injuries and the worries about my dominant arm and a recipe is being conjured up here. Seems non-productive to point out to them the folly of their ways in the presence of an injured and damaged me so I simply tolerate their charades. I sit through it all, a weak smile on my face until one day I explode standing up and saying to the speaker that this is not productive or helpful to me and I storm out of the room heading upstairs away from the circus that I've endured for the better part of an hour of the evening in question. The visits stop but the stories don't. Ami, the kids and I start going out to visit my parents in their home about five kilometres from our house just to get away as I'm beginning also to suffer from cabin fever. My sisters often join us at my folks and from time to time there talk gravitates to crime in Kenya and my outburst each time puts an ugly end to that. One evening the stories of crime have begun again when my little sis says.

"Hey, I heard a good one today. Someone at the office told me that this kind of alarmist talk is called 'chup' and is common especially among the muindis of Nairobi." (Kiswahili: muindi is a

[derogatory] colloquialism for Kenyan-Indian.)

"Then we should stop this chup once and for all."

"You can't help it Neal. Muindis are a weak and easily frightened lot." Anita trying to cool things down.

"Anyone who's shot like Neal and left to die would be cowardly wouldn't he?" My dad tries his own brand of conciliation.

"You think I'm cowardly dad?" I'm touchy, very touchy by now; this has been going on for too long already. I cower in my corner on the 35-year-old sofa in my dad's living room unwilling to give an inch, seething inside, wounds both physical and mental, raw, becoming more raw by the minute, skirting a fine edge.

"Dad's not saying you're touchy Neal."

Anita can be a little overbearing and when I'm not in the mood to be pacified like this I can lash out with venom equal to the best she can dish out.

"I'm fed up with all this nonsense -- everyone has been attacked, no one is safe, this country is going to the dogs, there's no future for us. The roads are breaking down, there are potholes everywhere, the cops want bribes every time we go out of the house, all the women in the country are being raped."

"What is raped?" Little Acacia stops the runaway train in its tracks and we look at each other caught in one of life's awkward moments.

Sheila, laughing, "OK, no more chup talk, cut the chup."

And with that statement she gives us a tool --- 'CUT THE CHUP' --- that we use time and again to combat the descent into the chupverse from which the only escape is a cold turkey cut with our new phrase --- cut the chup! a phrase will be used over and over again.

We develop and continue to refine this skill, but for all that we manage it will not be enough to prevent from being made that second mistake -- the mistake of leaving Kenya -- but that is a story for later in this book.

Everyone strives to keep me out of harm's way, mental harm's way. I too try to keep me out of harm's way; try to get my mind to move onto other things. I try to type on a keyboard -- impossible with just a left hand to do it. I can't get my fingers of my right hand to do any intricate work. Not only is the cast big and in the way but fine controlled movements of my fingers are well nigh impossible. These sorts of control attempts generate pain and swelling if attempted for any appreciable length of time. I buy dictation software called Dragon Dictate. I have to

articulate in halting sentences with phrases like 'next paragraph' and 'comma' needing to be very deliberately directed towards the machine and I eventually give up. I start to concentrate on using just a single finger of my left hand to type and that slowly progresses to using all five fingers. I get pretty good at this and can even type fairly long letters. Our Internet speeds are nothing like what we have today so I can't spend hours on the net keeping my mind active. Ami studies me and then returns one day from a shopping trip surprising me with a subscription to Digital Satellite TV -- just five channels -- Discovery, Animal Planet, National Geographic, BBC and CNBC but that proves to be more than I'll ever need. She knows me better than the back of my own hand and gets exactly what I'd tolerate, no more no less.

They place me on a mattress in front of our living room television and I watch 'Gone fishing' but soon tire of the reruns. The same fishing program twice is tolerable but the third time it starts getting depressing and when it pops up a fourth and fifth time I channel surf before the opening credits are done. Surprisingly or perhaps out of boredom I get into watching a cooking program 'Yan can cook.' I've always been a pretty good cook but now I content myself with gleaning ideas from Yan that I pass onto Ami and that she takes in her stride and even tries out. Some like how to cook octopus or squid such that it does not harden into rubber, are great and put to good effect. Others are a bother and I notice her weakly hidden scorn at them and this depresses me reason though I may as to their non-utility and her expected reaction.

My students trickle in to visit then a bunch show up and ask if I would help them earn some professional certifications. Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer is a much sought after qualification and five students want to pursue this. JP is one of those students. Before I sold my college to a rival JP had been a beacon in the storms of life for me. The storms? --- the mass of students that I taught most of whom seemed so uninterested in learning that I could only wonder at why they bothered to attend my college. Even though JP too asks if I'd turn him into an MCSE, I am reluctant. I know full well that he works hard and studies all that I guide him to read. I know that he excels at tasks I give him but not so the other four students that show up. I wonder at why they ask that I teach them and suspect they will not do the requisite work but will expect to learn the topics needed through some form of osmosis. I search for the materials that I'd need to acquire in order to teach them the six subjects they need to pass to be MCSE and I'm suddenly gripped by a sense of hopelessness. Is it the number of books that I will have to read before I can teach the topics or the daunting task of collecting past test questions through a sipping dial-up internet connection? Or is it just the futility that resides in the act of teaching those reluctant to 'really' earn and value the qualifications they get let alone to put those to work and to keep them honed through continual study and refinement?

I am suddenly overwhelmed by life. I find myself in a dark mood. My normally hyperactive mind that goes 99-miles-a-minute into all sorts of thought processes down every possible avenue of exploration, seems to come to a grinding halt. It hangs there in some kind of suspended animation --- all around me is this deep, dark place. I sit at my computer keyboard unable to think what to do next, unwilling to think the next step through. The engine of my mind comes to a grinding halt. No one sees this first incident but they will see plenty in time to come. I wallow in this place for an hour or more. I come out of it like a person that wakes from an afternoon

snooze unable to place where he is. Though I don't know it at the time I am about to enter a chapter in this my life story, that is going to run on and on seemingly without end in sight and I'm going to drag them all into a quagmire from which there will seem to be no escape for months to come. My darkness will rout them all from whatever paths they were on. Their lives will be rent almost as badly as mine.

Down this road I now follow there be devils.

Deep Dark Places of the Mind

I take to sitting longer and longer in front of the TV. I often catch myself sitting there doing nothing, just staring at the screen. I've never been one for much TV and regulate carefully the amount that I watch not allowing myself or the family more than three hours per week. So it does not come as too much of a surprise as TV starts to grate against my psyche. Sitting in front of a computer doing nothing productive with my time there also feels like glorified TV. I've done enough research to know that more than three hours of TV a week is damaging to the mind beyond anything most people are aware of so I try not to spend longer than that there. The time I do spend I often cannot account for and this rubs me up the wrong way. Sometimes I'm unable to account for several minutes gone by and sometimes even an hour passes undetected. Not having ever been a 'couch potato' my mind fights with itself over this wastage of time. Worry nibbles at me often replaced by anger. I don't ever suspect that there might be something 'wrong with me.' It never crosses my mind that I might be suffering from PTSD -- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After all I am alive and that is the only thing that I need to know, the only fact I need to focus on. The focus though flits this way and that. One minute I'm happy that I came through such a traumatic event the next I'm mired in a dark funk from which I cannot seem to escape. Then I'm angry with life and pushing myself to 'get up and do something about it' and a short time later I'm 'down in the dumps' so depressed that my life itself hangs in a balance with no hope on one side, no reason to go on on the other.

Trouble typing lingers on but I can surf the internet by using my left hand on the mouse. It's a pretty big adjustment especially since I had been able to type 130 words per minute before my right arm was ripped to bits. I struggle to move the mouse to my left hand and to adjust to this strange usage mode. My mind watches me do this and resists. I sit at the computer and put my left hand on the mouse. I almost cannot move it. I tell myself this is a simple hang-up and that it's such a small thing I should be able to get control of the rodent and be on my merry way within a few clicks. After an entire morning of trying I realise that it's not going to be that easy. I'm plagued with worries borne of reasoning about the simplicity of the learning task before me and my failure to surmount it. Clicking on various links in my browser is foreign when done with the 'wrong hand' and I often miss the target hunting this way and that before I finally get the pointer onto the thing I'm after. This should not be such a big deal but I make it one. I get frustrated and storm off in a huff after a lot of concerted effort uselessly wasted. Time becomes the judge of my efforts; wasted time becomes the penalty score.

The time approaches for my first visit to DrKG, my orthopaedic surgeon. On the requisite day

Ami bundles me into the car leaving Don to look after the house, my aunt and the kids. We head off to the edge of town to see the doc. His clinic is a house in a large compound that's been converted into a rambling pseudo-hospital with the various rooms and out-houses serving the usual functions of X-Ray, admissions, waiting and examination rooms. There's an X-Ray department in one corner in it's own little building. It's dingy and there are a lot of people in the waiting room where we're instructed to take a seat. Our 9am appointment time is passed and we watch patients in the queue disappear one by one as they get to see the doc. At 11am Ami's frustration gets the better of her and she vanishes to return a few minutes later with a nurse in tow. The nurse instructs me to go to their X-Ray department and have an image made of my arm. This I do and head back to the waiting room. Another hour and a half wait ensues during which time Ami tells me DrKG is not at his clinic yet but is in surgery at the Nairobi Hospital. Apparently patients have been seeing a colleague of his. We don't have cell phones so there's no way to inform Don. Thinking about the kids and Demi waiting anxiously at home to hear the news, injects an unsettled feeling into me.

Finally at 2 pm Doc KG is in the clinic and looking at my X-Rays though I am yet to meet him. He comes out to see me and shows me the images --- in the waiting room! I don't like this one bit. Worse, his words leave me stunned.

"There's no sign of callous formation Doctor Aggarwal. It should have started forming by now but let's wait and see how it progresses. It's still early -- only two weeks have passed it might be that the X-Ray is just not clear enough for us to see callus formation -- let's see you again in another two weeks, it might be clearer then."

We leave disappointed but hopeful. In two weeks time we're back and repeat the waiting--X-Ray--waiting charade once more. Again he's late but this time it's 4 pm before he sees me in a dingy outlying room of his. I look at the X-Ray and ask:

"Doc, those bones are too far apart aren't they?"

"Yes, but there's nothing we can do about that. The gap left when the bones were shattered, comminuted, by the bullet is large and they cannot be bridged by growing blood vessels -- capillaries -- that are needed to start the bone formation going."

"Is there nothing we can do?" I ask.

"Just wait and hope that healing begins soon."

In the car on the way home two sets of X-Rays in my lap Ami asks me, "What do you think. Will it heal?"

"Not the way it's looking. He's not even set the bones properly."

"And if it does not heal what then?"

"At best I'll end up with a false joint."

"What does that mean?"

"A joint like another elbow joint. Effectively my arm will be useless because I won't be able to develop any power in it, won't have any leverage on anything and won't be able to do anything except the very simplest of tasks. And of course I'll end up with a horrible deformity." That last thought leaves me depressed beyond anything I can describe.

Back home I head to my room after recounting the same story to Don and Demi. I begin to dig myself into a hole. The more I think about what is happening to me the deeper the hole gets. Ami and Don come to sit with me. JP shows up with his dad and they join in the attempt to keep my mind busy. Suggestions as to what to do next fly left and right. Suggestions move onto what 'else' to do -- how to keep busy, what to read, to watch on TV. A camping trip is mooted with Don doing most of the work, Ami driving and the kids left with my folks. Naivasha -- too commercial, Nakuru -- possible, Baringo -- Don's favourite, Bogoria -- a little too far off the beaten track and I need to be where I can get to medical help if necessary. I'm too downcast to raise the merest of enthusiasm for what they are trying to do for me and talk of my needing medical help brings a comment that downcasts everyone. Something to the tune of 'better I was killed than this hell.'

I wallow in this all evening. The next morning after a harrowing sleepless night of fitful short naps, I don't get out of bed until noon. JP comes by and insists that I go sit out with him in the driveway. My young protege -- how can I deny him his wish to sit with me and talk? We've done this a hundred times before. My deck chair is placed on the corner of the driveway that I have previously liked to sit in and I drag myself reluctantly into it. The sun is warm and the skies blue but my talk is of doom and gloom. I'm losing my dominant arm. I start to talk about amputation. Around me they are slowly overcome by my negativity and one by one excuse themselves to head off to attend to chores. Their excuses as they leave are only too keenly perceived by my faltering, angry-one-minute depressed-the-next mind and I start to feel lonelier and lonelier with each departure of my buddies. Finally I sink to rock bottom dropping off in my seat under fabulous blue African skies with the sounds of bird calls all around unheard by my crumbling mind. I dream terrible dreams full of nightmarish scenes but none of bullets and bullet injuries. A new dimension sneaks up on me, a dimension where deep regret for no apparent reason, with nothing to back it up, dominates the streams of thought. I begin to feel there is no hope, no point trying to sort out any problems, no way to turn, no direction to follow.

This goes on day after day for a month during which time I become insufferable. I talk about leaving the family and heading off somewhere on my own. They suggest a coastal holiday all by myself. I make excuses 'yes-butting' my way around my own suggestions. Then one morning Ami loses it and gives me a thorough dressing down. She is distraught and storms off to make lunch. I am shocked. She's never talked to me like this before. She's triggered something though. Somewhere deep inside a light glows feebly. I pick up our phone and call my childhood

buddy SV and ask him for his brothers office telephone number. His brother, initials also SV, agrees to see me the next morning and Ami and I are off on that journey at 8am sharp. We drop Acacia off at her kindergarten and head to SV's office. He is dismayed at the state of my arm as seen in the X-Ray films we have but the quality of the films is so bad that he orders some new ones done on 'his' machines and we're soon back looking at those.

Could this get any worse? It can and it does. By SV's trained, beady eye there is complete malunion -- in fact total non-union looking at the better images. SV's face reflects his inner state of mind. I have known him and his brother since we were toddlers in diapers and I can read him like a book at most times and certainly at this moment. That book is no fairy tale. It reeks of doom and the shadow that passes across his face, though quickly hidden, has registered itself on my psyche. He asks if I'd like a second opinion.

"Who do you have in mind?" I feebly ask.

"BV," he says.

"He was my ortho professor you know."

"You won't find a better surgeon," SV says.

"Can you arrange a consultation?" Ami asks.

"I'm sure I can. Leave it with me. I'll call you. Give me your home number."

Ami gives him our phone number and we head off. In the car Mr Doom awakens and makes the journey home a living hell. We're just walking in to the house, Don smiling at us when the phone rings.

"Great news Neal. BV says he'll see you this afternoon at three. Can you come back here?"

There's no question about that. I'm back at the Aga Khan Hospital after a quick lunch and waiting in another very busy waiting room. This one is much cleaner and nicer looking and there are magazines to keep me busy. We don't have to wait long though. Shortly after three BV walks in and memories flood back of this short Italian surgeon speaking in loud voice and bossing everyone around. I wonder, "Why do surgeons have to speak so loudly? Are they trying to compensate for something? Was I ever this loud?"

We are ushered into his office to find him going through my X-Rays and rifling through my history.

"Tell me what happened," he says.

"It's all there prof."

"Prof? Do we know each other?"

"I was your student at KNH prof. You taught me some ortho." KNH is Kenyatta National Hospital -- the place I completed my basic medical training.

"I know. I already remembered you when SV told me. I'm so sorry this unfortunate thing has happened to you and what KG has done is inexcusable but don't tell him I said so. Perhaps he has not dealt with too many bullet traumas. What did they shoot you with?" he asks looking at an X-Ray film of my chest.

"It was a nine millimetre according to the cops."

"What would those buggers know? But it does look like an FMJ on the film, it's held its shape through penetration into the muscle."

"FMJ?"

"Full metal jacket -- that's the most common round available the world over and you can be thankful for that. If it was a hollow point or soft point the damage would be much more severe. You might not be here! Why didn't it pass straight through you?"

"It went through a door first."

"More luck. Or maybe not. Straight through would not have done any more damage that it already has. Wiggle your fingers."

This I do for him and he's satisfied with what he sees of my motor control. He opens a drawer in his desk at his immediate right and fumbles with something. Suddenly a gun is in his hand and a red light flashes in my eye. He points the gun in my direction and I see a red dot on my chest just where I have 'my jewellery' embedded in my chest. He laughs.

"This is a Sig and it's loaded with hollow points. Forty fives."

I look steadily at him. There is no fear in me. I have an overwhelming desire to hold the gun to feel it's weight and to know what can be done with it. I imagine him pulling the trigger and ending this misery of mine right now. I hold my mouth shut though and just stare down the barrel.

"Not afraid huh? All I have to do now is pull the trigger and boom. It's hot with one in the chamber."

I don't say anything but it's not lost on me that I don't know what he's talking about. One in the chamber? Wish I could understand that. I'm not given a chance to say anything. A long lecture

follows on his only being prepared to operate and sort me out if, and only if, I have the fortitude, the mental fortitude to hold strong and fight to recover. He tells me that the only way I'll bounce back from this 'incident' of mine is if I fight and fight hard. We agree that surgery should be done as soon as possible BV suggesting that I check into the hospital that very evening to be 'prepped' for morning surgery. He talks about having his own theatre in the hospital which he does loan out to other surgeons but that we should be able to get it for the morning. He mentions plating the bones and mashing up the fragments to make a bone paste that he'll pack into the wound. He says the osteoblasts (bone making cells) will then be close enough to the site to start making a bridge to close the gap. He talks about how he'll freshen up the bone ends so blood capillaries will form and about the plate materials he'll use. Most of this flies over me as I contemplate yet another surgery, yet another Dr Aggarwal leaving the planet, yet another post surgical recovery period pain and all. I don't even ask if he's done this before and what sort of success rate he's had.

In a daze I head out of the office to go home and collect some things and then to drag myself through the admissions process. BV has been smart -- he's not left me much time to think. In my now usual daze I put a small bag together and head back to the hospital.

Tomorrow --- surgery number 2.

Gun On The OR Wall

Admissions is the usual long and boring process all patients face. I can't head off to my hospital room until the process has been completed for the nurses will not accept this body until it has been duly accounted for. I wade through the process with Ami doing the form-filling -- small mercy's -- and I chatting with the staff. We are surprised to find my employee file still on record and active! It's been thirteen years since I worked in this hospital. The staff move a little more quickly than for most other patients -- the twin 'doctor' and 'staff' titles, perhaps, kicking them into action.

My room is boring. It's the smallest room in the ward -- not the private wing as I don't want to abuse the system with this 'free' treatment that everyone seems to feel compelled to render unto me. Family drop by to see me, a few friends do too. The next morning the rigmarole begins all over again. I'm prepped for surgery and the pethidine quickly takes hold. In a dreamy state I await my executioner --- that really is how it feels this time. The euphoria is all gone and I'm anxious to get this over with. I'm depressed but keep it bottled up -- I've got used to this feeling now. 9am, the allotted time for the surgery comes and goes. So does 10am, 11am, noon and lunch. I'm not allowed to eat anything but food is brought to my room and put on my bed-table. I don't touch it and call the nurses in and blow up at them. NIL BY MOUTH, NIL BY MOUTH I scream over and over.

Finally at a half past two an orderly comes to get me. Now the pethidine is all worn off and my nerves are on edge. In the nice and fancy theatre I'm told to get up onto the operating table. This jars my nerves further. I'm mobile so they're not pulling out the kid-gloves. From the super-

nice treatment in admissions to this perfunctory handling they're wrenching me this way and that on a sickening roller coaster ride. They expect me to get out of the wheelchair in which I was wheeled into the OR -- this time I did use it, that old fight not in me any more -- and haul myself onto the table. Reluctantly I do this, struggling a little the nurse assisting by pushing my butt onto the table and am left with a meat-factory, butchery feeling for the place. I lie there for a long time -- twenty minutes is an interminable wait for a patient waiting for surgery. Finally I see BV scrubbing in and another green-capped head with him. Then they're in the OR and busying themselves. The first thing BV does is head to a hook in the wall and hangs up a belt on it. In the belt I see a holster and the Sig-sauer pistol that he'd pointed at me the previous day. I smile and he sees this.

"That used to this now huh?"

"Actually I am. Turns out being shot is not the traumatic thing they make out in Hollywood or was it just my luck?"

"I've been shot four times and it's always the same -- no pain at first, that comes later, but no way the kick that throws people down or back as in the movies. Meet DrDK - he's going to be your anaesthetist."

Shot four times huh? I'll have to ask him about that at some later date but for now there's no time even to think. He's in such a hurry. BV asks for a saw and I cringe. The saw is searched for -- they take too long -- and he blows up. I get to see the true BV. Until this moment I had no inkling of this side of him. After a short delay during which he seethes, he's onto me with a vibrating electric saw the semi-circular blade of which shines in the theatre lights. He has at it with the saw and I tense up when I see he's not using a saw guard under my plaster cast. He starts at the finger end and progresses up towards the elbow. So far so good; we're almost done, almost at the elbow. The thick plaster at the elbow is hard to cut through. The saw whines and jams. He fights it cursing loudly. He pushes harder and harder. I feel no pain. The saw suddenly breaks through the plaster and then I feel a searing, hot pain that courses through my arm beginning at my elbow and progressing upwards the tip of my right shoulder. He pulls at the plaster which is still not cut clean through.

"Ah -- it's not such a big deal," looking at me.

I don't say anything but there's quite a bit of blood flowing now and a corresponding amount of pain. I just close my eyes to hear

"Get him under NOW," he barks at DK.

And I'm out -- just like that -- so quick I had no time to prep myself mentally.

Drains

I awake in my room to find Ami at my bedside whispering to Acacia. Gaia is sitting propped up and is gurgling away on the small sofa seat in the room. My arm hurts like hell. It's a dull ache the likes of which remind me of the immediate moments after the bullet had just gone through breaking both bones. It's a deep, deep pain that not only hurts in my arm but also makes my head hurt. I look down at my arm to find that there are two tubes -- drainage tubes -- looking like aquarium air tubing -- leading out of my soft-bandaged arm and falling down the side of my bed to disappear somewhere below. The tubes are red-streaked and fluid is slowly trickling through them. I force my head through the pain inside it and through the pain in the arm to talk to my musketeers.

"Daddy. Why is there pipes in your hand?" Little Acacia squeaks.

"Gurgle, gurgle," goes Gaia.

"Shhhhhhh!" goes Ami.

"But he's awake!" comes the retort.

"Oh! Hi sweetie. How you feeling?"

"Hurts."

"Should we go and let you sleep."

"No, no. Stay. It's better that you're here."

We talk and the pain in my arm recedes. I see Don standing in the corner. I ask about him about the students as he walks into the centre of the room. We talk about a lot of things most of them not related to my injuries. I'm painfully aware of the avoidance tactics though grateful for them. Actually I feel quite cheerful and can see relief in their eyes.

Later that evening family and friends pour into my room and then BV shows up and examines my arm under the watchful gaze of all that are there. He seems oblivious to them. As to warning them that 'some of the following scenes may be disturbing' he cares not a bit as he cuts off my bandage with an angled scissors. The bandage falls away and I get a first look at what my arm is like. A long line of sutures -- mattress sutures -- runs down a length of 15cm of my inner arm another longer line on the outer part of the arm. The sutures are very neat. They look like one of those 'staples' on a fine zipper. Very nice; very satisfying but how many are those? Fifty, a hundred? Another similarly long line runs down the outside of my arm.

"Lotsa them huh? I tried to get as close an approximation as possible so you won't end up with a fat scar."

"They're very neat." He does not smile at the complement.

The arm is a mess. It's swollen badly and is a strange blue-black, brown-green colour. There is no pink flesh to be seen anywhere. BV peers closely at the arm and then presses at first with gentle pressure but then with more and more force. It hurts!

"Suck it up, suck it up! You're not a baby."

I suck it up as best I can but this is not the worst of it. In 24 hours I'm going to feel some real pain but I don't know that yet.

My students, who'd sneaked in behind BV while I steeled myself against his antics, are looking totally freaked out. They leave the room and those that were at the door disappear from view. Ami looks on closely and talks to BV. He tells her what to expect in the coming days and then turns to me.

"I used AO plates. Not the ones I wanted as they only had paediatric plates. They're a little weak so they'll flex but they should hold the bone ends steady enough and healing should occur. I filled the gap with crushed bone. I've done it before and it does seem to work though it takes a fair bit of time before healing can be seen to be happening. Now we have to wait for healing. It could be a long time - perhaps as long as six months. You'll have to bear this long time span and just keep exercising and we'll monitor the healing process. I'll be back tomorrow."

And with that he's gone without giving me a chance to ask any questions, without looking at anyone in the room. Just gone. For a long while there's silence in the room then dad speaks up and I become aware of his presence.

"Arm is quite bad Neal."

"Bloody awful dad."

"I'm sure it's going to heal very well," says Ami and I think 'trying to prevent me dropping into that funk again.'

"As he said -- it will take a while and you just have to do what you do -- can you go to the gym and exercise it? -- we should have asked." JP knows the gym is going to be a life saving place for me.

"Who cares. I'll go to the gym anyway. There's no way this is holding me down." JP smiles at me.

A nurse comes in and bandages my arm. I help her as much as I can and it feels good to be putting in my own work and input into my arm. I bandage up tighter than the nurse wants to to

try and reduce the swelling and within a few short minutes she's gone and we get up to our usual jokes and laughter.

The next day I'm up at the customary 6am hospital time and ask for a plastic bag. I put my arm in it and tape the ends shut with elastic tape. Then I'm into a hot tub and spend all of an hour lying in there. No one disturbs me and I add hot water from time to time to 'refresh' the warmth. I'm just beginning to feel someone will come to check if I'm still alive when Ami pushes open the bathroom door and smiles at me. I smile back. No words are needed to communicate between us the thought that the worst is over. I'm on the road to recovery now and my arm, my dominant arm, will once again become that beautiful muscular machine I've always had and I'll be whole again. Little do I sense what lies ahead -- that the road to recovery has not even been started yet. That before that road is started there is one more 'job' to be done, one more ordeal to go through.

At 2 pm the next day BV is back. Ami and Don have been sitting with me talking. BV busies himself with my charts and then cuts open the bandage again. The arm is still black and blue and brown all over. He tells me it's the Betadine that looks like that and that he painted it on very liberally because the last thing we need right now is an infection. Then he steps to the room door and sticks his head out and there are some words exchanged with, it appears, a nurse. He comes back and after a few minutes of examining my arm he straightens his back as the nurse comes in with a kidney dish that she places on my bed. I'm oblivious to what they are doing -- listening to Don and Ami chatting.

Suddenly there is a pulling sensation. My eyes snap open wide as I look at BV. He's looking straight at me a straining all over his face. He's pulling hard and the drainage tubes are inching slowly out of my wound. Each millimetre they move is pure agony. I have not felt this much pain even with the bullet passing through the arm. Tears well up in my eyes but BV stares at me and continues the pulling. It seems like a full minute goes by like this but I guess it was probably less than fifteen seconds. The tubes pull out of their final run with a sickening sucking sound the pain crescendoing before falling away sharply. Tears are streaming down my face as BV barks:

"Suck it in, suck it in. You're a grown man not a baby," tossing the tubes into the kidney dish.

And then without missing a breath ...

"Right I'm discharging you now. See you in my clinic after a week. Nurse -- get a plaster cast onto this arm and discharge the good daktari."

And once more --- he's gone.

The Loop

I find myself back home; the intervening discharge from hospital and the trip back and arrival home a blur. I'm elated though -- finally on my way to recovery. The next morning I'm up bright

and bushy tailed and ready to take on the world. I head off with Ami to the Parklands Sports Club gym where, at this point, I've been working out for more than ten years since my dad established the facility when he was manager of the club. I was in tremendous shape the day I was shot weighing in at 226 pounds (102 Kg) and had been carrying a six-pack for more than 13 years. Though at age 39 then, and having stopped playing competitive tennis for more than 10 years, I was still running 5 kilometres four times a week and making a 20 kilometre trek with Ami and her dad every Saturday afternoon. This was promising to be a typical morning. Arrived at the club we head to the gym -- weigh in. I update my log book -- pull out the training schedule for the day and head into the aerobics room spending 40 minutes getting thoroughly warmed up before hitting the weights for another 40 minutes. Giving it some thought, I figure I've been out of the gym for about two months on that day and my arm wounds are still fresh from the third surgery. I feel I'll work on legs and abs and leave my upper body alone for about two weeks. That will be enough time from stitches removal allowing the wound to knit together really strongly.

I get onto the scale and the balance tips down straight away with the indicator weight where I always knock it -- at around 220 pounds. "Not surprising," I think as I nudge it to the left. 210, 200, 195 -- a little nudge to 193 -- a smaller nudge still and now it's starting to balance. Balance at 191! I have trouble digesting this fact: Weight loss through the shooting and the two months past is ...

35 pounds!

I think "How can this be?" I say nothing to Ami but this is a real bother to me. It lurks at the back of my mind through a very difficult workout in which I cannot seem to handle even the lightest of weights. On the leg press machine, on which I used to put ALL the weights in the gym room -- 400 pounds -- and then have a trainer climb onto the sled also -- I cannot even push 80 pounds. Upsetting though this is I convince myself that it must be due to the massive blood loss coupled with the complete cessation of all training activity in the last two months during which time I've been running around hospitals dealing with my arm and the shenanigans surrounding it. I end the workout well before Ami is done with hers and I sit in the sun on a bench outside the gym. I tell myself that three bouts of general anaesthesia must have played a role in the weight loss also. Ami comes out of the gym and notices that I look somewhat pensive.

"You OK?"

"No not really. Very weak."

"Would be, wouldn't you?"

"I guess. And a lot of weight loss -- about 35 pounds."

"Seems like a lot -- do you think that's expected or is it something we need to have assessed?"

"No, I guess it's all the moping around. I need to start looking after myself better, eating better and such."

"That should be easy enough to do," she smiles at me.

We head home and I hit the pantry getting out six eggs swallowing them whole and raw as I've done for years. Then I head to my computers and do a little surfing on the internet. Aimless at first it quickly settles down to figuring out what the Microsoft Certified Systems Engineering certification is all about and what I'd need if I were to teach this to that bunch of students that had asked me to do it for them.

Lunch rolls around Don, Ami and I having a hearty one on our little wooden deck in amongst our budding acacia tree forest. I head to my bedroom for a post-lunch siesta something that I've taken to doing since the shooting but that I did not do before. I snooze for about an hour.

I awake and head to the sink to wash the sleep out of my eyes. I run the tap dipping my cupped hands into the cold water and splash it onto my face. The cold water brings me suddenly awake only to find myself still in my bed! I laugh a small laugh at the joke. I wasn't awake yet -- I'd just been dreaming that I had awoken and walked to the sink to wash my face. The cold water in my dream had splashed on my face and woken me. "That's a really funny one," I think heading to the sink for real now.

At the sink I run the water cupping it in my hands and splashing it on my face. Whoa! I'm awake and still in bed! I laugh again at the loop my mind seems stuck in and throw my legs off the side of the bed to go to the sink.

Something nasty is about to unfold here little though I know it.

The loop repeats itself 20, 30, 50 or more times. I have no accurate count. I get desperate. I begin to think that I cannot wake up and am stuck in this loop for who knows how long. Finally after an uncounted number of passages through the loop I wake up doubting deeply that I really am awake. I'm only convinced when Don walks into the room with a cup of tea to find me coming out of the bathroom. Seeing him there I realise the loop has terminated and catch myself thinking 'Like a computer program stuck in an infinite loop.'

Don sits and talks to me while I sip my tea. I don't say anything to him about the dream, it seems ridiculous to even mention this. It's left its mark on me though. The next afternoon I'm a little concerned about my siesta and only fall asleep after a struggle. I awake normally -- not caught in any loop but to a terrible feeling -- a feeling of not knowing where I am, of what life is all about, of what I stand for. My mind is overcome by a feeling that it's not worth even living this life. But as quick as the feeling came it's gone again and I'm fine.

As I head down to my cup of tea and a chat with my students, who now seem to be coming in to my home every day, I've all but forgotten the dungeons my mind had been trudging through just

moments earlier.

A few days go by like this -- workouts, talking to students determining if they will be able to take on the MCSE, trying to eat well, surfing the web, afternoon siestas. Then it happens again; I get caught in the very same loop. Round and around we go, an unending loop. This time though it's broken by Don coming in to the room with my cuppa and waking me up with a gentle shaking.

"Neal," he says. "You were dreaming and tossing about."

All through my cup of tea I feel very 'down-and-out' of things. I can't shake the feeling of 'nothing worth doing' but realise that it's something coming from my mind and not something real.

Over the next few days things start to get really bad. One afternoon I wake up after endless rounds of 'The Loop' in a deep, deep depression that I can't seem to shake. I try to work at my workstation but can't seem to get into it. I get a deck chair and sit in the driveway in the afternoon sun. The workday over, Don and JP join me and we chat a little. That evening I can't put away any dinner making excuses that I just don't feel like eating. Getting through dinner at that dining table is a huge, huge effort. I start to make excuses for missing workouts. My meal plans are shot to hell. Ami goes to a few workouts without me to come back to find me sitting on the driveway with Don and sometimes with JP. I'm not eating much at all. I sometimes overhear Ami and Don whispering their worries about me. Instead of gratitude I lash out at them both. Ami looks lost when I set upon her like this but I cannot care less; the more strained the bond between us the more I lash out. Sometimes I feel the spiral dive my aircraft is in, the ground rushing up to meet me, but I just keep pushing the stick forward. I'm heading for a crash and though I can sense it at the back of my mind, I can't seem to do anything about it.

My visits to BV roll around and each time I go to visit him he's reluctant to take off the cast as the X-Rays don't show anything resembling good healing. When he hears that I'm hefting small weights even with the arm in the cast he's happy about that and has a nurse cut off the cast. Remembering his prowess -- nay frustration -- with the electric saw I'm grateful that it's the nurse cutting the thing off now. The itching inside the cast has been terrible and now I'm glad to have it off. The tentative itch-relief using a knitting needle with trepidation lest I dig into the stitches is finally over. Stitches are quickly removed with the occasional stinging jab as the suture material sticks and comes away with some skin. This is no biggie to me after the sorts of pain I've been through. I head home and get to sit in the driveway with a cast-free arm. There's no longer any black and blue but my skin is wrecked and dark brown and has a 'cracked' appearance. I'm dismayed until I realise that the colour is due to the thick layer of betadine which is still clinging to my skin and cracking like a dried mud hole under African skies. I pick at it and underneath is nice, fresh, pink skin. I sit in the sun, pick off the little cracked squares of dried betadine and tan my arm back to a semblance of normality. The scars heal well -- my 'chest hole' has of course completely closed up by now and physically I look 'pretty OK' if somewhat wasted.

Three months pass in which I hardly manage a single workout a week. At each workout my

weight has gone down a little. 191 goes inexorably down to 185 then 175. Soon I weigh what I last weighed when I was 18 years old -- 153 pounds. Weight loss now is a sickening 73 pounds! My six pack is gone replaced by a flat abdominal wall with no definition at all. My former 18.5-inch biceps are down to skinny little stick-like things. My right arm looks like the 'veggie arms' I used to chide some of my friends about. My formerly massive legs resemble more those of a old man than of a virile, young sportsman.

And it's not just about appearance. With the rapid consumption of itself my body seems to overwhelm my mind with the products of protein metabolism. I analyse this putting my mental issues down to high blood nitrogen levels but am powerless to do anything about it. My mind comes apart at the seams --- yet again!

Sometime along -- about six months after the shooting -- a friend of mine, SST, asks me if I feel able to run a couple of time controls in the Safari Rally. I've been rally driver, navigator, organiser and manager in and of many rallies by this time, but I decline in spite of knowing full well that it will give me a change of scene that might help me break out of my funk once more. I pull the same 'I don't care about life any more' attitude on SST. I just can't seem to build up the enthusiasm to do the complicated locating of a control, putting up the signs, doing the finicky time-keeping and so on. SST then asks if I'd be willing to do a passage or medical or safety control where I'd basically just monitor cars at a roughly halfway point in the rally and stay there ready to render any medical assistance possible should the need arise. The first leg of the rally goes well enough as does the second. JP drives me around in his Land Cruiser and it's one of the easiest rallies I've ever been a part of organising. Hours spent on each day-long leg talking with my young protege seem to force me into a better mood. After we hand in our control signs and radios back to HQ we head to Nyari and once there I jump out of the car and stick my hand through the opening in our gate to fit the key into the lock and turn it.

As I turn the key there's a resounding crack of a sound and I feel something give way in my arm. No pain; no sudden collapse of the arm but I know something has gone terribly wrong. The sound was so loud I was sure it must have echoed across the lake. In the house I examine my arm and even as I'm looking at it with Ami coming over to ask what I'm doing the arm starts to bend at the point where the bullet entered it. Within a couple of minutes I have what looks like another elbow joint halfway between my hand and my elbow and I look up at her saying "I've broken my arm!"

Metal fatigue

The next morning we are all a-flurry trying to organise a meeting with BV only to find that he's tied up in surgery. I book an appointment but life is determined not to make things easy for me. BV is in surgery back-to-back for the next three days and then he's off to a conference in Italy and won't be back for another two weeks. I decide to prepare as much as I can and try to squeeze in a visit whenever possible, even in the corridors of the theatres if necessary. We get new X-Rays done and they show what we had never thought could happen -- one of the steel plates in my arm is broken; the one holding the radius -- the bigger one -- is broken while the

ulnar plate is intact though the gap between the bone fragments has enlarged. So no healing is taking place in the ulnar bone while the radius plate has now wrecked any healing that might have been taking place. We had been seeing some callus formation but not enough to qualify as good healing. Now of course that which we had seen is all gone and we're back at proverbial square one.

I manage finally to get to see BV for 'just 5 minutes' as he's on his way out to his conference. His words ring cold in my heart to this day.

"Nothing much we can do Neal. The plate is clearly broken and it's broken because the bone is not healing. The plates on their own can never be as strong as bone -- nature's bone."

Then his bedside manner comes out again.

"There wasn't much hope even when I ground up the bone and tried that between the bone fragments. I can't see this healing at all now."

"So, BV, what do I do next?"

"Well, there aren't many choices. If we operate again we can't get the bones to approximate as the gap is too large. The only thing we could try is a graft -- an autograft -- and see if that will take. If you want to do that I will be back in about a month and we can try it then. You'll need to keep the joints as stable as you can so some external splinting will be needed."

An autograft means a graft of bone taken from my own body -- most likely that would come from my hip. I unwrap my arm partially, showing him the two dinner knives I have bound to either side of it. He smiles wryly but it is abundantly clear that he's not going to do anything to help me.

"What happens if the bones don't heal?" I ask.

"Many people live with a false joint. You'll have very little power in that arm but simple things like pushing away a piece of paper or perhaps, one day, even picking up a glass of water might be possible especially if you wear a permanent external brace."

"Typing at a computer keyboard?"

"I doubt that you'd ever have enough strength to do that."

I leave downcast, shell-shocked even. From strong, powerful athlete to this? Ami is dejected also. She feebly utters "Let's go back to SV and see what he has to say."

As we walk into SV's office he's just saying bye to BV on the phone. He looks up at me and the expression on his face is all that I need at this moment. He looks as dejected as I am, perhaps more.

"I've just spoken to BV," he says. "Not good news huh?"

"I guess I'm facing losing my arm."

At that he looks up at me but says nothing. For a long while he holds my gaze and his eyes speak volumes.

We talk for a while with each sentence becoming slower and darker by its completion. I get so depressed I can't even speak any more. SV is stumped; Ami's gone all silent. We leave his office and the last thing I see, using my 'rear-view' mirror trick, is him looking at my back as I shut the door to his office. That look will not leave me for a long time. His shoulders were slumped over, his eyes looking at the back of my head but his head appearing almost too heavy for his neck to hold up. I have known SV all my life and have looked up to him as an older brother and that look of resignation put a finality to my fate.

That evening and night are the worst of the entire ordeal. I speak to no one though I sit in the same room just metres from them. They've all come to commiserate with me but we're silent -- all of us. Some sip tea, others keep their eyes downcast. The atmosphere is thick with a deafening silence. I leave them early and head up to bed. I feel like I might as well be dead if I lose my right arm.

Non-union

The days blur. I continue to sit in the sun on the driveway my arm held by flimsy cotton bandage holding two dinner knives tight against the skin. I can't work at my computer but I manage to read a little from time to time. I fall asleep in my deck chair to the sound of African bird calls not heard. After lunch siestas are a nightmare of trying to fall asleep, doing so after a struggle, awakening to 'the loop' but more often to a profound sense of there being nothing worth living for. The worst of this feeling lives in me from when I've just fully awakened and lasts for about thirty minutes. It is then replaced by a deep sense of loss. It is hard to explain this, the depth of it, the sense that life will never amount to anything again.

The days blur -- one day into the next. Students come and go. There's no plan materializing for how to deal with them. Don and JP teach them 'this and that.' Sometimes I step in and make a suggestion but my zest for information technology too is gone. My love of computers has been driven out of me.

Then one evening SV calls to find out how I am.

"Hi Neal, SV here, how are you doing?"

"Not so good SV, I'm down in the dumps and can't seem to build up an interest in anything."

"Aren't you teaching again?"

"I have students but no I'm not really teaching much at all."

"You haven't come in to do a check X-Ray -- it's been four weeks now since the plate broke. You should come and do that and we can talk."

"Is there really any point SV?" too dejected to go running about hospitals once more.

"You know it could start healing at any moment."

"You don't really believe that do you?"

"It's not very likely but it could start up and we should know what's going on."

After the call I think about this and that night I dream that there's nothing wrong with my arm and all of this was but a terrible nightmare. I awake at 4:30am and potter about the house making coffee for breakfast and marvelling at how little pain I now feel in the arm even if I push it to do some light lifting. Instead of feeling good about this my internal dialogue tells me that this must be because a permanent condition is forming -- a condition in which I end up with three elbows. It tells me the false joint is becoming a real one that will stop hurting in time and become my nemesis -- the thing that I will live with for the rest of my life -- the thing that will prevent me pursuing the multitude of pastimes that were 'my life' -- the thing that others will look at with that look of horror so many reserve for the disfigured among us. This thing that will rob me of my humanity little of which I have left as it is.

Later that morning I mention to Ami that SV said we should repeat the X-Ray and she suggests we go in and do that. I sense that she feels 'anything is better than this constant moping around.' By mid-morning we're at SV's office and he personally takes me to the machines and sees that the films are made exactly as he wants them done. They're some of the best X-Rays I've ever seen but the healing situation is dire. There has been no healing in the radius bone gap. In fact the gap looks wider and what little callus formation shadow we could make out has all gone. There is now a clear 'dead zone' where there should have been a grey wispy area showing bone being slowly laid down.

"This is not good Neal. There's no callus here and what we had before -- a little shadow there -- is now gone." he says pointing and comparing this latest and the previous films side-by-side on his light box.

"SV, is there anything we can do?" Ami asks.

"I've been giving it some thought and I don't think it's worth trying anything here. Did you contact BV again?"

"No I didn't, not after the brush-off that I got the last time I met him."

"Don't misunderstand him Neal. His manner is like that. He was probably just being his usual brash self."

"That may be so but he clearly felt that there was no hope for me."

"Well, you haven't got in touch with him and that might be a good thing."

"How so?" I ask trying in vain to pull my mind away from the depressing films on the light box.

"Well, I've been thinking. How about trying overseas? How about going to India to see what they might try there. Didn't your Dad say that you have a relative who is an ortho man?"

"Yes he did but that's an old guy. What is he going to know about this kind of injury?"

SV laughing, "One day you'll be calling me an old guy but at least I only have to know how to take photos so I guess I'm safe from your sarcasm."

"It's not sarcasm SV -- my experience is that these old guys are stuck in their ways and just won't change. I don't want to go under the knife again only to find myself in another GK con-job." Little did I know what I was foreshadowing.

"GK got confused Neal. He could not charge you -- professional courtesy and all that -- and he could not justify pro-bono work coming out of his hectic work day."

"That's no excuse for negligence --- or is it?"

"No, of course not but you can understand can't you?"

"No, I certainly don't understand. He should have come out and told me exactly that -- that he was going to leave me to rot because he could not charge me for the work he'd do. I'd have offered to pay. How could it ever be right the way he left me, bones not even set? What if it had healed that way?"

"Actually if it had healed we'd not be dealing with this malunion. In fact we'd be in a pretty good place with having to break the joint and reset it again. Now we have no healing at all."

"So, if that's the case what can they do in India?"

"I don't want to get your hopes up but maybe stem cells or perhaps they have some new research they're up in touch with and can try that for you? You know how those guys are -- Indians -- reading, reading, reading and quoting from their books all the time. I drives me nuts. And I dare say --- they'd be a better bet than even the UK or US. In those places the powers

that be rob the people of progressive, cutting edge medicine with their overbearing legal restrictions. Stem cells be gone and yet as you well know stem cells could save your right arm! In India you'll get *THE* cutting edge of any field out there."

"That I do know," I said, "Do you really think it's worth a shot."

"Just think about it. Talk to your Dad. Talk to ST."

In our entire conversation SV does not mention PTSD at all, not once. The same with ST. All the doctor friends seem to have missed the fact that I might be suffering in ways they should have considered and yet have completely forgotten. Today I put it down to not having experience dealing with battlefield participants but it occurs in other walks of life so I think I'm right in being more than a little annoyed at this miscarriage of their Hippocratic oath to serve their patients to the best of their ability.

I head home to another miserable evening but now a new seed is germinating in my head and tomorrow is going to be the start of a new adventure. I can sense it; I can feel that I will look into going to India. But where to start? Who to call? What to tell them? Where to begin the story? How competent are they? The questions fly fast and furious intertwined into the dark moods pushed this way and that by doubts.

India

This too shall pass

Ami always called me a dog with a bone and I'm about to prove her right yet again.

The next morning I'm up earlier than my usual 4am and connecting to the internet through our WiMAX office connection. My first target -- the Indian High Commission, Nairobi. Not much joy there -- most pathetic of websites with very little information on it. I move onto airlines and tickets to Mumbai. I find a place in our local mall -- The Sarit Centre -- that has a number of flights to Bombay with prices listed. I can hardly wait for 8am to roll around when I can call my Dad to ask the name and number of that ortho guy in Bombay. I don't wait calling Dad at 7:15 knowing that he's usually up and reading his paper by then. Dad seems happy that I've called and says he'll send me the number as soon as he gets to his office. No doubt the doom and gloom of the previous evening has been communicated to him though he was not there with me.

At sharp eight he calls to say he not only got the number but called Dr Gokarn who said he'd be most willing to see me and who felt that this should not be a difficult problem to deal with. I tell Dad that I need to talk to Gokarn to explain to him how complicated my case has become. I get the number and call immediately explaining the events of the past few months. Gokarn seems upbeat, perhaps a little too upbeat for my liking but I'm all fired up and ready to head out to

Mumbai on the next flight. I notice Gokarn's slightly halting, stammering, old-man speech but brush it away thinking this might be the ticket -- my road back to life. I'm clutching at straws but not stopping to observe my mind in action.

Now the pace picks up Ami also becoming infected with my 'dogginess.' She heads out to the High Commission returning later that morning to say that they were very sympathetic when they heard what had happened to me and were more than willing to expedite the visa process. Ami left our passports there and was told to check back in 48 hours. Now the family also moves into gear. My brother-in-law calls from London asking to speak to me.

"Hi, can I talk to Neal please?" Don answered the phone calls to me from the other office.

"Hello?"

"Hey Neal-san. How are you doing?"

"Not so good Hitu-san, my arms a wreck. Why are you calling? Has Ami said anything?"

The '-san' colloquialism from our days working with Japanese rally teams is something we seem to have stuck to with Ami's brothers at least.

"No actually Dad has been keeping me informed and he told me you might be able to get some help with your arm in India."

"Oh, that's how you know. I was wondering."

"Yes and I just wanted to say that whatever you need money, help, whatever, you can count on me to help to the fullest extent."

"That's very nice of you Hitu. It's already cost me close to a million shillings here in Kenya alone and now flights and such."

"Well, now you know -- whatever you need -- just let me know and I'll send you the funds."

"Thanks Hitu. I really appreciate this."

"Family mate, that's what family is for."

"Thanks Hitu."

I hang up and tell Ami what her brother has just said. She throws me a smile saying:

"When the chips are down, really down -- you know, really know who you can count on."

"So what are we waiting for -- let's get moving. Vaccinations."

"I checked this morning, both our Yellow Fevers are current."

"Tickets -- I've found a company in the Sarit Centre that has a good offer -- something like two hundred dollars plus taxes."

"OK, I'll go there right now."

"No need for right now. Tomorrow will be fine." I laugh at her eagerness and she smiles back at me, "now who is the dog with the bone?"

"I love seeing you smile like this and laugh also! That's my chicoo -- come on -- fight, fight -- we'll get this sorted out -- your famous words -- no maybe not."

"Go on, you can't annoy me now, feeling much better now that we're moving on this."

"OK here goes this too shall pass." And with that she ducks my hesitant punch thrown with my left arm.

The next morning Ami purchases two and a half tickets Nairobi -- Bombay. I am a little puzzled by this until she says "Acacia can come with us and Gaia can stay with Ba."

I don't see the logic in dragging 5-year-old Acacia all the way to India and back, having her watch me go through surgery yet again. Then Ami asks which is better to traumatise little ACs through leaving her behind or taking her with us and keeping her close. It takes a bit of talk but I eventually see the logic in it and agree. Littler Gaia will stay with Ba -- her grandma, Ami's mum -- at little over eleven-months of age she won't know what's going on anyway.

The day after we get a call from the High Commission to tell us that the visas are ready asking that we pick up our passports. Ami heads off and is back before the traffic builds. We pack our bags and that very night we're off. It all happens so quickly I don't even say a proper goodbye to Gaia. As we board the Kenya Airways flight to Bombay I regret leaving my little gem behind but console myself that this will be an easier surgery and it'll be better that we don't have a toddler, nay a babe-in-arms with us, to slow us down if we have to wander about getting things organised.

Little did I suspect how true that last sentence was going to turn out to be. Little did I suspect the huge journey that awaited me on landing in India. Little did I sense the Indian saga that awaited just over the horizon.

Thick Smoke

The flight is easy enough though I keep trapping my arm between the window and the bulkhead.

The cabin altitude, pressurized as it is to an altitude of 8,000 feet, proves to be low enough to cause an uncomfortable swelling. Half way through the five-hour flight I want nothing more than to cut off the cast. My trusty knitting needle eases the sticking, itching bits while I scratch away oblivious of the stares. We arrive in Bombay to find Ami's cousins waiting to pick us up and we're soon in their house in the northern suburbs of the city having somehow threaded our way through the chaos of the city traffic. It is a revelation to see this -- I swear to myself never to complain about Nairobi traffic again. The smells of exhaust fumes mixed with industrial gases are stifling in the near-100-per-cent humidity of the place. Enveloping it all is a thick smoke created from burning plastic bags, mixed with a heavy air the likes of which I've breathed in in Mombasa but clean air there, stinking to high heaven here.

The very next day we start our hunt for the medical professionals we have come here to seek out. Ami calls Gokarn and I talk to him. We arrange to meet in his offices in Breach Candy. A taxi is summoned and we head out from Goregaon trekking across the city from north to south. On a map it looks like a relatively simple, straight-line, main road. On the ground though it's far from that. There are thousands of motor vehicles crowding the streets the worst of which are the tuk tuks -- three wheeled tin cans belching blue smoke and emitting an awful clanging such that I want to shout out to each and every driver of the bloody things that they have an engine knocking that will seize at any moment. My research had made Mumbai look, to me on maps, Lonely Planet guides and such, like an organised, well-run, super-developed city. My experience now on the ground is anything but. I remark to Ami that we are looking at Nairobi of the future. The hot, humid air is stifling, the noise invading every nook and cranny in my brain, the crush of humanity threatening to cause a claustrophobia I've never suffered from. My arm begins to hurt in the hours commuting through the crowded concrete jungle. We find Gokarn's office after a long search -- we do not have cell phones and the only instructions we have are hastily scribbled notes Dipesh, Ami's cousin, has taken down on the phone. Finally four hours after the phone call we find the building after asking in shop after shop after shop. People are nice enough but they have no idea that there could be a doctors office nearby. Climbing a dark, dingy stairwell we get to a fourth floor office and sit down opposite a dinosaur of a doctor. I pull out my X-Rays

"Let's see," he says in a gruff, old, tired voice.

"Ah, this is complete non-union I see."

I could have told him that and had done so on the phone. Still the salesman personality oozes out between my ears and I hold still waiting for him to make the next move.

"This will heal, you've not given it enough time."

"But, uncle," I had trouble forcing that word out from between my teeth, "it's been almost a year already."

"Oh, I see. Then I'm afraid you have a non-union. You have to live with this."

I could have stood up then from the other side of his desk and calmly and resolutely choked him with my one and a half arms. I had already told him this on the phone and offered to scan and send him the X-Rays but 'NO' he did not need to see them he had said. He looked at me through his coca-cola bottle spectacles; I tilted my head as I imagined the unspeakable things I'd have loved to do to him. Thoughts raced through my mind at 99-miles-an-hour. All this way? For this 3-sentence-meeting?

Again. AGAIN! This incompetence! This push the patient into a corner attitude; this holier-than-thou smugness. Put a lab coat on a [hu]man and drape a stethoscope around his neck and the transformation is truly magical. But not in ways imagined. The head grows to fill the room, the shoulders puff up like some glorified male turkey displaying to his harem and the brain seems to depart the room post-haste. Suddenly we're more concerned about how we look than our patient. More important is attending to grooming our faces, hair, hands and to the picking of imaginary white hairs off our white coats. We may not strut physically but certainly do in the space between our ears. We dictate; we don't empathise. Rarer the father-figure or the home that you once only found in your mother's embrace. Now you face this. This intellectual bully, this master of your life. Rarely, if ever, do you find a person that you can give yourself up to completely, putting your trust in their hands and yet that is what we medical people are taught, indeed admonished to become. I guess that is what attracted me to medicine in the first place. And yet I too am guilty of this 'problem between the seat of the pants and the top of the head.' It wasn't the false talk others rendered unto me that as a doctor I'd always have food on my table nor that I'd be rich beyond my wildest dreams. It was this -- this at it's very basest -- that I'd be a God. I'd be the saviour others came to in their hour of need and I'd magically deliver the goods; sort out the problems; ever elevating myself to higher and higher planes of the Godly world I inhabited. But when the reality of this falsity, this dishonest way of living came home to roost, I'd be shaken to my very core I'd quit. Quit the profession, quit the community of false prophets, rally against them to try to bring sense to the world I left behind.

But that now lay far in the future. At the present moment I rebelled against this behaviour being meted out to me. I stood up and gathered together my medical test reports without saying a word. The strained silence in the room could have been cut with a knife. I moved to 'his' side of the desk and gathered up papers that were too far to reach from the opposite side. All the while I said nothing to him. I very deliberately stuffed the papers into my now-dog-eared brown paper envelope. Then I gestured with my head to Ami and headed for the door. As I got there I turned around and said, "Thank you for your time." And with that I walked out and only began fuming after we had trudged down the four flights of stairs.

At street level Dipesh opened his mouth, "Now you're in trouble."

I could have floored him with my envelope but Ami stepped between us. "It doesn't mean anything -- what he said."

"Let's just get out of here. I'm going to blow a fuse. We came all this way to be told that half-

assed nonsense by a dinosaur who can't see past his nose. His medical education is of the schools Goodie studied at." Goodie -- Dr Charles Raymond -- was my grandfather and the first doctor in Kisumu, East Africa at a time when one walked with camel and donkey caravan from the coast to the hinterland to set up practice or business there. He was a highly respected doctor in his time but to have his 1920's knowledge still lurking around being used on patients in the year 2000 was a bit much for me to take on board.

In silence we found the car; in silence we headed back to Goregaon weaving in and out of the traffic, dodging the tuk-tuks, cattle on the streets, piles of rubbish, human waste and more. After many near-misses that had me brooding over finding myself in this head injury capital of the world we arrived at the relative peace and calm of the four-story flats that we now temporarily called home. Later that evening the relatives offered to take us out to show us their corner of the sprawling city but I declined making the excuse that I was still tired from the flight. I did my, now well accustomed trick, of tying up my arm in a plastic bag and took a shower. The heat of the city, congealed sweat-soot-road-pollutants and grime washed away I felt much better. Thrown away in the bath water went my negativity and I emerged ready to do battle once more. Over tea I called Nairobi and spoke to my Dad spilling out my tribulations to him.

"I have an idea Neal," he said, "Why don't I call my cardio-surgeon in Lilavati Hospital?"

I had brought Dad here in 1993 and had then taken him to New Delhi to my cousins Apollo Hospital there. That had been my first visit to India but then I'd been 'whole' and had not taken the city so negatively. Also we'd hired fancy taxis as if any vehicle in India could have been called fancy at that time. We'd met DrAM then and he had done an angiogram on Dad. Now Dad suggested he'd call him and ask him how we should proceed.

Serendipity strikes once again. DrAM says he is sitting with his good friend Dr Vinod at that very moment and asks Dad to get me to call the number that he dictates over the phone. I call to hear a cheerful voice tell me that he'd like to see me with all my reports the next morning at 8am sharp. I gladly accept and tell the news to all gathered in the room.

I never once thought to ask what species of specialist Vinod was. There was just something about that voice. It spelled command and control and that was just the medicine I needed at the end of this long day, a very pregnant nine-month gestation away from the start of this whole nightmare. Here was that rarity; that person I could give myself up to completely, putting my trust into his hands letting my hair down and leaving it to him to get the job done.

"Eight O'clock? Do you know what that means? We'll have to leave at 5am!" Dipesh again with his 'put mouth in gear before brain is fully engaged.'

As hard as that early a start played on the future prospects of the day, I soon faced good day -- a rare event in my recent past. The tuk tuks clanging a ways off on the main street I imagined the belching blue trailing behind the bobbing and weaving, five across a two-lane road, waiting, waiting, then rushing headlong as an opening in the traffic appears at the junction to the house.

And yet I was able to think to myself

This too shall pass.

I say old chap!

0430: I'm up. The city is quiet, eerily quiet after the din of the night such that I could hardly get to sleep. After our house in Nyari in our own little forest it's been hard to take this constant din of cars, tuk-tuks, air conditioners and the incessant drone of the TV in the living room even when no one is watching. I guess a good dose of anxiety is also playing its part. I wake Ami and we gently get Acacia up. We'd all slept in one bed -- a double bed granted -- but it had been hot and sticky. We had to put up with it as the only way to keep Acacia happy. Through all these events -- from the shooting to this temporary migration to India -- Acacia had never once voiced any fear at what had happened. Her silence though has me worried as to what is going on in her head. Little do I know how my toughie will shape up in the years to come. Little do I know that I have nothing to worry about on that score; on her score.

We head into the living room to find the family already up and breakfast going full tilt. So welcoming; doing so much for us. I am touched and it must show mixed in with my flitting dark moods borne of the effort to push the thoughts of what lies ahead as far away as humanly possible. 'Aunty' is suddenly pushing me into a seat at the breakfast table a mug of steaming masala (spiced) tea plopped down in front of me. Quickly a plate and some *tepla* is put in front of me. I look across at Dipesh wolfing his down and teasing Acacia as he does so. I listen to Ami's voice in the kitchen it's cadences mixing with those of the other women in there and I feel a slowly creeping sense of calm pervade my being. The day feels good -- auspicious almost -- though I'm not prone to superstition. And I realise that things are going to turn out all right.

Dipesh pushes us to finish off our breakfast more quickly and within a few minutes shy of 5am we're off on the road that is still relatively empty. Indians are asleep! We make great progress and are at Lilavati as the city awakes and the traffic begins to congest. We're far too early to meet our 8am appointment so we head off to the hospital cafeteria and order coffee and some biscuits for Acacia. I watch her -- her neutral expression. Little Acacia -- what's going on in that hair tousled head? What is she thinking? How has all this affected her? Will she be changed forever?

At a quarter to eight we head off to find Vinod's office. The sign board outside the elevators says Second Floor. We board it finding an operator in there dressed like a guard. He asks who we want to see and Ami says doctor Vinod and he presses '2.' I wonder at this. Are there so few doctors in this huge, multi-storied building that he knows which floor each one is on?

Disembarking on the second floor Ami asks at a kind of reception where Vinod's office is and we're told, a little curtly, to go down the corridor and turn left. I trail behind her and Ami turns the corner saying: "Here."

I face a door with a name-plate on it. It reads: DR VINOD AGRAWAL. I'm a little stunned at the coincidence though why beats me. Aggarwal, Agarwal, Agrawal -- these are common enough names in India. I knock on the door and there's a muffled "Come," from inside.

We enter. Sitting behind his desk is a slender man of about 30 years in age. He stands up ascending to his full six foot height easily matching me, and holds out a hand:

"Come in, come in. Welcome, I'm doctor Agrawal," he jubilantly says.

"Hello," I practically shout back, "I'm doctor Aggarwal."

We pause and look at each other smiles breaking out on our faces. I like him almost immediately. I can hear him now saying "Almost?"

He's jolly, he looks young and he looks smart. We chit-chat a little and he holds out his hand to me and I give him my envelope without even thinking about it. He pulls out the papers dumping them on his desk, picking out the X-Ray films. He holds them up to the light then whistles under his breath and turns to his light boxes shoving the films under the clips in that manner that only we doctors can do with such panache.

He is silent for what seems a very long time then says, "Non-union and so long ago. You should have come here seven months back no matter though."

"It's a big matter to me doc. That's my dominant arm."

"Oh! Don't worry. In three days time it will be healing as though it broke yesterday."

"You're very confident," I say.

"I've done quite a few of these and they always heal. You have to know what you're doing."

"And that is going to be?" asks Ami.

"A bone graft of course. We'll harvest bone from his hip and fashion a piece for the gap in the radius and then fit that and secure it with a new plate and screws."

"Are you equipped to do that here?" Ami pushes after this long arduous journey through all the ups and downs, not willing to compromise any more.

"Yes, yes. This is quite a routine surgery. I have my own alignment computer in surgery and we'll make sure he gets back at least 95% mobility. He won't have 100% mobility but to all intents and purposes he won't notice the difference. And looking at him he looks like he works out in a gym -- he's going to be fine."

"Actually I do and I can't wait to get back."

"And you will. Let's go to the front desk and I'll give them instructions. Tomorrow you'll be admitted and we'll do the surgery in the late morning after you're prepped and by evening you'll be in your room enjoying the anaesthetic recovery."

"That's it?"

"What? You want more. Don't worry. Why so tense?"

"It's been a long haul doctor Agrawal."

"No, no you call me Vinod. We're colleagues after all. Can I call you Neal?"

"Of course."

"One of my professors in the UK was called Neil -- spelled with an 'i' though." Looking down at the reports on his desk. "Great guy."

"OK. Shall we make the admission booking?"

"Come -- I'll talk to the receptionists downstairs. That way they'll get moving on it more quickly and you don't have to hang around here too long. Go enjoy Bombay man -- you been here before?"

"Yes but I don't feel like doing anything. Perhaps I'll go home and rest."

"Ah! Stop it man. If you take that attitude how are you going to recover?"

We head down to reception and get the process moving. Vinod even fills in some forms and glares at staff who are so put out by having him there that they drop pens on the floor, fumble their booking ledgers and generally make fools of themselves. We're not quite done when Vinod turns to Ami and I and says:

"Listen. I'm free right now. Shall I show you a good restaurant. We can go have coffee together."

"You're free at 9am?"

"I had a surgery scheduled but the patient has not been prepped and they'll take at least another hour. Come on -- let's go." Turning to the receptionist he says, "Complete those forms and the patient will come in first thing tomorrow. Which room are you giving him?"

The receptionist looks at me and Ami chimes in "What is the charge on your best room."

"Madam -- that is very expensive -- it will be three thousand rupees per night." An emphasis on rupees coupled with a classic Indian head-shake. Little does she know that in Nairobi we'd be looking at twelve thousand shillings a day and they'd probably try to keep us in the hospital for at least five days to run up the charges as high as they can.

"We'll take it," Ami says.

"Please pay at the cashiers -- pay for two days then we'll bill accordingly."

Vinod -- stepping forward, "Don't worry about that. I'll vouch for these people. Can't you see he's a doctor. You can work out payment on discharge. C'mon Neal -- I need that coffee NOW!"

We head out of the hospital and jump into Dipesh's car and in a few minutes we're in a nice hotel restaurant enjoying some hot coffee. Never in Kenya have I been admitted into hospital that quickly and then disappeared again to have a coffee somewhere outside! Vinod shares stories with me. He's fascinated to learn about the events that brought me here. He's even more fascinated to learn about 'Africa' where he's never been before. As we joke about British doctors we find we're kindred spirits on that score. Mannerisms of our professors, their quirky habits, inability to progress up the ladder of advancement in British institutions until the 'old guy,' -- the sitting consultant -- is dead and buried. The stories flow thick and fast. At ten I glance at my watch and Vinod just waves it off pointing to his mobile phone. We seem to communicate almost by thought. I am truly enamored with this guy. We talk about all sorts of things spending a good two hours together that first day. Then his phone rings and he has to go back but not before he does his imitation British accent.

"I say old chap -- fancy a spot of tea then what?"

We laugh at that and my mood lightens. That good feeling comes over me again as we head back to Lilavati. Vinod jumps out waving cheerily to me as the car moves off.

That evening we go out to a restaurant for a seafood dinner. Moods certainly have changed.

Lilavati

5am: I'm shaving, tooth brushing and doing these and other things that I really don't enjoy doing one bit. I've never understood people who say they enjoy performing these acts. Even with one hand -- my non-dominant left hand -- I am able to shave in under 120 seconds, and I brush and attend to the other chores and am in the dining room quicker than anyone else. I shower in the evenings -- a carry over from days playing hours of tennis into dusk. I played on clay courts mostly and always came off after a few hours extremely dirty, dusty and laden with grime. To go to bed in that state was unconscionable and to bathe in the morning therefore never took hold in my psyche.

The next morning, having ascended the learning curve yesterday, things are faster and

smoother. We're all up early wolfing down breakfast and heading out to the hospital quick enough to beat the traffic. We're in the hospital bright and early; by 7am we're at the reception. This is only the second time we've done this here in India; it's amazing how a team learns to function together. No, I didn't eat anything -- I wouldn't forget now would I? But that I must stay 'NIL BY MOUTH' through the day and risk another fainting episode bothers me no end. Anticipation is strong in me -- today just might be the day -- the day I begin on the road to getting my life back.

At reception they're ever so nice and efficient. This is an eyebrow raiser for me. In Kenya it would take 45 minutes to an hour to get through the admissions process. Here:

"Morning doctor Aggarwal." The receptionist smiles and clearly recognises me from the day before. No doubt Vinod's brusque manner with her has left an impression. In Nairobi there would be a ton of "Eh? Ati? What? Why?" and such that would go on and on driving me to the brink of insanity. Here it is efficiency all the way. "Please come -- you're going up to the eighth floor. Mansi here will guide you."

I hardly manage to stammer out a "Thank you," before we're off towards the elevator.

The same guard is there to push the buttons after a quick exchange of words with Mansi. I can't make out the language -- the lingo is rolling, lilting, lifting and falling. The cadences are foreign. I only speak English and Kiswahili and my French, while passable, is nothing to write home about. I can understand Hindi, Gujarati and Punjabi almost completely but here this one is confusing and I can't even extract hints of what they mean but in spite of this it is comforting. I don't have time to ponder this though. In seconds we disembark on the eighth floor from one of the swiftest elevators I've ever ridden on. So swift in fact that at one point I felt a distinct dizziness threaten me.

The nurses station is already abuzz with activity. Two nurses nod to me the bigger, more impressively uniformed one asking me to follow her to my room. My entourage complies and I'm soon in a nice spacious room with flowery curtains on a large window facing east -- I can see the sun impinging on the cloth shining through the multicoloured flowers. The bed is by the main entry door. The room is large -- very large by Kenyan standards. One could easily divide this room into four standard patient rooms. The half that lies away from the foot of my bed contains a double settee and two singles that all face a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. Those walls are that 'usual' pastel green -- a colour I have come to loathe after all these hospital visits and past work stints. Here though it's been well matched by the linen, curtains and even the door handles! Across to the right is a door that lies ajar and through it I can see a bathroom. I head there peering into a spacious very well outfitted and serious looking, almost lab-like room. There are stainless steel railings all along the sides of a bath to make it easy to get up out of it. The bath floor is textured and just beyond that bath there is a separate shower stall surrounded by clear perspex. All business-like and meant to give a clear view of a patient should he get into trouble in there. My mind wanders to the thought that this shower in it's own stall is such a far cry from what I've become accustomed to in India in the recent past. Why-oh-why do Indians put

the shower head so close to the loo that whenever you take a shower you wet the porcelain throne and then have to dry it lest others coming in after you ascribe some unspeakable, uncouth behaviour patterns to the previous user?

The chubby nurse tells me to settle down as the skinny one pulls away the bed covers. Chubby hands Ami the remote and says something in that rolling lilt. I see Ami smile and then look towards me and shrug her shoulders and then reply in Hindi to which she gets a reply that causes another shrug of her shoulders and another smile in my direction. I gather even the Hindi is corrupted in a manner Ami has trouble deciphering.

I reach for the remote taking it from Ami and get onto the bed. I channel surf while activity bustles about me.

"Sir? Sir. I shave now."

"Oh. OK." I'm startled by a barber -- a very skinny, dark, too-young Indian fellow with a small bag at his side, towel tucked into his belt and hanging at his side. He's unzipping the bag.

Setting his 'gear' on the bedside table he gestures that I should remove my shirt. When that's off he gestures at my pants too. I comply and lie on the bed butt naked and he gets on with his job. It's a little nerve-wracking. He works very fast his blade glinting in the morning sun that is now streaming through the windows. From time to time he stops peers closely at this blade then undoes his belt and pulls a piece of it clear off his waist and expertly strops the blade on it. He then tries the blade on his own arm his hairs coming off smoothly. I try to divert my focus to the TV and away from the slight rasping the blade is making on my skin but the lingo on the box and the imagery do nothing to draw my mind away from the slight drawing sensation as the old-fashioned, flat blade glides along my chest, abdomen and then left leg all the way down to my toes! It's over soon though and he's quickly packed up and gone.

Vinod walks in -- still in shirt and tie.

"How can you wear a tie in this heat Vinod?"

"One gets used to it old chap." his attempts at that British accent are surprisingly good; must have spent a great deal of time there and yet he's too young to have been long in that country. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Ready to do battle."

"Hey! What's this?" He pulls back my covers and glowers. Then he's out the door and I can hear him shouting down the corridors.

I think to myself "Is this one of those surgeon-transformations like what I witnessed in Thika?" What an irony that would be to be caught now in that wheel-of-life that I thought so badly about

when it was meted on dead-to-the-world patients on operating tables in Kenya. What irony to have it dealt out to me now and here. What irony to be on the 'patient' end of this saga. But that's not the case with Vinod; no I had not been a poor judge of character. He's back with the barber in tow.

"What's this? Nurse get in here." The Hindi flies out his mouth, "is this how you prepare a patient for right arm surgery? You shave his chest and leg? What about his armpit, his right arm -- the arm that I will be operating on?"

Vinod glowers as the barber hurriedly sets out his gear once again and gets the job going. As he works on my right armpit Vinod winks at me and I smile back. Then my attention is directed to my arm where the razor is now flying a little less fast and the altered sensations I've been feeling since the bullet passed through my arm have to be battled with to prevent myself drawing back against the blade causing another deep cut where there already have been two one passing right through the limb the other from a fast-spinning shiny stainless steel saw blade carelessly and callously handled. Satisfied with the shaving job Vinod scoots the barber out the room and comes back to talk to me.

"You're going to have four surgeons working on you today mate. Two orthos, one neuro and one plastic. They all want to sort you out -- it's not something that I asked for -- out of their own volition they have said they'll look in at the appropriate moment."

"Very nice Vinod but what's that all about?"

"I will work on your arm while the other ortho harvests the bone from your hip. MrVM -- the neuro guy -- will work with me to sort out your nerves -- I could see the altered sensation and reflexes that you were flinching about just now -- the plastics man will close you up aiming for the least possible scarring we can manage. OK?"

There is little I can say to convey my gratitude. He looks at my blank look.

"Don't fret man. It's going to be fine and after the surgery I'm going to make sure you have a PCA to control pain."

"Pain does not bother me Vinod. I've been through enough already and it really doesn't worry me but the PCA will be good fun. Perhaps you can crank it up a little for me," I say this giving him a sly smile.

"There won't be any of that in this hospital. The nurses will come in regularly to check that it's working, loaded up and set to meter correctly."

PCA stands for Patient Controlled Analgesia and is a small machine with a connection to the patients drip. It is an infusion pump containing medication -- pain killers -- that the patient injects into himself by pressing a button. We doctors joke about how we like to have a PCA pump

because we can reprogram it to deliver a higher dose more frequently than it is set for. This is not possible in reality because staff constantly monitor that we're not setting ourselves up to become addicted to the medications. But we like to joke about this anyway to lighten the gravity of what we're heading into. I guess that mine will be loaded with pethidine (Demerol) and will be a help, if nothing else, than to make the time seem to pass by more quickly.

"So, relax. It's now eight ten and we should have you in theatre by nine. OK?"

"OK. Vinod -- see you there."

He heads out of my room and Ami comes to my bedside. We chat a little and then nurses descend on me fitting me with a cannula, giving me a blue surgical gown to get into and do up the unholy buttoning at the front, injecting me with pethidine and then they're gone and I am left to wait. The pethidine buzz begins and Ami and I talk about how this time it's going to be the final solution to the long months that have gone before. The buzz deepens and soon I'm not sure if I wait for something to happen or if Ami is asking me questions I need to answer. I look at her and smile; it really does not matter. I sleep.

By now we should have known better. Final solution? Huh! A long road, a long long road less traveled lies ahead, a road I will continue to travel mostly alone. Much of it rough -- rougher than anything I've been down thus far -- but a rich road nonetheless.

Dr Aggarwal patient 'AND' surgeon?

I am woken by a quarrel in the corridors. I look around my room. Ami is not here. The TV is turned way down low.

"What is happening -- nurse, nurse?" That's not Ami's voice.

"Yes matron." That definitely is NOT Ami's voice.

"We are looking for Dr Aggarwal."

"Dr Aggarwal will be in theatre." Matron sounds annoyed.

"Dr Aggarwal is in the room matron."

"Is he?" she pokes her head into the room. My own head swims though it feels pleasantly light, "he's not in here."

Another head pokes in then quickly withdraws, "he is matron."

Back comes the previous head and quickly turns this way and that.

"Where? He's not in there. What is wrong with you. Go. Go. Go to the nurses station. Can't you hear the phone ringing."

There's a momentary silence and then talking again.

"Yes?" I now can make out that this is matrons angry voice and I quake.

We're taught throughout our medical studies that the patients are ours -- they 'belong' to us doctors -- but the ward is matrons. And matron is always a big bossy character that is strict, unforgiving and quick to discipline. But she can only discipline us professionals when it's a matter that concerns her ward. She cannot tell us how to handle our patients. And now she's in a quandary.

"Dr Agrawal matron -- on the phone -- he wants to talk to you."

"And you told me Dr Agrawal is in the room."

"But he is matron."

"Are you mad nurse. How can Dr Agrawal be on the phone AND in the room?"

Silence. And I laugh out loud; a little too loud --- the pethidine has loosened my tongue. Matron's head pokes into the room and I cringe. She glowers at me -- a big woman -- in control -- but now having lost that control. Out of her glowering face comes in a peeping voice.

"Dr Aggarwal?"

"Yes?" I manage with difficulty wondering if I slur.

"Oh. YOU are doctor Aggarwal?"

"Yes matron," definitely slurring I think as I open my mouth and speak brain no longer in gear.

"Oh! YOU!" And she's gone.

The next thing I know I'm being accosted by four nurses and two orderlies that are rushing to get my bed out of the room. Ami swims into and out of focus -- I'm wheeled out at what to me seems like a breakneck pace. White lights flash overhead and I think about how this is what they try to show us in movies but fail so miserably in their attempt to provide the whole picture -- the patient, the motion, the voices, the smells.

Suddenly Ami is by my bedside wishing me and then bending down to give me a kiss and I'm back into that cold place walls devoid of hangings, staff milling about rushing to their next assignment, patient left in the corridor wondering what comes next. I shut my eyes and fall

asleep. Somewhere in the distance I hear a voice. It sounds like Vinod. I dream, I see his eyes peeking out over a green/white mask. I see lots of masked people in a room with bright lights and I come awake suddenly, startled, shivering, a biting cold tugging at my core. Someone is taking off my blankets. I want to protest but they start talking to me before I can put brain in gear.

"Sorry doctor Aggarwal. Don't be alarmed. You're in the theatre." A scrub nurse speaking, gowned and masked: I can't tell who is who.

"Hey doc." Another gloved face but the voice is familiar.

"Vin--o--d."

"Don't talk. The pethidine is working. I asked for a little extra to be given to you as you're such a big fella. This is DrVM -- he's your neuro for your arm. This is DrPK and this DrPD - they will be harvesting the graft and suturing you up. This is the machine to align your arm."

My mind fixates on his statement, you're such a big fella, and I go down a mental road in which I tell him how big I really was and how much weight I've lost. How I've lost my beautiful arm. A despairing feeling that's underlies Vinod's voice as he points out various machines and instruments. I can't get my head around any of this so I just smile at him as I hear myself say "Perhaps a little too much peth Vinod huh?"

"Yes looks like it doesn't it," with a big grin. "Enjoy it mate what?"

"Doctor Aggarwal, doctor Aggarwal, doc -- look here -- you're going to be having a metallic taste now." The face hovers close, masked, hair covered that Indian accent blasting through, head-shake shimmying in a pethidine-laden dream-state.

And boom -- it hits me just as I hear -- once more --
and Dr Aggarwal has left the planet.

Waking up yet again!

I awake in my room. Out of deep nothingness my mind starts to pick up the thread of activity, begins the internal dialogue that soon will be raging. Dreams are a bane of my existence through this ordeal. The hours spent under GA -- general anaesthetic -- have turned into welcome relief. As the needle is inserted and the plunger shoved in a blissful nothingness envelopes. Nothing enters the mind; a truly dreamless state of existence. The NDE -- Near Death Experience -- was illuminating, even exhilarating but nowhere near the death experience of GA. GA is the closest I've come to achieving that silenced mind so many strive for in meditation. Where the NDE had left me feeling I 'knew' what lay across the divide between life and death GA adds a layer of mortar across that steel scaffolding cementing it all together into a monolithic whole. A whole that will be able, one day, to hold my mind together. That though will

come after a period of consolidation that still lies ahead of me.

For now I awake slowly into my room, horrible pastel green walls shimmering slowly welding themselves into visual stability. I see the back of Ami's head; she's watching TV. Looks like some documentary is on. I watch it too. Lions on a vast, grassy plain. A group of them. Functioning as a team. They pad slowly towards a rise in the land. Over the horizon of that rise they peer into a vast herd of wildebeest that are milling around. "Getting ready to run," I say out loud. Ami turns, simultaneously jumping up to her feet.

"You're awake?"

"They're getting ready to run. See how they mill about and egg each other on?"

"Yes, they'll run soon."

"I miss my home, I miss the wildees, I miss the blue, clear skies."

"We'll soon be back. Vinod says the surgery went very well -- the alignment computer shows you'll have close to full mobility back. He says the graft that they got is very good -- you have very strong bones --- apparently." Smiling.

"Not much good those strong bones. If they were that strong I'd not be needing this grafting business."

"How are you feeling?"

"Same old, same old."

"Just rest -- watch TV."

I do that until later in the evening when Vinod comes to visit and tell me what I already know. The surgery went well; the bone graft is a good one; healing should be swift. He shows me the PCA which I have not needed all afternoon but probably will later in the night. I give it a pump and watch the plunger push the microdose of pethidine along. I feel the slight buzz within seconds. Smiling at him I give the button another push -- nothing happens and he shakes his head at me making like I'm acting the miscreant.

"Ami, see he does not re-program this thing."

"You prepared to catheterise me?"

"Why would we do that?"

"Told you didn't I? I won't be able to pass any water for at least 48 hours -- it's been happening

to me after each dose of GA."

"We'll wait and see what happens. It might not happen this time. We used ketamine remember? You were almost awake through the entire surgery. Anyway the risks from infection via a catheter are not something we'll chance unless we really have to insert one into you. OK?"

"Yes boss."

We joke for a good hour and then he notices that I'm falling asleep intermittently and excuses himself. I sleep off the ketamine waking up late in the night. I see Ami sleeping on the sofa and call to her to help me get to the bathroom. She comes to my bedside shaking the sleep out of her eyes. I try to sit up in the bed and am overwhelmed with pain -- pain from my hip -- pain from the 5th surgery site -- the site of the bone graft harvesting. It courses through my leg and then into my lower back. It's unbearable. I pump the PCA once, twice, three times before I realise that it will only give me one single dose no matter how many times I push that button. I fall back exhausted -- this is a kind of pain that is completely different from broken bones and burning bullets entering my chest. It's different from any kind of pain I've ever felt before. It's 'crippling' being the only word I have for it. The PCA pump responds to another button press and the double dose makes me sleepy again. It doesn't take me long to figure out that if I press the PCA button and watch carefully as the plunger returns I can get it to deliver a second dose if I hit the button just before it settles back to the 'park' position. I wait for six minutes to pass for the next dose hit the plunger watch it return, hit it again and then once more. The pethidine courses through my veins, drags my mental turmoil to a halt and I fall off into a dreamless night to be awoken by nurses at 6am.

An insipid breakfast of purees and tea is placed before me. I eat it out of sheer hunger. The tea is good but I'm already fed up with these purees after just a few days here. My bladder is now really full but I have not forgotten the gift from my hip that awaits me if I try to get out of bed. By 10am my bladder is killing me the distension horrible. I tell Ami that I will have to try to make it to the bathroom and she calls for a nurse. Together they help me out of bed with me gritting my teeth against the pain. It's indescribable and it's only my ability to take pain that has me pushing my right leg forward half-steps at a time. I make it to the bathroom and they put me on the throne but the pain has been so bad that I can't let go and have to grunt and bear the bladder distension and head back to the bed. By evening I'm in worse shape. The arm is OK. Vinod has been in to check that but the bladder is now pressing on me in a truly horrible way. The distension has turned into pain. Vinod is unwilling to catheterise me and calls a nurse. Between Ami the nurse and himself they get me onto the throne and leave me there Vinod threatening that he's going to walk out and only come back when I've done the deed.

I sit and sit in there staring at the tiled walls and floor. My butt starts to ache and I wonder how this increase in pain is going to help me 'go.' Finally -- after nearly 10 minutes just sitting there the tension releases and my bladder empties. As with all the other surgeries I've been through, the feeling at this event signals the end of an ordeal and the pain on the walk back to the bed I try to take in my stride. I find Vinod there, smiling.

"We were worried there for a bit mate. Did not want to catheterise you but" he holds up a catheter in it's plastic bag.

"I don't know what it's about but I always have this problem."

"Seems to be neuro involvement through the anaesthetic."

"It's over now but the pain in the hip. Phew."

"That will ease off soon."

I spend two boring, very boring days in that bed. Wobbling my way to the loo at least now only with Ami's help. I learn that it helps to get two doses of pethidine before attempting the journey. Surreptitiously I reprogram the infusion pump to remove the 1 dose per six minute limitation. It's simple enough to do -- just a few DIP (dual in-line package) switches hidden inside the battery compartment of the unit. I'm careful not to dose myself too much but I can't be sure of how much I do overdo it. The fact that the peth ran out and was not replaced by stern looking nurses peering at the infusion pump gives me a little kick!

True to Vinods words the hip pain rapidly diminishes and the rest of the stay at Lilavati is uneventful. We head 'home' to Goregaon on the third day post-op. I'm in high spirits; an X-Ray on the day of discharge shows all the screws and plates sitting pretty. Vinod asks me to stay in India for at least two weeks so he can monitor things. We go out for a few dinners and lunches together: a friendship is born; a deep friendship is born. After a week I ask him if I can travel in India a bit and he OK's a 100Km trip overnight to Dahanu. We hire a driver and large, comfy taxi that looks like a four-wheel-drive but isn't. It's comfortable though and the driving around alleviates the stifling rush of traffic in Bombay. We head north and meet Ami's extended family there. They show us around their tobacco farms, the beaches, a man-made dam that they visit often and some of their friends. I resist my urge to lecture them on the dangers of tobacco even when not smoked and the deeper moral meaning of being part of the suffering that this drug causes to thousands of victims. Acacia enjoys watching a train pass by just inches from where we stand and we have chapatis and tea at a trackside 'kiosk' very much like the ones we have in Kenya. Acacia's shock and amazement at a toddy-drinking inebriated woman in a sari has us all laughing ourselves silly. Ami's cousin shows us his sari factory and we try a new species of coconut while there. We come back to Bombay refreshed, my hip pain all gone. Vinod has one more X-Ray taken, removes the stitches on my hip and OKs me to head home with instructions to take an X-Ray every 2 weeks, scan and email it to him. It feels like the worst is now over, the mountain climbed, descent phase now facing me.

Down The Rabbit Hole

My return from India with an arm that surely will now heal to full and complete normality should

be filling me with happiness and encouragement that the worst is over. But this is not to be. Depression hits again; apparently my experience with PTSD is not typical but then PTSD can manifest in different ways in different people. I descend back into a depressive state for no reason I can discern.

Return to Nairobi. Boarding: 'Kenya Inchi Yetu'

Ami's cousin Dipesh arranges for us to be taken to the airport. We bully our way through the traffic on Mumbai roads. (I refuse to call it Mumbai because of the way it was named -- by that thug Bal Thackeray of the chauvinistic Shiv Sena party. Few know the story of how he bullied the entire ruling population into adopting this change in name). Luckily Dipesh has come early, four hours early, to get us to our flight. We wind our way through tuk tuks belching the now familiar blue smoke from their exhaust pipes, past cattle sitting on roadsides eating all manner of garbage and alongside the little piles of human waste on the road verges. I am disgusted by the mountains of garbage that lie outside the huge slums that we must pass on our way to the airport. At the airport we are treated as badly as we were on our way in. I tell myself that with so many people in this city I should not expect much more than this very kind of treatment.

The airport is dirty and there are red splotches on the walls as we head in to immigration control. I tell Ami that these are the work of pan-chewing Indians that spit out their spittle on the walls and leave these large stains. She is disgusted but not believing of this until Dipesh concurs.

Immigration officials are brash and handle is in a rough manner leafing through our passports like they'll rip a page at any moment. Acacia is riding on Ami's lap and the immigration goon handling us looks at her with a dismissive stare that is only too typical of how so many Indian men look at women. We're herded through the security checks and into the departure lounge to sit on rows of crude, ripped seats that are not at all becoming of an airport that sees so many millions of passengers pass through it daily.

After an hour-long wait the boarding call issues from a mouse-like voice of a pretty airport official in her smart uniform -- a beacon of light in this dingy place. We grab our bags and our little one and head to the gate and are on our way through the jetway into the aircraft. So far we've not seen anything of this aircraft but now, as we push to our seats, put our bags in the overhead storage and settle into our seats I see the Kenya Airways logo on the in-flight magazine in the seat pocket in front of me and then become aware of the soft music playing on the speakers. It's the post-independence timeless piece 'Kenya, Inchi Yetu' (Kenya, Our Land) and I turn to Ami and say, "Listen."

She cocks her head and a smile creeps over her face. I smile back. Heading home, healed. On the road to recovery now. I say to her, "At the end a chapter and opening a new door huh?"

"Yes Neal," She says, "On the way to a new phase of life. Looking forward to it?"

"Yes. Yes of course."

Landing - home at last

Various Kenyan songs play on the aircraft cabin sound system while we wait for taxi clearance. Each new tune puts another smile on my face and I turn to Ami and say, "Sounds of home."

Just as I say that a stewardess announces that we'll be departing in a few minutes and then translates into Kiswahili and my smile turns into a face-cracking grin. The language echoes around me enveloping me in its warm syllables, caressing my mind. We are going home!

Then comes the pushback, the engines start up and we're taxiing to the holding point. The engines spin up and I feel the aircraft roll faster and faster and then we're airborne. My mind flies free as we part with gravity and I experience that rush that I get whenever I fly with my own hands and mind at the controls even though now it's not me at the controls.

I sleep in a deep peaceful place and the flight seems short though it's all of five hours long. Soon the announcement comes over the speakers that our descent into Nairobi has begun and we're told to fasten our seatbelts and put our seats in the upright position. I catch a glimpse of the Ngong Hills and, in my mind, hear Karen Blixen saying, "I had a farm in Africa." My favourite, movie, soundtrack, books and biographies course through my neural circuitry. We descend down towards Runway Zero Six and I see Wilson airport pass by my window on the port side of the aircraft. There's little time to devote to dreaming of descents over the threshold of Zero Sevan at Wilson. The Nairobi-Mombasa road flashes below us and suddenly the ground rushes up to meet us and we're rolling on the land of my being the pilot having executed a 'greased-on' landing to make any pilot on board envious beyond belief. We exit the craft, go down the steps onto the tarmac and I'm happy that there was no jetway to take us in that so sterile a manner into the airport complex. Instead I can turn my head up to blue African skies and drink in the smells of my home.

Our bags collected from the carousel we find my Dad waiting for us at International Arrivals. Everyone is fussing over me and keen to find out how it all went. Before we know it we're in the car and heading out of the airport. It hits us that the roads are quiet, very quiet. There are no tuk tuks, no blue smoke to clog our eyes and nostrils, no cows sitting by the kerb eating even plastic bags. Things seem so peaceful; no rush; no panic.

The first X-Ray

The very next day we head out to the Aga Khan Hospital for the first X-ray. I don't want to leave it a day longer than necessary. SV requisitions the image and I go through what I've gone through so many times before. We then head to his office to await the films. It takes about ten minutes during which time we make idle chit-chat. Then the films arrive, he pops them up onto his light box and says, "Not much to see here Neal. The plates are sitting very nice and the gap is closed now you can see this light grey bone here -- that's the bone graft."

I take a look and see the graft. "SV, Dr Vinod Agrawal, the ortho who did my surgery has asked that I take these X-rays every month and scan and send them to him."

"That's a good plan. You take this film and do that and come back in four weeks and we'll do another one."

He seems and sounds neutral, not saying much, no happier than when I left but not negative either. I am not letting myself get down. I head out of his office with the ridiculously large, pink X-Ray envelope under my left armpit. Ami drives me home and we're silent in the car. There isn't much to say and there are no bumps that irritate my wounds this time.

the second X-Ray

The month goes by too slowly. I potter about the garden, try to get some reading done technical reading, surf the internet and watch Discovery Channel now and then. It seems like ages whiling away the time, waiting, waiting for the days to pass until the next day. I dare not work out now. Vinod has warned me against this until the bones have stitched together. The cabin fever gets me and I go deep 'down in the dumps.' I try to find odd jobs to do around the house, weld a thing or two here and there, fix a broken wall socket but cannot do too much with my dominant arm encased in fibreglass.

Finally a month has gone by and we head to the hospital to repeat the X-ray. Up on the light box SV peers at it for what appears, to me, to be too long a time. I don't look at it preferring to let him have his undisturbed moment with it to come to an unbiased, unhurried conclusion.

"Neal?"

"Yes."

"Looks good." He smiles at me. "Look here, this shadow. It's faint I know. That's callous formation."

I am relieved and the relief must show on my face. I look at him and he smiles.

"This is what we needed to see. I think it's healing now. That really does look like callous. Rest it some more and let's not disturb the bone abutments at all. I'm keen to see what this will be like in another month. Here take the films and scan them and see what your surgeon says. And do let me know."

"I will SV," I say as I head out once more with films tucked into my armpit.

The third X-ray

I begin to get a little depressed. The afternoons just after lunch seems to be the time that is worst for me. I put it down to the food in my belly causing a spike in insulin levels that first gets me looking towards a siesta but then leaves me feeling drawn, energy at low ebb. At this point in my life I don't know how to control my insulin levels so I just have to bear it. Later I will help dozens patients overcome obesity and type 2 diabetes but at this point in time this physician does not know how to heal himself let alone complete strangers.

I again potter about and do 'this that' as Acacia used to say when questioned, as a toddler, about what she was doing.

The third X-Ray is much like the second one. There is a surprise for us though. Adjacent to the callous formation there is a lighter part of the bone that initially was healthy. Dozens of films are put onto light boxes and we peer from one to the other and it really does look like the bone adjacent to the fracture is lightening. We're all puzzled then SV says, "This must be pseudo fracture Neal. I don't think it's anything to worry about but you scan and ask Vinod what he thinks."

I scan and send and wait with baited breath. No reply comes from Vinod and I finally can't hold on any longer and give him a call.

"Neal, the callous formation is very clear and progressing well."

"So what is the lightened area alongside the fractured surface pseudo fracture?"

"It looks like pseudo fracture Neal. It could be caused by the migration of minerals and osteocytes to the fracture area. If it is it's a sign of osteomalacia. I hope it isn't but we won't know for a while. We just have to keep on doing what we are doing and take X-rays every month or so. Keep up your antibiotics"

The way he says it, it smacks of worry. I worry too that I've been on very powerful antibiotics, in my case Zinat (Cefuroxime) and in high dose, 500mg twice a day now for just over a year. I worry that this must be playing hell with my gut flora and fauna knowing only too well that the human body is made up more of non-human than of human cells. I begin to get worn down by the constant hoping, the constant care of my arm. Don't move this, don't reach out for that, do things with your left arm. Don't type, use dictation software instead. It wears me down and every time SV emits his diagnosis and I head home to scan the films and email them to Vinod I suddenly feel tired to my bones. Even after the conversation with Vinod on the phone and even after his upbeat tone I am weary and can only head up to my bed to fall fast asleep within seconds.

Depressed on the driveway

A period now begins that I find hard to explain. I wake up in the morning and have a hearty breakfast of eggs and sausages. I cannot resist our local Farmer's Choice sausages and I need the food to keep me on the road to recovery. I barely notice that the muscle mass that I had prior to the shooting is now being replaced with fat. I am pretty sedentary at this time as I cannot work out. Scared of breaking my plates again, I avoid the gym. I'm getting next to no exercise at all. Too scared to lift weights I think of going for walks around the estate but put that off in a vicious cycle of lazy begets lazy. It does not strike me that the eat-gain-feel-less-like-exercising-eat-gain cycle has grabbed a hold of me.

In a very short period of time I weigh 50 pounds more than I did a couple of months after the shooting by which time I had lost nearly all my highly defined muscle, my ripped body. At 225 pounds body weight I'm still a little lighter than on the day I was shot but the difference is that I now am close to 25% body fat where before I was a lean 8% fat and had a six-pack washboard of a belly. In retrospect I can see that the high fat content in the presence of high carbohydrate intake must have addled my brain too and the high insulin levels that have accompanied my dietary and sedentary lifestyle must have been playing havoc on my mental stability. The daily afternoon siestas borne of the brain fog that carbohydrates are known to cause are doing me more harm than good. Thoughts collect around nothing! I come out of the trance and for good long moments don't know where I am. Then I look around me at the driveway and 'come back into myself.' But that self is always riddled with hopelessness and I am inundated with thoughts of something terrible pending just over the horizon. As this progresses even sitting under blue African skies that I've revelled in so much in the past, becomes less and less a part of me and I start thinking there's no point in going on. I begin, once again, to think of ending it all. I never actually try to commit suicide but I do think about it a lot in a dejected, disjointed sort of way.

Ami does the research and begins to panic as the warning signs pile up. I talk about there being no reason to go on, wanting to kill myself, about feeling trapped and about being a burden to her. Then I start to get angry again and complain about not being allowed to kill those thugs with my own bare hands. I have never been a violent person but I can and do look after myself very ably. Unable to buy a gun I make a cayenne pepper spray in a garden plant sprayer bottle pumping in a lot of pressure so that it will shoot a good ten metres from me. I also build a stun gun out of a bug killer, the tennis racket type and a flamethrower out of some bits that I had in my workshop. At the first test of the flame thrower I almost burn the fence down -- the flames rocket out all of ten metres!

Deserted: The lack of support

In all those days -- almost a years worth of suffering -- very few people come to my aid. JP pulls up a seat and sits with me day after day. Ami of course is with me all the time. Don helps me through countless 'hours of darkness.' But my extended family are rarely to be seen. My sisters give me a wide berth and even my mum and dad get on with their lives seemingly oblivious to what is going on with their son oblivious that I teeter on the edge of life barely managing to stay

on this side of the fence.

Even with Ami, Don and JP around I walk this walk alone and I discover my treatment on my own lonesome self. The journey begins as I sit contemplating my computers. These machines have been my life and joy. As I sit looking at the two sitting on my desk I travel back to the days when I had built a computer from scratch using single transistors and other bits and pieces. Not able to afford a complete, ready-built machine at that time I had to come up with one on my own, on a shoestring budget. These thoughts awaken a little something in me. Tentatively I begin to try to handle a mouse again and then a keyboard. There no longer being any pain from the arm I surf the internet looking mostly for information on computer hardware and how to build nifty things out of microcontrollers. My old bent comes back; my love of hardware mated to software surfaces and takes a hold of me and then I came across the Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) program.

We have a bunch of students attending their classes more like private tuition in computing studies right here in my home. We are no longer offering the full-blown degrees that we had offered at Cybercol but are offering vendor certifications like the MCSE. We have made the discovery that full blown degrees are not really of much use and many companies in Kenya have made the same discovery we have that even a person with a bachelor's degree in computer science usually does not know enough about everyday computing needs that companies face. Ask such a graduate what operating system they use and likely they hem and haw and blurt out something like -- Windows. Ask them what version of Windows they use and they don't know what to say uttering some nonsense like 'the one which came with my computer.' Businesses have figured out that a student with a vendor certification really knows what she has studied and can be put to work and be a very productive and useful person right from the very first minute of employment. So we fill the need. We churn them out as fast as we can. Actually there's no 'we' in that venture -- Don and JP do most of the churning out. I am in no shape to participate. I just wallow on the driveway. JP himself is sitting the MCSE even as he teaches it. Grades are not good; several students go through multiple resits. Then I wake up and everything changes.

It comes on suddenly. One day I am as depressed as usual the next I am enthusiastic, up-beat and surfing the net trying to find out how to get better grades for my students. I came across sites that offer questions and answers -- the so-called 'braindump' sites. I begin collecting these questions cutting and pasting them into my text editor, this EMACS that I'm using to write this memoir right here. I collect many hundreds of questions printing them out, binding the books and giving them to our students.

I develop my 'inverted classroom' technique. Students study questions and then and only then, go looking in the text for answers. No one is allowed to read the text cover to cover but to drive the search for knowledge through the need to answer the questions I've gleaned for them. I explain the answers when the students query a question they cannot understand the answer to. I lecture on small topics. With my usual clear, concise explanations I am slowly making a comeback. The students 'get it.' Not just the explanations but the unfolding story of my

increasing awakening right before their very eyes. We send a bunch off to exams at the testing centre in town and they come back with 900 and 1000 marks out of a possible 1000. I have a lot of fun collecting information and teaching it. I progress to asking Don why he does not do the MCSE himself and that question naturally leads to 'Why not do it myself?' I talk this over with Ami and Don and though Ami is not exactly falling over herself for my taking on such a monumental task in my current mental state, she agrees and my 'dog-with-a-bone' mentality comes out with full force. I study sixteen hours a day, sit exams left, right and centre and come out with marks all above 900. Life begins to take on bright colours. My typing speed improves and with the small movements that I have to make to type my arm gets its exercise without being subject to risky large weights. I begin to feel good about myself and the depression slowly recedes into the distance. I take on more difficult certifications and sit the exams passing them all with flying colours. Ami and Don watch and marvel. They both take on the MCSE themselves and excel by using the very same methods the inverted classroom that my students are using. I teach these skills, tips and tricks to new students and soar mentally with them when they pass their exams. JP passes his exams and goes on to more difficult subjects passing those too and when he comes home one day after a visit to France to tell us that he has secured a high end job in a large telecommunications company in France, we are all elated and celebrate with a bottle of bubbly.

Healing well

Another X-ray date rolls up and we head out. My mood is excellent and the films on the light box elevate it all the more.

"Neal, look at this!"

"What SV?" I say surprised at his surprise.

"Look at the gap."

"What gap?" I say smiling at the black and white image on the bright white box.

"The gap is there but see how it's getting obscured by a whitish haze?"

"I see that."

"You know what that is, I don't have to tell you."

"Bone formation in the broken ends, stem cells at work!"

"Yes, this is great, we're on our way now. Your bones are stitching together."

The road home is a magical drive. I am smiling at everyone and everything. The grass by the side of the road sways in the wind, the sun warms me to my very core. I drive fast, too fast. I

turn onto the dirt track through the coffee estate near home and floor the pedal. I glance across at Ami looking at me. From the corner of my eye I catch her smile. The car approaches the first corner going far too fast to negotiate the ninety degree turn. I blip the clutch while at the same time turning the steering ever so slightly away from the corner -- left in this case -- on a right hand bend. I floor the throttle the full two hundred and eighty horses of our rally Mitsubishi Lancer spinning the rear wheels. The car goes into a powered slide her tail end turning towards the right hand bend her nose pointed into the valley that falls away to our left. I now turn the steering to the right and get ready to blip the clutch. As we approach the apex of the turn, big right boot down hard on the throttle. The engine roars. I blip the clutch to get the wheels to spin and lose their traction. As I do this I turn the steering more into the turn and the car pendulums around flicking her tail to the left now pointing her nose into the right hand turn. Too much into the turn so I opposite-lock her turning the steering all the way to the left executing a perfect pendulum turn the car's nose tracking beautifully into the apex. Ami laughs out loud as we speed away from the corner not losing any speed at all through the turn.

And she says, "And Neal-san is back!"

Sunny days on the driveway

This second phase of depression is chased away by big blue African skies and the plants and animals that surround me and take on colours and aspects that until this time had been all but gone from my life. I sit on the driveway and my talk now turns to the future. I bubble forth with so much enthusiasm it infects all those around me. They grin with me and we come up with all sorts of ideas; things to do. One morning as I sit alone with a cup of coffee warming my hands in the cool crisp air of the start of day, a sound hoots off to my right and is responded to by a lower-pitched response to the left. Like stereo speakers surrounding my head these sounds echo back and forth. I relish the call of tropical boo boos -- a kind of shriek -- a hunting bird that we've often heard in acacia forests in our parks but have never had in our garden. This was one of the first sounds Ami and I identified on the edge of Lake Naivasha shortly after we were married and started camping together. This is the sound that started us off on our bird-watching 'career' and it means so much to us. To have them in our garden portends of good days ahead.

A few days later a bunch of weaver birds arrive in the trees on the lake margins and promptly start building their intricate nests just outside Acacia's bedroom window. When they hang upside down below their nests displaying to their females Acacia is intrigued asking me all manner of questions about this. Fish Eagles then begin to call from on high and in a short bit we have them landing in our trees. Their calls -- another hallmark of our lives -- become an intimate part of little Acacia's mind. To this day she stops her conversation and smiles when their calls come over the blue to us. Nature abounds around us and it infects me. I come into the light; I start to become whole again. And good news awaits; there is light at the end of the tunnel after all.

The gap is closed!

A continuing series of x-rays yields a cascade of UPLIFTS. Progress continues unabated. And then finally the gap is closed! SV is ecstatic when he shoots another film and then pronounces me healed. He almost falls off his seat in his excitement as he grabs for his desk phone and barks into it orders to have the fibreglass cast cut off. A nurse brandishes a reciprocating saw and I'm momentarily apprehensive remembering the saw that doc BV used on my first cast in the surgery after I broke the plates in my arm. That saw had cut me badly due mainly to BVs brash ways. Now I cringe a little as this nurse approaches me. But I have nothing to fear. She pulls a plastic ruler-like plate - a saw guard - out of a drawer and carefully inserts that into my cast telling me to let her know if it pinches me. She then runs the saw along the cast making sure to have the plate below the blade at all times. Within a few minutes the cast is off and I'm rubbing my itchy skin.

Over The next few days the itch disappears as I tan my pale skin in the sun on the driveway. Pain persists on the outer part of the forearm though and it's only after I see ST again at the MP Shah Hospital that he finds there's still a stitch hiding under the skin on my wrist. It hurts like hell when he digs it out with a scalpel but I take it on the chin as I'm wont to do with so many procedures. The stitch out all pain now disappears and I head to the gym each day increasing the loading on my arm each training session. Soon I'm up to the eighteen kilogram dumbbell weight in curls that my body was used to pre-shooting and my skinny right arm is back in size to match my left.

Truly --- I am back now!

The Cybercoll Backstory

Jeeps, mainframes and stoned viruses

Anita pulls into the driveway at Parklands Sports Club driving her little dirty, brown Suzuki jeep. The year 1989 is many years -- ten years actually -- before the shooting but the back-story has great bearing on how my life will alter through such a wide arc that it's worth repeating here if only for my three musketeers.

"Hey Aneet -- what did you go buying that thing for. LJ80 jeep? It's going to kill your back!"

"I always wanted one of these brader." In those days she affectionately called me brader her word for brother. We were the mixed doubles tennis kings, the best of buddies and got along like the proverbial house on fire.

We went for a ride together and it was just as I thought. The jeep bumped badly on the smallest

of road imperfections and jarred the fillings in my teeth to the point that I could swear a number of them were getting quite loose.

"OK, now you've bought it I suppose you'll have to live with it."

"Aw, don't say that, be happy for me."

"OK, OK. But don't say I didn't warn you."

I head back to my workshop and my customer's car out of which we have pulled the engine and gearbox and are working to rebuild both. Catering to my usual fastidiousness the mechanics have covered the workbenches with clean paper and all the parts have been blasted with a mix of petrol and paraffin pumped through a cleaning gun powered by a compressor we have built right here out of old engine parts. The thing works pretty well but it takes an age to pressure up and once the pressure is gone -- about as long as it takes to spray one side of a car -- we have to wait for an hour or so for the pressure to build up again so we can spray the other side. It is cumbersome but we manage to pull off concours-quality spray jobs and in any case, I do not have the money to buy one of those fancy new red and black units that are appearing in the tool shops around Nairobi. We make do with what we have and make money like we've never made in any business since. This business, my first business, gives me the funds that allow me to build my dream home, on a lake margin in the upper crust neighbourhood of Nyari Estate, Nairobi.

A few days later the jeep comes rolling into the driveway of the manager's house at the Parklands Sports Club. We live here at the time as dad is the manager of the club. It is a cozy little house with a gravel driveway that crunches when cars come and go. Now it crunches as the lightweight jeep trundles in but there is another sound that accompanies the crunching -- a kind of thump, thump that I've heard only too often in the past.

"Anita, Anita, turn it off, quick!"

"What?"

"Just turn it off. Can't you hear that?"

"John, come." There's no need to call my ace mechanic who I've trained up from the age of seventeen and now at twenty knows oodles more than when he had joined us a little kid. We pop the hood open and look around the engine bay -- nothing to be seen there. I jump into the driver's seat and meekly turn the key. The engine coughs once then again and finally catches and fires. A horrible clanging emanates from the engine bay.

"Off, off, off," shouts John his face appearing around the open hood. His sangfroid says it all.

Turning to Anita I say, "Bad news Aneet. That noise you hear -- that's called an engine knock.

I'm afraid the engine is gone. We're going to have to take it out, strip it and rebuild. It's going to take some time and it's going to cost quite a bit."

"I just bought this car, like a month back. Was I cheated?"

"Perhaps not. Maybe it was just your luck that the engine was going at this time and it's just a coincidence."

We begin the stripping process straight away pulling the car into the deepest reaches of our driveway garage. Dad lends Anita 'his' car -- actually my car -- a Mitsubishi Colt Lancer that I have lovingly built for myself and then given to him when his own car gets too long in the tooth to keep. Strip, clean, find cracks, buy parts, take bits to engineers for machining, get it all back to the workshop, clean again, blast air through oil ways, reassemble. We put the engine back into the car and take the battery off our workshop charger, install it in the car and get ready to start her up on her new engine. This has always been a nerve-wracking time for me. I get into the car, turn the key and she turns over barely half a revolution, catches the spark off her new plugs and fires on all four cylinders purring like a contented cat. Her coolant temperature comes up smoothly, stabilises at normal and stays there. We run her for thirty minutes and are satisfied that we've done a good job and running in is all that is needed going forward. I head to my bedroom/office to work out the costing.

"Neal, I see she's running." Ami says, coming in to our room.

"Yes, and really well. Just working out the costings."

"Is it a lot?"

"Yes, we put in a new water pump, new distributor and then the usual plugs, pistons, rings, bearings, oil and so on. It's come to about forty thousand."

"What? Forty? Isn't that very high?"

"It's a little high but I spared no thought to using old parts and as I can do this at cost for her she'll never get it cheaper anywhere else."

"I guess."

That evening, after I've had an afternoon to think about it, I ask Ami, "Ami, how about doing something for Anita?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"How about painting the car? We could do a really snazzy paint job on it that will suit our little sis."

"It'll cost her even more on top of the engine and she's just starting out here Neal."

"I was thinking about that Ami. How about undercharging her on the engine? We're making good money here and she's just starting out. She's got those four little computers she bought and the place she rented that we painted with Sant and company. She really could use a leg up. We were given that chance by our customers when we were starting out. It would be nice to help her. I'd like to do it."

"Why not? We're doing well as you say. We could get the paint from Kash -- she'll give us a really good price. I'm excited. What colour?"

"How about a bold red and we still have some of that grey, a can of white and some black from the Lancer. We could do some stripes."

"I'll ask my dad for some carpet offcuts. We can cover the floors."

"Good idea. I'll get some fibreglass out of the boat stores and cut out the rusty floor bits and replace those with fibre."

We swing into gear with gusto. It takes seven days and six nights working until just before midnight to paint the car, do up the carpeting and get the seats sorted at a seat repair shop. We then take the car out to the Nairobi National Park and run her for about two hundred kilometres. It nearly kills my back; the engine doesn't bat an eyelid. At the workshop I take out the shock absorbers and replace them with softer ones. I also remove the leaf springs, take out one leaf and refit them. The ride is better then but still a bone breaker. I work on the figures and then we surprise Anita with her new baby which she had not seen all this time as we have hidden it from her deep in the workshop and made her promise not to peep.

"Open your eyes!"

Squeals of delight greet us and she wants to head out to drive the car immediately. Admonished suitably about holding down the speed and not stressing out the engine for the next one thousand kilometres while the engine runs in, she gets behind the wheel and goes for a spin.

"Fabulous Neal. It even rides more smoothly and isn't bouncing about so much."

"I also worked on the suspension Anita."

The inevitable question: "So what's the damage?"

"Don't worry about it Anita. You already gave me fifteen thousand -- that will cover it."

"That's impossible Neal. The paint alone must have cost that much. What about the engine

parts, labour, your mechanics?"

"Look Anita. Take it that this is our contribution, Ami's and mine, to your startup here. I'm doing well and I can help you out with this."

It takes some convincing and we eventually leave it that she owes me on the car and she heads out to show off her 'new' car to her friends. It isn't until about two weeks later that she is again trundling into the driveway when I notice that her face is streaked with tears.

"What happened Anita?"

"Paul died."

"What?"

"This morning at the MP Shah."

"Only last week he was fine," I said.

"You know he was diabetic yes?"

"Yes I knew that -- I helped him get some insulin remember?"

"He had a brain abscess. He was admitted last Friday and today he's gone. In three days, just like that."

Later that evening the Suzuki purrs into the driveway again. I head out to it and check the odometer. Almost at one thousand since the rebuild. I make a mental note that I'll soon need to tighten up the cylinder head again, adjust the valve clearances and change the oil and filters. Anita has rushed into the house. I head there now to tell her to prepare to leave the car with me one of these mornings. I cannot find her anywhere. Mum says she is in her room. Mum is strangely strained as she says this.

"Anita?" knocking on her bedroom door.

No answer.

"Anita?"

She opens the door and falls into my arms sobbing away. "What's happened?"

She sobs louder her shoulders shaking. I cannot get anything out of her in that state. "Nothing can beat you Anita, and you have us here with you. Just settle down, we'll sort out whatever has happened."

It takes a long while before she calms down enough to talk. "I can't believe my bad luck Neal. I think I'm not supposed to do what I'm doing. Something is telling me to get out, change, go back, I don't know."

"What's happened? Slow down. Tell me."

"My computers my computers have got a virus."

"What's a computer virus Anita? I've only ever dealt with a mainframe computer at the uni, I don't know what these little desktop jobs do. What's a computer virus and what can we do about it?"

"This one is called Stoned. Apparently it was built in New Zealand. It just popped up on the screen of one of the computers this morning -- it said Your PC is now stoned. I think they might all be infected. The computer won't boot up at all."

"OK. Let's go into the sitting room and have some tea. Mum has made us a cup and we'll talk about it there."

Sipping our hot tea we talk about it. I have no idea about desktop computers. A few months before this incident I had found several boxes in one of our medical school library basement stores and had asked if I could look inside. The librarian had agreed I think primarily because she wanted to figure out if she could throw out the dust-gathering things. The first box I opened had been full of books and manuals. The one on top said -- PDP 11 Startup. I'd been a bit of a computer geek for a while by this point; I was the first 'kid' in Nairobi to build a Sinclair ZX80 computer from a kit and had had endless fun with that. My friends had scoffed at me but I was too taken by these machines to bother with what others said. Even earlier than that I had put together simple logic circuits and the light had gone off when I had succeeded in creating a NAND gate and had suddenly realised that it was making simple decisions. One thing had led to another and the possibilities had exploded in my mind. I'd taken that PDP manual home and a whole world had opened up to me. With permission from my professors I'd assembled and played for hours with the machine to the detriment of my medical studies but who cared. I was having so much fun and was so bubbly about it that I'd infected a number of friends, colleagues and professors with the 'virus of my mind' and together we'd secretly, in many cases, snuck out of ward rounds to play with this magic-machine of ours. That NORAIID donation had become a toy for us. Saving it from the dust heap had been a time to cherish.

"Anita, I don't know about these desktops. I don't even know what operating system they run."

"They run something called DOS Neal. It's a small operating system."

"Should not be a problem for me to figure out. How about bringing one of the computers home with it's DOS manual and I'll study it and see what I can do."

"You'll be a lifesaver Neal if you can figure this out. I don't know who to turn to. There's no suitably skilled person here and even if I did find one, his bills would kill me off."

"Give me one machine and I'll see what I can do."

It proves to be a struggle to get to grips with the machine while at the same time working at the Aga Khan Hospital and running my lucrative workshop that is building a sterling reputation day after day. I figure out how to do a low level format -- the only way to remove a partition table -- rebuild the table and re-install DOS. Then I reinstall her spreadsheet and word processing packages -- the ones Anita needs for her courses at her new, fledgling college, and hand the machine back to her. She is stunned. I quickly have the other three machines in my care formatted and reinstalled and delivered and they're soon up and running again.

As I deliver the last machine: "Neal, come have some tea in my office."

Her office is one small room off the main room in which she teaches and I am very proud of my little sis who has gone to the US, studied there for four years and come back and immediately started a business of her own. Over tea:

"I'm so stuck Neal. I have no lecturer -- I have to do all the teaching and go look for new students, look for clients to teach at their offices and more. It's just not working. The car broke down, Paul died -- it's like something is against me."

"I don't believe in that hokus pokus stuff Anita and you know that."

"I know but I can't help feeling something is telling me I'm doing the wrong thing."

"How can I help?"

"You've got your work Neal. I can't ask you for more. You've done more than enough already."

"I think I can still do my work and help you Anita. What if I came in at times that we work out carefully not to coincide with my other work and did some lectures like a guest lecturer. After all I have a diploma in education from the minor I took while in med school."

And so it began and extended to six years working at INtel Computers Data Processing which later we morphed into INtel Computers. Along the way I recruited, with Anita's help, Donald Hurlbutt who stepped in as an equal to me to help with the teaching burden that had grown to a full 80-hour week for me working on my own. Along the way I closed down my workshop the money saved up and put into various financial growth instruments. I also left the Aga Khan Hospital in a tiff over a politically based quarrel and became a full-time member of INtel. I had about thirty students in each of four streams and with all the lectures, tests, note writing, development of handouts and more for thirty subjects ranging from circuit design to business

modelling and development my work was cut out for me. I had little time for myself and yet Don and I managed to do some software development on the side. It was a challenging but fun time though after those six years of doing the same thing over and over again to say it began to get boring is an understatement.

I QUIT!

"Anita we need to talk."

"I don't have any time right now Neal. Perhaps tomorrow."

This goes on for a while; I keep asking to talk to her but she is always busy. I guess we're all busy but my need to discuss the future haunts me. Don and I meet in the evenings to write software and it's fun, real fun after all the boring teaching and it's lucrative and it has promise. This is what I want to talk to her about -- the future, INtel's future, my future.

Finally the time is found.

"Yes, Neal, tell me what's on your mind."

I look from Dad to Anita. They are both in her first floor office. Dad has his own corner where he keeps the books for the business. He's long since retired from the manager's position at Parklands Sports Club a job that he'd held for fourteen years and that he'd quit only after his smoking habit caused what I call to this day the 'holy trinity' -- diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Only later will I come to realise, fully realise that his smoking just complicated matters that were already souring before they came to a head. Though I've known for a long time -- since I studied Masai diets for a Masters thesis -- that the real backdrop to the holy trinity is all those carbohydrates that we've made it a habit to consume, life is such that I've gone along with the mainstream drivel that fat is the culprit and less fat more carbs is the answer. That said though I cannot convince my dad that he is killing himself by following the diet that his doctors are advising I can only sit back and watch the unfolding of the demise of his health and ultimately the loss of his life! With this backdrop I now approach the topic at hand

"Anita, I've been trying to talk to you for weeks now."

"Well, now you've got me, talk," the hostility is clearly evident and dad stops what he's doing to look round at us.

"Acacia is now six months old and these classes that I'm running here -- I only get paid for classes that are within the purview of Intel Electronics -- the electronics and programming classes. This is amounting to about twenty five 'k' a month. The other classes -- the IMIS ones take a lot of my time and I don't get paid for those." IMIS -- the Institute for the Management of Information Systems is the organisation that morphed out of the IDPM - Institute of Data Processing Management.

"I thought we had agreed on that. You'd earn when you run a class -- so run more classes."

"A bit hard to do with an eighty hour week Anita. How can I schedule any more classes when I'm here even when I'm not here for eighty hours each week counting all the teaching, marking, making notes and such?"

"That's what we had agreed Neal."

"Over the past few months Anita, Don and I have been developing software. We've done two large projects -- the one for Sakabe and the other for ARC. Both have gone very well and have been very lucrative you'll agree I'm sure. We've done it in our spare time on our own computers which we bought for that very job."

"And?"

"I've been thinking that we should cut down the teaching work and start doing more software development. I've been running those C and C plus plus classes for a while now and we have a few recruits from them that could be very useful additions to the team, a software development team. Instead of introducing the degree program perhaps we could hold off on that while we develop the software arm. Or perhaps we could do both in parallel -- by employing more people to teach while I branch out into software?"

"Like Stephen Barnes?"

"Yes like Stephen."

"I know what you've been doing -- you've been teaching him on the side -- at his home."

"Yes I have and remember I ran this by you more than six months ago and you said you did not want to have anything to do with software development? Remember -- you agreed that what I did on the side was my business. And now I've tried and tested this on the side and it works and I'm bringing it to you -- a full-fledged business model that we can diversify into."

"Neal, you cannot teach someone outside of Intel. That's a conflict of interest." says dad.

"I've not been charging him anything dad so to me it makes me a friend of his, OK a knowledgeable friend, but a friend all the same, and as I have not been charging how is there a conflict of interest? I'm not taking any income away from Intel? Intel does not teach programming. All along I've been training him -- and Preeti also by the way -- to get them to the point where they will be good recruits to a software development team. Our development team INtel's development team."

"Neal, I told you a long time back -- you say six months -- that I don't want to have anything to

do with software development. I hate the topic."

"And you made that clear to me Anita and when I asked you if I could do it in my spare time you said -- yes, go ahead."

Dad: "What you do in your spare time Neal is your business."

"Anita, I've been with you now for six years." This was turning into a circular argument, I had to change tack.

"If you say so."

"Yes I do. I started in 1987 -- just after I recovered from hepatitis."

I'd caught Hep 'A' on a camping trip to Lake Bogoria and had spent eight months in bed. The hospital had held my job and I had gone back to work just before Anita had her own unholy trinity -- the death of her star lecturer, the killing off of her car engine and being hit by stoned virus.

"So what do you want?"

"I want to know where I stand in this company."

Dad looks at me and speaks up: "Neal why are you bringing this up? Aren't you happy with what Anita has done for you."

Staying as calm as possible: "Dad I've also done a lot for Anita you know. I've given up my business, I quit my medical career."

"What did I tell you dad? He wants to go back to the hospital job." The way she said it implied I was on some kind of ego trip that she had anticipated and had figured out a way to stop me going down that road.

Dad just looks on blankly.

"Of course you have Neal. What is that you want? Please hurry up -- I have a meeting with a client in about ten minutes."

"Anita, I just want to know where I stand in this company. I have a six-month old baby at home. I have to think of her future. I've been with you now for six years. If I'm going to be an employee and a singleton teacher at that and stay there all my life I need to know that NOW. I need to know if I am ever going to be a part of this company."

"Of course you are a part of the company Neal."

"Perhaps you're not understanding what I'm asking. Am I ever going to have a share in the company Anita?"

Dad looks at me his face turning dark as though storm clouds gather about him and then he says words that have cleaved to my heart and will remain there for all time:

He first mutters, barely audible "Shares in this company," followed by a heavy, "Over my dead body."

I am stunned. I just sit there dumbfounded letting the words wash over me. Not believing what I have heard, then not daring to believe and finally letting them sink in. I don't know how long I sit there. Only stony-cold silence keeps me company. Finally I speak up.

"So that's it? You're telling me that I'll only ever be an employee?"

"Neal, Anita formed this business. This is hers. Why should she give you a share?"

"Because that's what's done Dad. As a business grows it becomes more than a one-man show. It needs people to keep it growing. I have ideas, I also have places I want to take this business." I'm still too thick to pick up the verbal bullying queues.

"This is not your business Neal. This is my business and I will decide where to take it."

"Neal, don't expect any share. You'll never get a share -- this is Anita's business as it has been right from the start."

"You know that's wrong don't you? In fact you should be giving Don a share too. OK, it can be a very small share but if you want to keep him in the business it would be a gesture that would lock him into us."

"That bastard -- why would we give him any share. Anita built this business and now you want a share -- and that fellow -- what has he ever done for us?"

This is the attitude dad will hold towards Don for years to come. Even after my shooting, when Don moved into my home at the drop of a hat, Dad would not come to visit us as long as Don was there. On my birthdays Anita would actually ask if Don was around and would then calmly say she would not visit us as long as 'that bastard' was around. Once this would be said in front of 11-year-old Acacia well after I left Intel and for years to this day Acacia has been left scarred by hearing this and the revelations of the events described above as I explained Anita's behaviour to her. I've never understood this for it was me that left Intel starting my own college and it was me that pulled Don along with me, he did not start any of this, he did not abandon Intel. He left and followed me to the next phase of my life because I asked him to and because he knew how much effort I had put into the college, how all, yes ALL the courses, books,

manuals, time-tables, all of it had been laboriously put together by he and I.

It takes me just a few seconds to come to a decision. It feels like an age as I sit there looking at the two of them but my mind is on full throttle, humming away and the decision comes easily.

"OK, Anita, Dad. Then I'll be leaving. I'll see my students through to their final exams and then I'll leave."

"If that's what you want Neal."

I get up and turn to the door. I do not look back; I feel no anger just a calm acceptance of my life as it unfolds right before my very eyes. I pick up my books from the classroom in which I've been teaching last and head down the stairs. In the parking lot I dump the books into my car and then notice Don looking at me over the Suzuki hood. He has been given this car when Anita graduated to a better one, less injurious on her tennis-injured back. Don beckons me over.

"You look like you've seen a ghost Neal."

"I saw two of them Don, and they don't seem to have even basic mental skills."

"Oh, Oh. When you make such statements in such a quiet and controlled manner it usually spells trouble. Go on then, spill the beans."

"I'm out Don."

"What do you mean, out of what?"

"I'm out of here. I'm gone. I'm leaving. I just quit."

"Get in" he says.

I forget all about my open vehicle and our office lying door-ajar and jump into the jeep. We head to my 'pad' at Parklands Sports Club pull Ami out of 'the crate' and walk to the poolside. Over coffee we talk about our future actions. This, the first of many, many meetings will gel the idea of an internet based information technology training establishment. We iron out the difficulties of running a college over the internet in those days when all we had was dial-up speeds. We work out what equipment we need, the development team to build the software the college will run on and more. Finally we hammer out a short-list of tasks to complete and decide that it works out better if Don and I go to London to get the specialist equipment -- the very fast hard disk, servers and so on that we need but decide to buy the desktop machines here in Nairobi. Tickets bought Don and I fly to London in the heart of winter, survive that trip and return full of gumption to start our new endeavour.

CyberCollege - Ami builds

We get back from London to find Ami has been busy for several weeks. In the upmarket Westlands area she's found a house to let and has stripped the rooms and installed counters on all bedroom walls. A metre off the ground these counters run round three sides while on the fourth side she's put a blackboard. In one of the rooms she's put in a whiteboard and dressed up the room for more 'posh' students and clients. That room will serve as our conference room. She's also built a small log-cabin-like building which houses three large rooms. One will become our library while the other two become our favourite classrooms looking as they do onto a forest view. She's hired JK as administrator and VC as a teacher. We take delivery of our twenty four desktop computers and dive into the setup of our network. Literally within days we have our old students pouring in asking if we'll please offer classes like those we taught at Intel. Soon we are being inundated by requests and then a parent walks in and offers the Aga Khan Sports Club conference hall where he suggests we hold a meeting to tell people what our intentions are. This we do spending an entire morning talking to people telling them about our idea to start an internet based teaching institution.

The Q&A session

Parent: "Thank you for your talk. Are you going to have a normal school?"

Don: "What do you mean by 'normal' school?"

Parent: "I mean, like you had before at Intel?"

Don: "Do you want to take this one Neal?"

Me: "Sure Don," I say stepping up to the mike. "No that's not the intention at all. We are looking for students -- twenty four in total who we'll teach to a very high level, in computer science. Not at all the sort of training that Intel does -- that we did at Intel. This is an entirely different undertaking. These students will become our team to build our internet presence. While they are undergoing training we'll expect them to pay us fees as any student does in any 'regular' college but once they have learned enough to become part of the team we will start paying them a salary."

Parent: "Will they get any diploma for their studies to prove that they have actually done some studying?"

Don: "We are not intending to offer any diploma like the IMIS ones Intel offers. We are going to offer our own diploma," turning to me Don gives me a chance to respond.

Me: "We are FUNDAMENTALLY different in what we are intending to do. We are going to be teaching COMPUTER SCIENCE. That is a far, far different kettle of fish from what we were doing at Intel. We are not going to offer word-processing, spreadsheet or database classes. We

are not going to offer what we call end-user training. Our courses will be much deeper and those that complete them and come work for us will be on a whole different level. They will be real engineers who will be able to work on really hard computer problems. We're talking about website development, web-based applications, curriculum development, building a complete system from the ground up."

Parent: "What happens if you close down after say a couple of years? What will our kids have to prove that they have done all that study?"

Me: "We're not going to close down. After all we've invested good money into all our equipment -- which some of you have already seen -- we want to recoup that money and make more. Those that join us will become part of this and will reap a share of that gain. We're not the old-fashioned business that you see so many of here in Kenya. We have a new outlook altogether -- we'll not only be paying our recruits but also giving them a share in the business that will grow as they grow with us."

Parent: "Is it that hard to offer a course like IMIS while at the same time doing what you have talked about here?"

Don: "Actually it is. There is a lot of vetting to go through, a lot of rules and regulations to comply with if we are to offer the IMIS program."

Me: "And even more important -- those IMIS subjects just don't support our goals. If I were to go looking for a recruit right now an IMIS graduate would be the last one on my list. They're just not the calibre of engineer we are looking to create."

Don: "If you want your kids to learn the kinds of things we were offering at Intel by all means take them there. We will not be teaching those things." Don being his usual tough self.

Me: "Mr Hurlbutt has hit the nail on the head. I did not want to sound too tough but that really is the case. If you feel that you'd rather your children learn those things then please take them there. If on the other hand you'd like your kids to become part of a new internet startup then this is the place they should be."

Parent: "You said you are going to take twenty four students?"

Don: "Yes that's right. Only twenty four and we're going to put them through several tests to see if they meet our criteria and then we'll let them know if they qualify and then and only then take them on. They will also need to sign an undertaking that they are going to stay with us a certain length of time so we can recoup our investment in them."

Don, Ami and I pull out the document we've spent innumerable hours at our favourite Master Bakers Cafe hammering out. We turn to the Mission and Vision statements and the many-paged Standard Operating Procedure Manual and stick to that using it to guide us in fielding all the

parents questions that keep coming at us until well after dark. Finally we agree to offer the IMIS program but leave the hall with deep misgivings. How are we going to run a program in which 'ordinary' students work side-by-side with our more advanced lot?

Come the following Monday morning the trickle of students begins. We set them up in a room as they come in to have them sit our multiple choice exams which we then mark short-listing those that seem suitable for the engineering program. We interview the short-listed candidates. By the afternoon we are being inundated with other students who just want to follow the IMIS program with no thought to working for us. By weeks end we have seventy five students already enrolled of which only eight are on the engineering program.

Our second week begins with a bang. The scheduling of classes that has been a big problem for us while at Intel is done between Don, Ami and I. Juggling the three computer labs and the three classes is the most difficult part to figure out but we've done it before and we do it again. Fees start rolling in from the students that are following our IMIS program and those funds help to get the materials put up on our website which we house internally as an intranet waiting for that time when we'd get enough stuff on there and the funds to push it to the internet proper and have the world flock to it.

Months pass by and we get better and better at what we do. Materials accumulate on our intranet website. Don and I pull long hours hacking away at code that will create the site where we'll house the lectures as a series of videos, where we'll have a shared whiteboard and where students will help each other out via discussion fora. When we have 34 subjects setup complete with syllabi, structured lessons, video lectures, tests, links to other sites for cross-referencing, digital whiteboards, discussion forums and lots more we decide to take the site live. No sooner have we done this than we start getting enquiries not for students to take part but for other colleges to buy the system from us. It seems there are others out there who feel, like us, that the internet is the way of the future and who want in on the action before the whole world has jumped into this business model.

Immigration

I'm sitting in my office listening to the servers humming away as students access the materials we have on the intranet. My office doubles as the server room as we do not have enough space to be able to dedicate a room to that function.

"Neal, there are some people in the parking lot that are talking to Jack. I think you should have a look, they don't look like the most appetising folk." This came from PP our administrator whom we'd recently hired. Being a family member and having nothing to do with her time at home she'd come by each day and work through the morning hours for a little pocket money. She did not have a work permit and was not a full-time employee but was just whiling away her time. Still we had talked to her about the illegality of even working for free without a work permit so she was always alarmed when 'suits' showed up in our premises.

I look out the kitchen window which overlooks our parking lot. I too don't like what I am seeing. I rush into the nearest computer lab to find Don in there.

"Don, did you get that work permit of yours sorted out yet?"

"No, they're still processing it -- the documents are in the department."

"Quick -- into the loo."

"What?"

"Into the loo -- there are some suits outside. Don't know who they are but it could be trouble -- they don't look very nice." I say shoving Don into the nearest loo I can get him into. I head off into my office and sit down in my big revolving seat.

"Dr Aggarwal? These gentlemen are here to see you," says PP acting the part of receptionist two burly men following her in.

"Morning gentlemen," I say trying not to show the hostility that I feel welling up inside me.

"Hello sir!" The tall one speaks first. He has a swarthy face with a big nose planted in the centre of it. The nostrils flare in a menacing way as he emits his fake hello.

"Have a seat. What can I do for you?" trying to act as poker-faced as possible.

"We've come to find out if we can admit a student here."

I'm not buying any of this. "Of course you can. What does your child want to learn?"

"Computers. You teach computers yes." The way he said it, it was more like gomputers than computers.

"Yes we do but it's not just computers you know it's more like computer engineering."

"Yes, yes. What are your fees?" He does not bat an eyelid and it comes to me clearly that I'm dealing with a con man here -- he's not interested in what we teach, he's up to something else.

"First you have to tell me what your child wants to learn. I assume it's your child yes?"

"Uh uh yes. Computers."

"Well, can I see your child. Did you bring her -- I assume you have a girl?"

"No I did not bring her. I want to find out first."

"Tell me about her then. Her previous studies, where she is now, what her goals are."

He lets it slip, "I was told you have very good teachers." It comes out 'teeshas' and now my alarm bells are ringing. I look at the door to see PP standing there and signal with my eyes that she should go away. "Who are your teeshas?"

"We have several. There's myself, Mr. JK, Mr. VO and we have a teacher who is not here at the moment -- he's away."

"Who is this teesha who is away and why is he not here?"

"His name is," I'm about to play into his game but catch myself in time. "Anyway -- I was saying -- we have a number of teachers -- all of them are highly qualified and I myself -- I am the head teacher here. Why do you ask?"

"We were told you have a very special teacher here."

"All our teachers are very special. They're each special in their own way. Are you looking for some specialist education for your daughter?"

"Of course but"

I keep stalling and playing him like a fish on a line. Through all this his shifty-eyed friend is quiet but looking around my office. Suddenly he speaks up, "Would it be all right if we walk around and have a look at your premises?" Now this one has no accent and speaks English very well. So! This is the dangerous one -- the other is just a mouthpiece.

"I'm afraid not -- we have classes running and you would be disturbing them. I will take you for a tour if you both like. Would you like to have a look at our premises? I can take you around."

"Let' us not botha you -- your receptionist can take us."

"Oh, it's no bother at all -- I have a free period right now. Come let's go have a look around," I say as I head for the door.

I first lead them out of the main building, away from where Don is hiding in the loo, to the classes in the garden. Going to the door on the end room I push it open and they have a look inside. There are thirty or so students in there all listening to VO lecturing them. I then take the goons to the library where JK says hello and they have a wander around our 800-strong collection of computer science books and magazines.

I then lead them back to my office. As we get to the corridor that splits off towards my end of the building, the smart one turns the other way and yanks open a lab door. In there are eleven

computers and twenty two students hard at work in pairs trying to master some concept or other in C programming. They frown at him just as I manage to rush at the door and ask him politely not to disturb the students. As we turn away from the lab we pass the loo and the bugger reaches out and grabs the handle turning it. The door is locked from the inside.

"What is here?" he asks.

"That is a toilet," PP whispers, "There's a student in there."

He looks at me like he does not trust what he's been told. Just then the flush sounds and seconds later the door opens and a student, a female student, comes out looking very pretty but very peaved by this male person hanging around outside the loo. If he blushed no one would have seen it in his dark complexion but he's obviously taken aback and walks quickly down the hall to the main entrance of our building and from there into the sun. PP, his partner and I follow him. I dare not look at PP -- I know my expression will give away the question I'm ready to fling at her "Where is Don?" Instead I look straight ahead and stay focused on these two.

"Mister Aggarwal, we have come here because we have received a complaint from another college that you are employing a teacher who is working here without a work permit."

Finally we are on topic.

"Gentlemen -- now you will have to leave. You have been misleading me about your reasons for being here, you have cheated your way into seeing our operation and now you are asking me questions you should have just asked me at the very beginning without this beating about the bush. For all I know this 'other college' you talk about is a competitor who sent you here to spy on us to see what we are offering so they can compete with us."

But he is not intimidated. As though he had not even heard what I said he stammers on, "We were told you have a mister Harbart working here."

"Who told you that?"

"Inti somebody."

He almost said it. What he did NOT say though was as good as practically letting the cat fully out of the bag. I now know what is going on. "Mister Hurlbutt was working here till last month when his work permit expired and he has stopped coming until he gets a new permit and then he will return."

"It is illegal to work in Kenya without a work permit. You know we can have him deported."

"You cannot my friend. He is not working here."

"I can arrest him right now if I want to."

"Please, be my guest. I want to see how you will arrest someone who is not here."

"We are watching you and we will be ready to catch him when he comes here."

"As I told you. You are wasting your time. He will not come here until he gets his new work permit. You can spend your whole day -- your whole week -- several weeks waiting for him to come in if you like but you will do it outside our premises. I will not be intimidated like this. Leave now before I have you forcibly removed."

He turns to leave and I slip in. "Tell the Intel people that mister Hurlbutt is not here and we will not be intimidated like this."

"I will," he says as he storms off. The tall one follows. The bully is beaten, sorely, but I wait to make sure they've really walked out of the gate. I have my answer I know what the ruse is now.

A car starts up outside -- sneaky buggers -- and heads off. I go back into our building to find Don leaning against the corridor wall. "Phew, that was close."

"They're gone but we'll have to keep the gate closed from now on and you'll have to maintain a low profile. I think we're going to have to call on one of our lifelines and get that permit. Where were you? I was sure that bugger had caught you when he nearly yanked open that loo door."

"Ah! We're English mate -- we can hide from the best of 'em."

"Where were you?"

"I'd slipped out and gone into the kitchen mate. Was busy making a cuppa!" he smiles his mischievous smile at me.

A few calls later and I'm assured, by our 'contact' in the immigration department that the permit can be obtained within the week and true to his word the document is in our possession not long after his promise. As with most things this turned out to be easier than it seemed at first. We curse that we had to go through that bullying by immigration goons. Why oh why did we not put our noses to the grindstone and just get that permit and be done with it? Why? The cost of course well over one hundred thousand shillings and not an amount a fledgling business can toss about willy nilly. Well, one lives and learns and now we know better to plunge ahead and get things done as they're needed instead of making mountains out of mole-hills in our heads. It is difficult enough trying to get this business model off the ground without procrastination and worry creeping in. But there are going to be additional roadblocks that we must face and overcome and we can sense it.

A tough road ahead awaits us.

The Mole

Jack comes to us via a friend. He knows nothing about computers nor about business management but he seems sincere and says he is willing to take on any work of any nature and that he'll work hard at it. He offers to work for free for two months to prove his worth. We take him on and find that he does indeed put in the effort and does a lot of stuff that we do not want to deal with ourselves. He handles legal issues heading off to the dreaded Central Business District offices of the Kenya Revenue Authority waiting in long queues for hours on end but getting the job done. He renews our business and driving licenses, makes sure classrooms are cleaned and ready for us each morning and even makes tea and coffee for us staff. Fairly soon we build up our IT library and move most of my 4,000 books into there. Jack looks after this library while we look after the intranet that we are busy building as a reference site for our online students. This is the major part of our work day --- massaging ideas and keying in text. Staff members are often to be found sitting at a computer with books littered all around them reading varied points of view of various authors, re-thinking and re-engineering the ideas and putting them onto our web server in our own words. Students come into the labs and read up the text, do the exercises and tests and progress through our materials at as fast a pace as they can manage. These students become guinea pigs for us. Their continued progress through to the degree program becomes a confirming test that our materials are up to scratch.

Jack sits in the library which is in a building separate from our main building where the computer labs are housed. He is very congenial and the students love to sit with him and discuss all manner of things. It therefore comes as a shock to us when two students walk in to my offices and ask to speak to me:

"Sir, are you free right now?"

"I have a few minutes, got a class in about twenty."

"We wanted to talk to you about Jack."

"Jack?"

"The librarian."

"Oh, that Jack. OK. What's on your minds?"

"He's saying things that we don't like."

Uh-Oh, I think. The usual student complaint. Better listen to them though -- might be some sexual harassment thing or other business breaking deal. "What is he saying?"

"He's started to say things like we have nothing here but software. No good teachers, no good teaching and such."

"Who is he saying this to?"

"To all of us."

"All of you?"

"Yes. All the students. You know we spend quite a bit of time with him between classes, break time, through lunch and"

"And what do you guys think about these things he's saying? Do you think that's ALL we have?"

"He's saying it a lot right now and we're a bit fed up. I don't like it. I'm fed up with it. I want to study and this is getting in my way."

At that moment JP walks in. JP's arrival at CyberCol has been a saga of its own. One day his mother -- a person of Malaysian background had walked into my office and sat down somewhat dejectedly.

"How can I help you MP?"

"I have a son. He's Seventeen now and is very interested in computers. He's also very good with them."

"He's seventeen you said?"

"Yes, he's just finished his 'O' Levels."

"So he's now reading for his 'A' levels?"

"He started at a school here but did not like the subjects he was given. We then sent him to Ethiopia to the International School there but same thing. The only option is to send him to France."

"France?"

"We are French citizens so he can get a free education there."

"So, what's wrong with sending him there?"

She looks at me with alarm in her face and I feel so, so sorry for this petite lady who looks so intelligent and at the same time caught between a rock and a hard place. As I watch her expression it changes and she begins to look like she'll burst into tears at any moment --- an eye brims and a tear rolls down her cheek.

"We can't send him there. They require, it's compulsory, that he do two years of military service. I don't want him to do that -- I'll lose him forever if he goes into the military." With that she starts sobbing.

"MP. Please, don't cry," I say handing up my hanky thanking the stars that it is not grubby.

"I don't want to lose my son. We've tried everything and he's so miserable now. I can't stand to see the way he hangs his head around the house all day. Can you help me?"

We hammer out a few questions that I have. I learn that JP has not been the brightest of kids at school. His love has always been for computers and he has little patience with other subjects. I discern that this is a boy that will not do well in a 'traditional' school setting forced to swallow wholesale eight or nine subjects all of which don't interest him at all. After a half hour of trying to figure out her son I come up with:

"I can make this suggestion. We can put JP into our program here and he can work his way through IMIS -- that's the Institute for the Management of Information Systems. There that framed certificate you can see on the wall. I am a fellow of the institute. We can put him through the system. It will take him about two years to get through all the levels if he's good and works hard. At the end of the two years he can decide if he wants to go on and do the final year -- it's called the Diploma -- and then he'll have a Diploma in Computing Studies. If he wants to go further than that he can do two months in London at City University and that will upgrade his diploma to a full degree -- a bachelor's degree. If on the other hand he decides to take a different track he can, at any time in his course, opt to take on some vendor certifications -- there are many from Microsoft, Cisco, Oracle and others and stop or continue with his degree at the same time. And if that does not suit him and he shows the skills you are saying he is capable of he can come work for us."

"You're saying that even without a formal degree he can get an education that will allow him to work for a good company in the future?"

"Not just a good education but a real one, a serious one that requires hard study and one that most businesses today are demanding because a degree has come to mean so much less now than it did in the past."

"I agree -- I have a PhD in Botany and today all I can do is work as lecturer and the University of Nairobi."

"I know what you mean MP. I have twin medical degrees and I'm working to teach kids what I truly believe is the future of this planet."

She leave us after a much more spirited discussion that lasts more than thirty minutes longer. She has a smile on her face as she leaves and she holds my hand and looks long and hard into

my eyes.

"You have given me so much hope Neal. Before I came here today I had almost given up. I did not know what to do for my son. When I tell him he can spend his study days working with computers he is going to jump for joy. You will see what my boy can do."

That was how JP came to us. From day zero he dug in both heels put his head down and did all manner of work towards his studies and to help us get Cybercol tuned to racing car standards. Now as he stood in my office looking at me I knew to take seriously what he would say.

"Neal, I know what they're talking about. It's like this -- Jack is telling them things like that this college has nothing of value. All we are doing is putting books onto computers and telling them to read. He says they could just as well copy the books, take them home and study from there."

"I guess he hasn't figured out that that is the eventual goal has he? To be able to study from home and not be dependent on any physical location."

"Seriously though, we're working so hard and he's undermining us and will lose us a lot of students."

We go back and forth over this trying to figure out what to do. Eventually Don comes up with an idea.

"How about recording what he is saying not only for evidence but also to give us ammo to fire him and also to figure out if there is more to this than meets the eye. After all that has happened -- immigration and such there might be more here than we're aware of."

"Good idea. JP, can you help with this recording?"

"Neal, I can," says Shezade, one of our students standing in the room stepping forward.

"OK, Shezade. Here is a recorder. What are you going to do?"

"Simple. I'll start it up and put it on the shelf above him and get him to talk his rot."

"Ok, you do that and get it back to me when you have at least 30 minutes of dirt on him."

JP, Shezade and the others take the recorder and head off. Ami, Don and I talk about this for a while. What to do with the evidence? Turn him in to the police? Have our 'friends' in the CID (Criminal Investigations Department - the Kenya Gestapo!) rough him up a bit? Fire him of course but what else? He's sure to go in to the labour office and seek representation for wrongful dismissal. We wait for the evidence and it is not long coming and carries an unexpected sting in the tail!

"We did it!" Shezade was obviously tickled by his little clandestine snooping skit.

"What did you get? Give me the recorder."

"Neal, we got at least an hours worth. I hope it's clear enough."

"Let's immediately capture it to digital form. I'm sure you'll want to see how that is done."

I use a piece of software that we have written in-house to convert the analog soundtrack on the recorder to digital form on hard disk and then we load up the digital waveform and listen to it. It is very clear and contains, among other conversational chit-chat, these sorts of phrases:

this college is useless. You guys are being cheated.

all they have is software.

their teachers are terrible.

they are terrible at teaching.

Neal just leaves you to do things yourselves. He does not help you when you are in trouble.

Don is so harsh he's cruel.

And then the can of worms throws itself fully open with:

Jack: "Why bother with this college when there are much better ones."

Shezade: "Which ones?"

Jack: "Intel is the best college in Nairobi."

Shezade: "Jack we left Intel and came here because the teachers Intel had are here now. Neal and Don are here."

Jack: "Intel has REAL university professors now."

JP: "I had not heard of those. Who are they?"

Jack: "They are from Kenyatta Uni. There are four of them and they're the best. They're real professors."

JP: "Don and Neal are also fully qualified teachers and they have got a number of students full degrees."

Schezade: "It's not their fault if all the students are not as hard working. One has to work to get degrees."

Jack: "You guys are being cheated. It's that simple."

JP: "So could you find out if there are places at Intel and would they take us back?"

Jack: "I'll work on it."

There is a lot more on the tape and I instruct our receptionist to transcribe it into written text which Don and I go over editing and correcting where the soundtrack is a little hard to hear. Then we call Jack to our offices and confront him with the tape, the transcription and a police officer friend who we've asked to be present. Jack cannot deny any of it. He is escorted to the library, told to pick up his things and leaves. A few weeks later we receive a Wrongful Termination letter from the Labour Department of the City Council of Nairobi. I go in with Don

and Ami, to their offices at the assigned meeting place at the right time, present our case and tell the councillor that I will seek damages from Jack. The whole thing turns against Jack as I insist on several million shillings in damages. I also threaten the officer handling Jack's case that I'll go after him personally in addition to Jack. He is quick to get rid of Jack and gets down to begging me not to take action against him.

We head back to our office still somewhat shell-shocked by the revelations of attempts by our former business members to kill us off in any way no matter how dirty. Things are beginning to stack up -- from the visit by the immigration department goons to this injection of a mole into our midst it is beginning to look more and more sinister by the day. We do not know it yet, as we drive back to our offices, but 'the enemy' has another arrow in their quiver!

Hostile takeover

The phone rings and PP, our receptionist walks into our office to tell Don that my Dad is calling to speak to him. This is such an unusual turn of events that she feels she'd have to whisper the news to Don and then sits with me to await the story Don would inevitably have to tell about this conversation.

Don walks back to our office with his eyebrows raised -- the very unusual state of mind behind those eyes clearly troubling his usually sedate sangfroid.

"What?"

"Your dad. He wants a meeting."

"A meeting? Here? With all of us?"

"No, just me and at the Sarit Centre."

"So a free cup of coffee. Go for it."

"Neal, after all that's happened you're not worried about a setup?"

"What can they do Don?"

"They could have me picked up from the Sarit."

"By whom and on what grounds? You have a Class H work permit and can do anything you like while the permit is current. You are teaching something totally different from what they are offering. Our courses are nothing like theirs. They don't even do any programming teaching at all."

"Oh, I know all that. We've been over this so many times that it's tiring. We are completely

different businesses. That their students are moving to us in droves is not our fault. Ah, we've been through this so many times. I'm just concerned about this meeting."

"We'll fit you with a wire like in a Hollywood movie. How's that?"

"Exciting." A smile creeps across his face.

On the day we take the very same recorder we used to corner Jack and put it into a top pocket in a thick jacket putting that on Don. The recorder is hardly visible. Don heads off to the meeting and we wait. He's back in a couple of hours. The recording is quickly dumped to disk and we turn up the volume to listen. JP joins us five proving to be quite a crowd in our office cum server room.

"Morning Donald."

"Morning Mr. Aggarwal."

"Thanks for coming. What will you have."

Niceties over, coffee mugs in their respective places, the discussion began in earnest. What follows is excerpted from the transcript that I still have sixteen years after the event, BA is dad, DH is Don, no editorializing, no comments, no embellishment. Just as it happened.

BA: "How is Cybercol doing?"

DH: "Very well thank you."

[several minutes transcribed but not included for reasons of irrelevancy to this text]

BA: "How many students do you have?"

DH: "Several hundred."

BA: "How can that be?"

DH: "Most of our students are online students. We're very different from the old INtel."

BA: "You're no different. You have pinched most of our students and you're teaching the very same subjects aren't you?"

DH: "We have not pinched your students, they chose to come to us. And we were not teaching the same subjects until after the students parents came to us and asked us to teach the IMIS subjects in addition to our main curriculum"

BA: "Which is?"

DH: "Have you brought me here to find out how we run our business?"

[several minutes transcribed but not included for reasons of irrelevance to this text]

BA: "Actually I have an offer to make."

DH: "What is that?"

BA: "Would you consider selling Cybercoll to me?"

DH: "That is not something that I can decide on you know. There is Neal and our other partners and investors."

BA: "I knew it, you have investors. Ramanbhai?"

[Ramanbhai = Ami's dad]

DH: "I am not at liberty to discuss that without my other partners present but no not Ramanbhai."

BA: "Should I speak to Ramanbhai then?"

DH: "That is your wish but he'll say the same thing. There are others involved and if you want to pursue this line of questioning you need to involve all of them."

[several minutes transcribed but not included for reasons of irrelevance to this text]

BA: "If we could purchase Cybercol from you we'd make it worth your while."

DH: "By we do you mean Anita is also involved and knows you are here to talk to me."

BA: "No she does not know that I am talking to you about this."

DH: "You need to involve her. What amount are you offering us? I need to know that so I can discuss it with Neal and the others."

BA: "Who are these others?"

DH: "I am not at liberty to say but it's the usual Series A type of angel investors that have invested quite a large sum of money into the business."

BA: "What is series A?"

[follows a discussion on venture capital. DH educating the accountant BA on venture funding and how it's done!]

DH: "I can tell you this much. Under venture funding models Neal has sought and obtained for us series A funding for which the investors have received preferred stock in our venture."

BA: "How much?"

DH: "That's a little strange a thing to ask me isn't it. A little like in the region of a quarter million dollars."

BA: "Nonsense, no one would give you that kind of money."

DH: "That's what we have as initial funding, we need more if we are to continue to expand at the pace we are growing."

BA: "We can offer you a million shillings to buy the business."

DH: "Mr. Aggarwal perhaps you are not clear on what I said. We have series A funding of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that is one point eight million shillings. If you are to purchase CyberColl you'll have to make an offer of at least ten times that or our investors will just laugh at you. Remember this is series A funding -- the first round of funding. Once we meet our targets we'll be seeking second stage funding at which point Cybercol will become too expensive for you to purchase."

BA: "You people are very big headed. Twenty million shillings? Nonsense. Who would give you that kind of money?"

[several minutes transcribed but not included for reasons of irrelevance to this text]

DH: "Mister Aggarwal, I will take your offer back to the board at CyberColl but you obviously don't understand venture funding and how startups work. Perhaps you'd like to look into that before the board calls you, if they do, to discuss this matter further."

DH: "I'll take your offer back to our board of directors and see what they have to say. Who should I contact if we want to get in touch with you. Should I just call Mrs. D'Souza at the reception."

BA: "No, no, don't do that. Call me on my private phone."

DH: "Well, thanks for the coffee. I must get back to work now."

[total recording length: 1hr 49 minutes]

White knight

It happens again: PP barges into our office with the information that a phone call for me is awaiting my attendance. She says, "It's the guys from STMC."

We have no PBX and phone extensions so I have to walk up to our reception and take the phone call there.

"Hello is this Doctor Aggarwal?"

"Yes it is. Who's this?"

"My name is Crane, Patrick Crane. Please call me Rick."

"Rick, people call me doc or daktari."

"Daktari huh? That's nice. Daktari, I wanted to meet to discuss something of mutual interest."

"Which is?"

"You're in the education business and so are we. There are some synergies I think between our two firms."

We talk a bit about what these synergies might be and it sounds like it might be interesting to meet with this guy.

"OK Rick, how do you want to do this?"

"How about I buy you coffee one morning this week?"

"Sounds good. When and where?"

"The Royal in the Sarit basement? How about tomorrow morning at nine thirty."

"Sure," I say smiling to myself that I won't need to wear a wire as Don did though I'll be in the very same venue Don was in having to face a hostile takeover attempt of sorts just a few weeks back.

We have a long and very interesting meeting that extends into and beyond lunch. By mid afternoon we're cracking jokes and slapping high-fives that has the whole restaurant smiling at us. We part company in the high spirits of friendship suddenly kindled keenly aware that this is going to become something very special. Rick is on the phone the very next morning and arranges to meet again. He's a member of Parklands Sports Club so we agree to meet there. Our discussion quickly moves to the rapidly growing number of students that we are slowly but surely getting snowed under by. Rick's firm develops teaching materials for schools and universities. He is keen to extend his reach into online materials. He's seen what we have on offer; I had given him a password and access to our materials at contributor level the last time we met. He asks to come and see our setup. We head back to the office together and he marvels at how simple our setup is and the amount of work that is going into the development of on-line training materials. He's keen to learn more about our LMS -- Learning Management System. I agree to allow him access to the code the system is built on. I do not consider that I should close the source code though I am not yet a full convert to the open source movement. Rick is thoroughly surprised to learn that I am willing to part with the source. He heads off with armfuls of printed source code and promises to spend a few hours at the weekend pouring over this valuable resource. Ami and Don are furious at me for parting with the code but there's something changing in my core and I can feel it. It makes me smile and puts a distance between my psyche and that of the others who still have a 'Microsoft mentality' towards keeping the code for our and our use only.

Monday morning on the phone: "Daktari, I've spent the entire weekend pouring over the code, the reams of code. This is a substantial thing you've built here. I can't understand a lot of it but it's great work. Can we meet again? Can you come over to my offices."

Now I sense that I am being 'courted' for something. "Sure Rick. The Eighth Floor?"

"Yes, yes. Come over now if you can. Coffee is steaming away."

"OK. See you in a bit traffic permitting."

I head over to Rick's office and we get down to deep discussions immediately. I'm brutal with him knowing that our friendship can take it. I tell him to his face that his business developing training materials does not fit in with our 'more modern' approach of putting materials on-line. A long discussion ensues and it's well past sunset when I get ready to leave his office. Suddenly the ruse is sprung. No, I should not call it a ruse for Rick and I are good friends even though it's

been only two weeks since I first met him. The upshot is that he's so impressed with the product -- our LMS -- that he's interested in partnering with us.

Back at the office: "Hey guys, into the office. NOW!"

They troop in behind me and pull out chairs. By this point JP is as much a part of our team as Don and Ami are. He troops in with the rest. I have no qualms including him in the good news.

"Rick has just offered me four hundred thou for it all -- lock, stock and barrel."

"What!"

"Yes. It's a lot of money. Something we should all think about very carefully."

"Whoa, Neal. I'm depending on you guys to get me an education. What will happen to me? What will happen to the rest of the IMIS students?" whimpers JP.

"Rick is willing to take on any students that are learning to program and are working on the code base. In fact he's counting on a complement of coders to keep the coding going. But you don't have anything to worry about JP. We don't let people down and you know that now don't you? We'll make sure you get your education completed. Don't worry."

A lot of time is spent discussing this. We call meetings with our two investors our accountant and financial advisor. Things move quickly. We put Rick in touch with the other team members and he works through the legalese with them. After a surprisingly short time we sell Cybercol to STCM and are out of the quagmire life has handed us ducking the issues with our enemies keenly looking forward to taking a softly, softly approach to life for a bit. The money is good and sets us financially free. I head off to the UK and open up offshore accounts in the Channel Islands putting my share in there in mutual funds knowing full well that this approach is not ideal but also knowing that I'll need to build up a knowledge base in financial investment before I can start to try to grow my savings in a more meaningful way than through mutual funds. We open up our labs in my home to the students that need to finish their studies and put nine students through the MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer), CompTIA's Network+ and Linux+ certifications and Cisco's CCNA (Cisco Certified Network Associate) and CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetwork Engineer) programs that we develop afresh in my home. In turn Don and I take on the MCSE and complete that ourselves. I go on to many more certifications and become a certified Microsoft Trainer as well as acquiring several Linux certifications to broaden my experience. It's all great fun, I'm working with my beloved computers and life is good. And it's going to come in quite handy in a while!

Clawing at sanity

A last goodbye

The business sold money sequestered into self-managing savings accounts and mutual funds we're free to figure out what do next with ourselves. Don is living with us in the aftermath of the shooting and we decide to train a few select students in deep IT courses that will get them high, very high paying jobs. We tell a few and the word spreads. Soon we have a nine-computer lab set up next to my study and a bunch of students attending daily. It's easy going for us -- just hop out of bed and we're into our teaching lab without any more commuting than the walk from our kitchen and dining table to the lab all of sixty five feet!

Lets emigrate!

We continue putting our students through the certification programs as a thought gels in one of the students and she approaches me in my study.

"Neal, I was reading an article on the web this morning and there was this stuff about Australia."

"Yes?"

"It's got some good stuff in it. You should read it and see what you think. I'm thinking about it."

"What are you thinking about? What is so exciting about this article Shabs?"

"You read it and you'll see what I mean."

I take the piece of paper from her on which she has written the URL of the website. That evening I sit in bed with my laptop and plug in the address. I come to a website describing the lifestyle in Australia, earning potential of various professions, the free and unfettered lives. It looks very glamorous. I search for the security state in the various cities. Looks very safe. I pull up maps and look at the country. I look up camp sites and sense that life might be much like what we have here in Kenya. Earning potential of IT professionals looks considerable. That night I dream of a man sitting on the edge of my bed and the words 'Funzi Software' float out clearly into my dreaming mind. I awake with something in the pit of my stomach, a restlessness, an urgency. I rush through breakfast and head off to my study pulling up websites left, right and centre. Australia, New Zealand, Oceania -- I research fast and furious -- a 'dog-with-a-bone' again. Putting my mind into it's best speed reading gear I whizz through the sites taking mental notes as I go. I create a mind map and populate it till it looks like a baobab tree on the plains of Tsavo East National Park. The students come in and Shabs is blown away by all the research I've done. JP is also keen to see what I've been up to but has his last minute study to do before his exam at the end of that week. At break time -- 1030am -- we sit on our little deck and talk about Australia. The students are excited and their enthusiasm infective. Before we know it

we're talking about moving to Australia -- the feasibility of it all and what we'd achieve if we made the move.

LSD Australia: Look, See and Decide

We apply for visitors visas and purchase plane tickets. Shabs arranges with her fiancée in Perth to house us for a month long visit and just like that we're off. We fly through Jo'Burg and land in Perth. Bundling the kids into the maxi taxi that we hire at the airport we head off to Sorrento to Shabs fiancée's house. The drive from the airport is amazing the land very much like home in Kenya. Sorrento is an upmarket neighbourhood and the house that we're to live in for a month looks every bit as good as ours in Nyari. We immediately start to travel around trying to get a feel for the city. The Perth sky line is pretty in the sunsets and the beaches pristine. But there's a kind of sterility here that I just can't put my finger on and Shabs and her fiancée prove to be extremely lazy preferring to sleep in all morning long when time is limited and the cost to come here eating at me. Ami and I finally tire of the sloth and leave our students and their relatives and head out on our own hiring a small car and moving into an apartment that our lawyer arranges for us. We make close friends with Don our legal counsel. He tells us that the paper-work on our permanent residencies proves to be very easy as though the Aussie immigration authorities have fast-tracked our papers. We wink knowingly at each other, hire a tiny little hatchback and use that to travel around Perth for two additional months trying to figure out if this is a place we'd like to come live the rest of our lives in. It seems to fit the bill.

A chance encounter

We head back home to Nairobi after three months of exploring and adventure in WA -- Western Australia. We're happy with what we've seen and keen to get our papers in order, our house in Kenya sold, our stuff packed and move to Australia finalized to start a new life there. I'm sitting at my computer surfing the net, doing my work when the machine beeps and a notification pops up that a new mail has arrived. I switch applications to open up my email and see a mail from someone I'd given up as lost to the corners of our planet somewhere. I open the mail to find a message from SM. It's about two pages long. I thought only I wrote such long mails!

He writes about how we were such good and close buddies, about our days playing tennis together, the matches we won, the trials and tribulations. It all comes flooding back to me. He goes on to write about where he's been these past fifteen years, about his move to New Zealand and what he's been up to over there. I read with ever-widening eyes. Is this a coincidence? Could it be? I've just come from down under to receive a message from 'further down under!' In those days I believed in things not happening by chance; that there was a thread connecting all things that go on on Earth. I've since learned better and now more fully appreciate the all powerful pattern recognizing facets of our minds but at the time I connected

dots where none really existed. I read with amazement that SM was in the IT business, that he and his wife set up as Apple resellers and had been in the business for more than 15 years and doing well.

I write back in a rush telling him my story to that point in time, about my trip to WA, what I found there and what my plans going forward are. The reply comes back so quickly I hardly have time to blink and his words are magic to my seething mind. "Come over, come see what we're about. See if you can make a living here. New Zealand has treated us so well and life is so gentle and laid back. You'll love it here and we'll be close to each other again. Tennis, long walks in the forests of the land of the long cloud"

Before we know it we're planning another trip. My aunt and little Gaia are placed in the care of Ami's mum and dad and we're off!

Gold Coast

Ami and I fly to Perth and spend a few days there. This time around it's even easier to figure out our way from the airport, in rented car, to the Flag Motel on the Great Eastern Highway. We take those few days very easy lounging around by the motel pool, driving around Perth, sitting at the beach or at the Marina. We leave Perth calm and composed the shooting and PTSD far, far behind us. We fly to Sydney and find it surprisingly easy to adapt to that city. Again we rent a car and drive around up and down the Gold Coast first to Brisbane and then back down to Sydney and further afield to Melbourne. The drive is long but amazing. Scenery, great roads, a highly civilized way to live. I'm breathalysed once during a late night drive from a restaurant on our way to our apartment. The cops are ever so polite and find no alcohol at all on my breath as I dare not drink; I don't want to miss any of this trip but want to have all my nerve endings on high alert. After all any one of these experiences might be the one that makes us shift our focus and the rest of our lives away from WA to New South Wales.

LSD New Zealand

The day arrives finally that we must head back up to Sydney to catch our flight to New Zealand. We board a Qantas aircraft and make the five-hour hop across the pond. In Auckland we emerge from the airport to find SM there with his Mercedes and are soon driving to New Plymouth. From the idyllic drive through green forests and across mountains to the week spent with SM and his family we're quite smitten. SM shows us his business. I can see a lot of ways in which he can improve what he's doing. I tell him what I see and he offers me 50% in the business if I'll just come to NZ and live there and work with him. We spend a week looking around, figuring out living costs, looking at what sort of real estate we could purchase with the money we raise from the sale of our Nyari home and leave SM and his better half with tears in our eyes, all around, that we've lost so much time but have finally found our long lost family down under. We hug at the airport promising that we'll be back as soon as we can tie up our affairs in Kenya.

Winding up

In Nairobi life is all a-rush as we pack our stuff, give away what we can't take and create adverts for the house, cars and our extremely well equipped workshop housed in a twenty-foot container on our plot. We give ourselves two months to get it all done and soon have to move into an apartment as we empty our living space beyond liveability. We don't find a buyer for our workshop and as the time to leave draws nigh I decide to sell it to a good friend -- SB. He comes by and I can see the gleam in his eye as he gets my MIG and gas welders, grinders, sanders, compressors, spray guns and so much more. He promises to pay me 1.5 million shillings -- way less than the cost of the equipment if he were to buy it all himself -- but gives me 150,000 there and then and though I suspect that I'll never see the rest I find myself shoved into a corner with our flights coming up so quickly.

We're unable to sell the house and at the last minute find a UN staffer prepared to rent it from us. The rent we ask is too low and I know it but I'm getting desperate and Ami and I let the deal go through. We draw up rental agreements and walk through our empty living room hearing the pitter-patter of our absent children feeling our hearts torn apart as we leave our home, the place we poured so much of ourselves into. As we padlock the door we hold onto each other knowing that a chapter is ended and there is no coming back to this point ever again.

Our stuff packed into a shipping container in Nairobi's Industrial Area we're soon packing ourselves into cars and heading to the airport for our final trip our permanent move to New Zealand. There's no coming back this time.

Still the depression continues to abate and even the occasional shallow bout goes away. It's been a long haul through the multiple hospital visits, the slow progress of the healing, the no-reason-for deep depression and finally the shaking off of that depression. Studying hard, very hard subjects has forced my mind onto a narrow path. Working on the MCSE leaves me too tired to think depressive thoughts. Although I'm already qualified and have passed all the exams and used the qualification to secure my Permanent Residency visas for both Australia and New Zealand I continue to perfect my skills studying harder and harder each day. After each day of going through this stuff I knock off in bed too exhausted to think any more. We live in a kind of suspended-animation-mode in our apartment in Westlands opposite my folks home, waiting to leave Kenya forever to head to our new home in New Zealand.

I contemplate the day that will soon arrive when we leave Kenya for good. This in itself is depressing but thoughts of a fresh start, of an escape from the 'chup-mongerers' from the oppressiveness of security escorts home, from the bad taste of events past beckon me ever forwards. Living in a small apartment while we get our stuff shipped helps but the failure to sell the Nyari house due to the housing crash in Kenya, the preparations to leave, the thousands of jobs to be done have taken their toll on us both. We have accumulated a lifetime of stuff that we now have to 'get rid off.' It's not easy; it takes every ounce of strength to keep at it right to the finish and it leaves us broken both mentally and physically.

I write a poem to my mother -- I'm not very poetic otherwise but I find myself emotional to the point that putting pen to paper is the only way to keep myself from breaking down. I write stanzas that rhyme, a rhythm that feels good while hurting at the same time. It tugs at my heart-strings. Mum looks pained too as she reads it. Though long lost, thoughts of that poem still sting to this day. I write about the trials and tribulations as we built our home after twelve years of consistent saving of every penny we could scrounge. I write about the birth of my two children in this house and of the community that sprang up around it even as I lay bleeding in the hospital. I write about the forest and the replica of a favourite camping spot that we re-created in our back yard. I sit with my dad and wonder out loud about the mistake that we might be making moving away from the place of our birth. But mine and Ami's dads are of the old school and convince us both that the future of our kids is at stake and that that future will not now or ever exist in Kenya. They convince us that we should leave; the people that visit come with their 'chup' baggage and serve up convincing arguments too.

Somehow we manage to get to the point of boarding the plane. Facing a long flight is hard enough but the friends coming to see us off at the airport is the harder task to face. It's terribly emotional not just the shedding of tears but also the finality of what we are about to do. It feels worse than a close family member dying.

One of the most trying moments is SV coming up to me saying "Why? Why leave?"

"A better future, a place for the kids to grow up, a safer place?"

"You don't believe that do you Neal?"

"I think I've come to believe it SV."

"You were the last person we'd have thought, any of us, would leave Kenya. You were so --- at home --- here. Your forests, national parks, your peace in the wild places. What's that all going to come to? Will you find that in a developed country?"

Even as he said it I felt in my core that I was doing something wrong -- I was rending my soul apart. I heard again that pitter patter of my childrens' feet in the house where they were born and in which they spent all their early years -- their core years -- growing up. In my mind I played the song of the Boo Boos in the garden, the Fish Eagles and Augurs borne on the wind above the lake. In my mind I watched the Augur's halting, hesitating glide on the wind and I recalled one of my favourite poems by Ursula le Guin in Wizard of Earthsea:

Only in silence the word
Only in dark the light
Only in dying life
Bright the hawk's flight
On the empty sky

and I spiral down that long deep, dark tunnel of despair, of emptiness, of depression. I see the deep, black hole that will plague me for the rest of my life though I will learn to handle it in time. That evening as we fly from Jo'burg to Perth I leave Africa behind me and my heart sinks. It hurts so much I cannot not talk to my best friend sitting in the seat beside me, cannot not tell her that with each passing second I put a distance between me and land of my birth, the place where the roots of my soul go down to the centre of the Earth. And the depression is replaced by a deep sadness as I shut my eyes and sleep as I speed through the air of the Southern Ocean going ever farther away from my beloved Kenya.

Exploring Western Australia

We board the Kenya Airways flight in a kind of daze and continue in that dazed frame of mind until Johannesburg. Disembarking in Jo'burg we're scared out of our wits when a taxi driver tells us all manner of horror stories including how no hotel will open their gates to us after 6pm. Luckily we're only in transit and Ami has organized a transit hotel from the Nairobi end so there's a shuttle bus to take us to our hotel from the airport. We're in the room in an hour or so and just sit around inside not daring to wander around anywhere. Chup runs deep. The time passes only too slowly but it does eventually pass and we're into the airport again and boarding a South African airways flight to Perth for the long 13-hour flight there.

The time passes slowly.

The stewards are brilliant. They play with the kids and get them all manner of things to keep them busy. After a while the kids drop off and we fly through the night to our intermediate destination --- Perth. In the early morning hours we land in and disembark to one of the warmest welcomes we have ever had. They call me a 'new son of Australia' when they see my permanent residency visa stamped into my passport. We're full of smiles as we collect our baggage and head away from the baggage carousels to hire a car at a Budget Car Hire counter. It all goes so smoothly because we've practised this on our LSD trip and because of our attitude towards the people who already we're coming to like very much.

We decide to spend our time in WA as productively as we can having a closer look at the country that we still might make our home. We rent a four-wheel-drive -- a Land Cruiser VX -- and search for it in the parking lot. Getting into it I find the fuel tank full to the brim and it fires up without as much as a hiccup. I pop open the glove box and find the A-Z maps book there. Ami attends to the little ones. I don't need the maps -- I remember well our LSD trip [pun intended] and quickly find the Great Eastern Highway and drive the short distance it takes to get to the Flag Motel. Car parked I head to the reception and the girl there welcomes me addressing me 'Dr Aggarwal.' I am pleasantly surprised and book us in for a three night stay. We settle in quickly and that lunchtime head out to a Red Roosters for a bite to eat and then a short drive up the coast along Riverside and Mounts Bay roads and soon we're cruising West Coast Drive. As we drive around the tension begins to leave us and we smile at each other. We stop at Hilary's Yacht Club for dinner and kick back with some wine and the sounds of a piano at the bar as we reminisce about our 'look see and decide' trip here a year back. We're slated to spend three

months in Perth before we head off to New Zealand where SM has offered me a 50% partnership in his computer business which we've already talked about a lot on our earlier visit. There's no commitment though to move there; it's a tentative agreement and I'm going to see what Perth has to offer and try to 'understand' what WA is like filing away as much of it as possible before heading out to New Zealand just in case we don't like it in NZ and want to head back here at some point. After dinner we head back to our motel via the freeway and I marvel at how easily we've settled in here -- it feels uncannily like we've seen and done this all before and of course we have.

The next day we begin the search for an apartment to rent for a longer stay and after a morning filled with too many confusing choices we decide to delay our apartment hunt and just head north to do some exploring. In the meantime though we roam around Perth learning the roads, travelling down south to Fremantle, Mandurah and ending up in Albany where we manage to find a campsite. We make friends of some Australians living semi-permanently in the campsite and the kids have a great time playing with their Gullah parrot. The couple are elderly, very welcoming and fascinated by our journey, where we come from and our stories about East Africa. Over wine and great conversation the last of our tensions leaves us and we settle into our trip.

Our three days stay at the Flag over it's north through Yanchep to Lancelin and a lunch break at Green Head becomes an overnight stay somewhere along the Coorow-Green Head Road where I manage to get the Land Cruiser stuck in deep sand. We are so peaceful and unafraid now though that we just let the LC lie buried deep in the sand and go to sleep in it. In the morning we're amazed by the sight of a herd of Kangaroos -- more than sixty individuals -- that hop around and past us as they cross from one side of the road to the other. We're out trying to dig the LC out of the sand when the roos come by again. It's a magical moment even as I struggle to dig in the sand with only my left hand, the guarding of my right arm still being a feature of my life at this point.

Then it's pottering about once we get the LC out of the sand and a delightful day sitting on lots of different beaches each spread with a different colour of sand. A little shop in Leeman near Pioneer Park serves us two big brown paper bags filled with calamari rings for just \$20 and we sit on a windy beach-head a short ways from a caravan park and marvel at the unspoilt beaches. An afternoon walk brings tons of different shells, rock pools and some small anemones. They're not the kind of silver sand beaches of Mombasa nor are the waters as teeming with life as those 'back home' but we put that behind us and we get on with enjoying ourselves. We've not been this relaxed in a long time. Later that evening we head up to the Coolimba Eneabba Road and find a delightful little campsite on Lake Indoon. It reminds me so much of Lake Naivasha that I almost want to stay here for our entire three months that we've allotted ourselves for exploring.

The next morning though I head up the Brand Highway and drive on to Port Denison and then to Geraldton and finally to Kalbarri. Lunch at the mouth of the Murchison River is an amazing affair. At the headland just off Grey Street the waves are monsters. We sit and munch on

scallops and more calamari rings and watch the giant rollers come rushing in to the cliff in front of us. They're so impossibly big that it seems like they'll crash into the car and drown us but the sea floor rises rapidly causing the waves to curl and roll over themselves and peter out with a roar just metres from where we sit. It's another magical moment. There is no such place on 'our' coast.

In the afternoon we head into the Kalbarri National Park following signs and our maps. We are treated to yet another amazing event. At the entrance to the park there is no human. Just a barrier and a post atop of which is a clear perspex box. A sign informs us that the park operates on the 'honour system' and we read it our eyes opening wider by the reading of each sentence. We're informed that entry is nine dollars per vehicle and we're to put the money into an envelope that is provided in a compartment in the perspex box. Inside the envelope is a sticker. We're to write our car number in the space provided on the envelope and on the sticker and drop the envelope into the box through the slot and stick the sticker on our car windscreen and then proceed to enjoy the park! We laugh at this imagining what Kenyans would do given this opportunity to visit a park for free. But we dutifully do as we're told and put our dollars into the right places and head up the road that seems to lead to the Murchison River.

It's an amazing place, the views over the river very much like Lugard Falls in Tsavo East 'back home.' There are no predators though; no plains game. We don't come across any kangaroos or any small animals. We explore the river, Acacia and Gaia are put into a small side pool of the river and play there contentedly for a few hours. Laziness overtakes us and we just pop up the roof of the LC and spend the night right there. It's very pleasant but already we're beginning to feel the lack of the kind of intense bio-diversity we're used to in Kenya. The safety is incredible though: we just stop wherever we like and spend a night. We spend lots of nights around here and the days spent exploring slowly, slowly -- no hurry, no rush to get anywhere.

Then it's Carnarvon, Exmouth and Port Hedland before leisurely wandering in to Broome. We've now been travelling and exploring for a month and each day has been wonderful. All tension has left us and we feel ready to head back to Perth to see what business opportunities might be available there. This trip has been just the ticket for us. Ami and I have got closer still. Though there have been the occasional very down days for me and though I've missed Kenya a ton, I'm feeling much better now. My arm gives me a fair bit of trouble. There's some pain that strikes without warning and the altered sensations mean that the slightest scrape against a door or window has me jumping, not with pain, but with a strange, pins-and-needles feeling that travels up and down my arm. But the peace and calm and leisurely pace of life among kindred souls has me even putting my problems with my arm at the back of my mind. My energy is coming back.

Heading back is easy, the roads even this far north are wonderful. We come across a land train for the first time. It roars past us while we're sitting eating lunch off the beaten track somewhere. It's a Mack truck pulling four Shell Oil trailers and it's going far faster than I'd ever drive the LC. We're amazed by this sight that has us wondering what we'd have done if he'd needed to overtake us on the road. We come across a Caution, Road Trains, 54m long sign and look at

each other. Another sign says smaller vehicles use shoulder when overtaking or approaching. These trains seem to be going 120kph and faster. I'd overtake one? Never --- not with the family on board.

We make it back to Perth and easily locate ourselves into an apartment. Tomorrow Perth, business, housing and job exploring.

Perth

The next few days are spent wandering about Perth. We accumulate time on Hay Street Mall which we end up coming to again and again. The McDonald's restaurant there becomes the first place we visit each morning for breakfast. The kids love the little playground and the pancakes. The idea that an entire street can be used as a mall is new to us and the layout of the shops is done just right: not too gaudy, not too shabby. We end up coming back here over and over. We buy ourselves a long term stay at the Flag Motel at a fantastic rate because of my offer to pay for a 2-month stay up-front and for now this suits us as it's close to all our contacts. From Nairobi I'd made a friend, via my students. He's a lawyer and a great help in trying to get us settled into Australia, seeing to my rights, our comfort and making us feel at home with his family. He becomes a person to whom I turn when I can't sort out some legal issue or other. He shows us around taking us out to dinner at several places near the James Mitchell Park, to a seafood diner in Fremantle and to his own home and his own restaurant close to Matilda Bay. With him we visit the Royal Yacht Club and the University of Western Australia.

Long walks in Kings Park follow, Gaia pushed along in her stroller when hobbling along on the unsteady legs of a two-year-old gets too tiring for her. Acacia runs ahead of us with no care in the world. Bold Park becomes another haunt but evenings are often spent in Kings Park watching the night lights of Perth. We spend long hours on City Beach where we have our first encounter with authority with big brother! We arrive at the beach one morning early Gaia dozing on the back seat of our LC. We leave her there and sit on a bench a few metres from the car. It's a cool morning and the waves are crashing on the beach. Acacia asks if she can go down to the water. We agree and lock Gaia in the car heading off to the water's edge. The car is not more than fifty metres from us and I keep looking back at it. Suddenly I notice someone cupping his hands around his face and looking into the car. I stop my walking around in circles and look at him. I notice that he walks around to the other side of the car and now, with his back to me, again cups his hands around his face and spends quite a long time, too long a time, looking past the reflections. I start to head up to the car with Ami asking me what's wrong. I ignore her and quicken my pace. Soon I'm at the car and calling out to the man who is now on the far side from me.

He looks up and I notice he's a white male in running shoes and shorts. He has a set of headphones on, is not very big and is looking over the car bonnet at me. He speaks:

"This your car mate?"

"Yes," I say.

"You left your daughter in here?" It comes out more like 'ya leyft ya dota in heeya?'

I smile inwardly at the accent but realise that this is no joking matter. I start to wonder where it's all heading. Surely I'm not about to meet a white mugger? Could it be that this peaceful sojourn of ours is going to turn out this temporary.

"That's my daughter," I say.

"You can't do that mate. You new here?"

"Yes I am. Why can't I do what?"

"You can't leave a kid in a car like this."

"I'm just over there watching the car."

"It's against the law mate!"

"What do you mean?"

"You can't leave a child in a car mate, it's against the law, the cops'll have you for it. Some kids've died from the heat you know."

"I didn't know that."

"Don't meant to alarm you mate but you should take her with you. The sentence is pretty tough if the coppers come around and see her in here."

"OK, thanks, I'll remember that."

And with that he's gone running down the foreshore concrete pathway. I open the car door and wake Gaia. As we walk on the beach I tell Ami about this and wonder about the level of control the authorities have over the citizenry. We both convince ourselves that this is a good law and that the protection of kids must be for our benefit. We don't for one minute see the foreshadowing of an event that will bother us greatly in New Zealand shooting an arrow into our peaceful existence there, putting another nail into a coffin that New Zealand steadily builds for us.

Back at the motel after our McDonald's breakfast I go through some papers I had picked up in the city. I come across an ad by a company called Funzi Software. My curiosity is piqued: Could this be the very same Funzi that the Aussi High Commissioner aids had told me about? I call the number in the ad. As it says they're looking for a CTO level person -- a Chief Technology Officer

-- and I leave my number with the receptionist who answered my call. That very morning a friendly voice on the phone says his name is Vaughan and asks if I'll come for a short chat in his office. He describes his offices as being located in the office suites just past Curtin University on Brodie-Hall Drive. I find this on the A-Z in the car and make my way there. Vaughan is a short, stocky guy as much Australian as anyone could be, at least to me. He talks enthusiastically about how many of the company's staff are South African. When I ask him why the name Funzi he painstakingly explains to me that Funzi means artisan or workman in an African language called Kiswahili. This breaks any ice that might have been there when he learns that I speak the language fluently and am from Kenya. He is thrilled by this, a little too thrilled by my reckoning until I meet a few of the staff and realise that Funzi Software is practically an African company domiciled in Australia. The short chat goes on for an hour and a half at the end of which he takes me, at my own request, for a tour of the university. All in all we spend half a morning and all afternoon together. Throw in the time we spent over lunch at one of the university cafeterias and Vaughan has got a really good idea of who I am. At the university I meet the people behind Moodle and it's an uncanny meeting for well before this meeting I've been playing with Moodle trying to get ideas from it for my own business, CyberCollege in Kenya -- the first internet based college in Africa and what today would be called a MOOC -- Massive Online Open Course. Turns out 15 years before Moodle really started coming to the fore of education worldwide I had been playing with it trying to get ideas to create the product that it has now become! Head of the project at the university -- Martin -- talks to me at length about my experiences with on-line training and Vaughan looks on with great interest. Martin is amazed at the deep level of understanding I have of Moodle and MOOCs in general. I spend time explaining to him some of the features that we implemented in our own software, features that Moodle is yet to have added to it.

I part company with these new friends of mine Vaughan promising that within a couple of weeks he'll get back to me regarding what I role I could play at Funzi. I'm surprised when Martin asks me whether my interest in teaching is it still there? Teaching has always been a draw for me and of course it's still there. Then Martin too says he'll be in touch with me within a week or so. I notice that Vaughan's smile is a little strained as we part company. I cruise the freeway to a heady evening with Ami telling her that it seems like I'll be able to score some gainful employment quite easily here in WA. Things are really starting to look up.

My pattern seeking brain circuits are firing on both cylinders seeing serendipity and meaning in Vaughan -- my best friend at one time while I was in medical school -- Funzi -- a word in my 'native' tongue -- Moodle -- a piece of software I have admired and tried to emulate.

It will take a long time to disabuse myself of this behaviour.

Teaching Again!

"Neal, phone call for you," Ami calls out to me where I'm cleaning the rental car. I head back to the apartment.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Neal, it's Martin."

"Hi Martin, nice to hear from you again."

"That was a lovely meeting we had the other day. Are you able to meet with me again?"

I hastily change and head out to the university marvelling at how the electric trains have been engineered into the centre of the freeway all so neat and tidy. Making my way to the cafeteria that we had met in a few days back I find Martin waiting for me.

"I saw the website for your college in Kenya. Seems like you'd done a lot of development there."

"Built it from scratch Martin."

"There's a lot of content also. Can we get hold of that content?"

"No, I don't think so. I sold the college, that's how I can come to Australia and travel around like this not worrying too much about a job."

"I figured as much. But you have a lot of experience in how an online course should be taught. Could you handle a university level course?"

"Martin, my college in Kenya was affiliated to City University of London. We WERE teaching university level courses. All our courses led to a bachelor's degree vetted by City uni."

"Oh, I didn't catch that one."

"It was a pain and a half getting through all the vetting procedures, bringing the guys over from England, putting them up, showing them a good time and such. But in the end it was worth it -- we got the certification and we were the first in Kenya to manage that."

"OK, I think I should get down to brass tacks."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. How would you like to come to work at Curtin?"

"As what?"

"Well, from what you've told me regarding your qualifications you'd be associate professor level. It's a good place to start."

"Tenure track?"

"Academia through and through. How does that strike you?"

"Hadn't thought about it to be honest. I'm more of a businessman than an academic."

"Why don't you give a guest lecture to one of my classes and see how that goes."

"What did you have in mind, topic-wise?"

"How about something up your street -- say online education pedagogy?"

Wow -- I think to myself -- a tough topic -- is this a test? To him I say, "How about we pick a more specific topic and I talk about that and it's impact and importance where I come from?" I'm playing it fast and furious and trying to wrack my brain for a topic that will mean not too much work at my end and yet be a good showing. Who knows who will come to the lecture --- perhaps some of the other IT gurus here?

"What topic?"

"How about -- the business case for internet deployment in the developing world specifically the East African region?"

He pauses and looks at me. His stare is blank and I can see that he's thinking fast and furious too. After a pause:

"Sounds good. How soon could you do this? I have a class tomorrow afternoon at two. Would that suit you."

Aha! A test it is. Get him to the front of a class and see how he does when put on the spot. Little does he know how used to this I am; I've been lecturing, at this point in time, for more than 15 years. While I worked at our joint Intel college my sister continually took on nigh-impossible jobs and had me scrambling, trying to learn arcane technologies of every possible kind having to deploy them within a 24 to 48-hour time period. From embedded clay-firing kiln control systems to classes in Structured Query Language in dBase IV run against a very large company financial database I've done it all. So it's easy to me to say "Tomorrow it is Martin."

He smiles at me and I wonder if he thinks I'm calling a bluff or bluffing my way through. The next afternoon I'm back at the university having done no study at all. The topic, chosen by me, is right up my street as I've not only taught it before but also been in discussions about it many times over. We head out to the class and walk into a largish room where I am surprised to find that nearly all the students are Chinese. There are about thirty students in the room; three are not Chinese. A few minutes after we walk in two men appear and Martin introduces me to them. They're head of department, his department and the other is a recruitment officer. They find

seats at the back of the class. I think to myself -- 'OK, this is an interview. No stress!' The student demographic surprises me greatly; so many Chinese students? Martin introduces me and I buy some time to settle my mind by dusting off the blackboard. Then I turn round and conduct a lecture much like any of the hundreds that I've conducted back home in Kenya. The lecture goes very well and after 40 minutes the question and answer period is full of very interesting questions. I have no trouble understanding the Chinese accents and the students are intrigued at my assessment that the adoption of computer networking, the internet and mobile phones in East Africa will be a huge, huge business success for any company that jumps onto that particular bandwagon first.

After the lecture we head off back to the now familiar cafeteria and the four of us have a chat over a cup of tea. Some time into our tea Vaughan joins us. It's a surprise and I pick up that he had been looking for me. The conversation is lively and wide-ranging and mostly about information technology but also about my background, the fun and exciting time we've come from in Kenya; the shooting and some of the trauma that I went through. They're surprised to hear that I've already driven clear to the Kimberley's in a rental car with two small kids in tow. We part with Martin requesting that I think about the idea to come teach at the university. On my request Martin promises to get a formal offer drawn up and courier that to me within a couple of days. I give him the address of the Flag Motel which I'd had the presence of mind to bring with me. I notice a slight scowl on Vaughan's face as I do this and wonder what that's all about.

Employee Stock Options

"Hi Neal, Vaughan here." The call comes the very next day.

"Can we meet?"

"Sure Vaughan what did you have in mind?" thinking as I said this that I'm the one looking for a business to work in so I should not be too picky or demanding but this commuting is already killing me.

"I have to come out to the CBD, you want to meet me near there?"

"Sure, can you tell me where exactly?"

"Actually, why don't I come to you at the motel. It'll be easier and you don't have to worry about finding your way about. Is that OK?"

"Of course. When can I expect you? I'll come to the reception."

"I'll call you when I'm near so you don't waste time waiting for me and hanging around. It'll be around 11:30."

"Sounds good. See you then."

After the phone call Ami and I talk about this development. Coming to see me? Can I read anything into this? Two suitors now? The university and Funzi? Time passes by ever so slowly. I help Ami do the laundry -- there are laundry machines in the back of the motel -- and then take the kids to the swimming pool and we sip coffees while the kids play with a robotic pool cleaner. We have to make our own coffee and take it to the poolside as there's no cafe here but that's OK. The pool setting is very nice and cozy and the kids have a ball. A young lady shows up saying I have a call that I can take on the pool phone. I had let them know that I was expecting a visitor and that he'd call. I speak to Vaughan and tell him we're at the pool. All very civilised, according to plan and easy to do. Martin shows up at the pool and is introduced to Ami and waves at the kids splashing each other in the water.

"Nice family Neal. How old are the girls?"

"Acacia is eight and Gaia is just turning three."

"Are you enjoying it here Ami?"

"Yes, thanks. I like Perth very much," she answers.

A little chit chat follows. He talks about how it's getting into the 'winter' months now and temperatures will be dropping soon adding that it won't get too cold but that two weeks or so will be much colder than what were used to in 'Africa.' He asks again about Kenya and then says something that adds another nail into a future coffin:

"I miss Cape Town, Neal. It's very nice here and I've been living in Perth now for more than fifteen years but I still think of Africa as home."

"Were you born in South Africa Vaughan?"

"Eighth generation."

"Wow! We're third generation Kenyans," I tell him thinking as I do that I'm still calling myself a Kenyan.

"I guess we're Africans through and through huh? And that won't be changing any time soon."

I think --- soon? He's been here fifteen years and he still thinks of 'home' as being South Africa? I'm seeing this all over again. On a visit to my paternal relatives in London in 1992 Ami and I spent a couple of days with my uncle Brij who had emigrated to the UK from Kenya in 1972 at the height of the Idi Amin debacle across the fence in Uganda. My 'rels,' as we 'fondly' say in my home, chickened out and, even though there was no similar 'problem' in Kenya at the time they decided to leave and start afresh in the UK. Uncle Brij, according to my read of all accounts he shared with me, was particularly badly hit by the move. When I met him in Hounslow a decade

after he left he was well past his prime, an old man walking at snail pace down the sidewalk taking Ami and I to the high street so we could buy something for lunch. All the way to the shops and back he struggled stopping every few metres to catch his breath. Occasionally he clutched at his chest complaining of angina. It took two hours to cover a distance and shopping chore that on my own would have taken me less than thirty minutes. Back at his little hovel of a British wood and cardboard thing they call a house, hot chicken nuggets warming our bellies, we sat with my grandmother. She sat in her wheelchair, almost completely blind, leg ulcers, sores on the back, non-responsive. I looked on at a diabetes-ravaged grandmother I had never known, one that had been removed from my circle of life by circumstance and the people around her that made life-changing decisions most likely with little input if any from her. I put it down to the reaching of an age few would have attained in years past and accepted it for that. In those days I did not yet understand the way we have been duped about our diets so I let it go at that -- what Neal does not know won't hurt him -- Ha! Little did I suspect what I'd come to learn. I wondered what she'd have told me if she could. Too late now though: her body and mind ravaged beyond all normality. Uncle Brij tried to tell her that I was there to see her; she did not seem to hear at all.

"You know Neal, I think of Kenya often. Sometimes I dream and in my dreams I'm back in Kisumu. I play by the lake with your dad, we walk in the town, go to school and head back home in the evenings. I spend so many good --- great moments there ---"

He pauses as he reminisces.

"I meet my old friends, we go to Hippo Point. We pass your granddads house and remember his parrots, his patients, his tennis."

He's talking about my maternal grandfather -- Dr Raymond.

"Your dad and I play tennis -- Dr Raymond used to join us sometimes. And your mum -- what a beauty. No wonder your dad fell for her," he sniggers as he says this and his eyes take on a faraway look. He's back in Kisumu now as he tells this story.

"And then of course I have to wake up --- here." He pauses; the pause grows longer. He is far away and then back again: "At least in my sleep I was there --- back in Kisumu."

This last statement of his haunts me to this day. Too many times I have seen, heard and witnessed this phenomenon. Those that leave Africa, in particular East Africa, pine for it the pining growing with the years. They tell themselves that they have left for the kids' futures, the better prospects in the developed world, the security. At the end of the day though, at the end of life's arc they come back to the remembrances, the good times that sweep away the bad, the blue skies of Africa. But their life now spent it is pointless looking back. Now I see this in Vaughan and I am reminded of my times with Uncle Brij, and sink at the thought that he died waiting for heart surgery, the well-abused NHS system unable to dish out the entitlement so many expect to get yet die waiting for. And a warning is flashed into my mind. But I push it aside

and pull my mind back to what Vaughan is telling Ami.

"There are some nice shops at the western end of Hay Street Mall but those shops are expensive of course. It's a kind of tourist trap, Hay Street Mall. You should try Northbridge. Things are cheaper there."

"I will. We've not been there yet."

"Neal, I was just telling Ami about shopping, where to get things cheaper. Are you guys going to settle here? There's a couple of places you should know about to buy stuff for a house, kitchen and such." He calls her Amy not Ami and I notice how she cringes.

"We like what we've seen so far Vaughan."

"I've found Perth to be pretty good for me. I came here a long time back and settled in quickly. I've been here ever since. I go back and visit SA from time to time. It's quite easy to do. Just a hop across the ocean."

"Yeah. I thought it might be quite easy to go back to Kenya too. An additional flight from Jo'burg on to Nairobi."

"I'm telling you this because uh what have you heard from Martin? Have you heard from Martin since we last spoke?"

"Actually yes," I say hatching a plan on-the-fly to get these two competing for me, "I had coffee with him again at the uni the other day."

"I see. Well, tenure track. How would that sit with you? There won't be much money in it but certainly there's satisfaction and the opportunity for research."

"Vaughan to be honest it's all coming a little fast. I've only just got here. The teaching certainly is attractive, research uh have not given that much thought so far but it certainly would be a feature if I started teaching. I'd go nuts without something challenging me -- I've taught before and I can only do so much of void main argv if you know what I mean."

Laughing, "Yeah, I was a coder too at one time. But what I'm offering is not coding. I know Martin's is a very attractive offer even not considering the pay but Funzi would also be great fun and we're talking a better pay structure."

"What would that be -- the pay structure?"

"Well, as we talked before, we're looking at a 'C' level job and that entails a pay structure of about one hundred thou Auss dollars per annum plus benefits. But we're a startup Neal and you know we can't afford to pay hard dollars right now. We're looking at pumping back all the

profits right now so we're giving the equivalent in Employee Stock Options."

"You mean no pay at all in hard dollars -- all as stock options?"

"Yes, Neal. As I said, we're a startup, hard dollars are hard to come by. But you'll have a stake in the business and one day that could be worth a fortune."

"Any benefits?" I say trying to deflect the conversation while I get my head around this employee benefits thing.

"The usual stuff -- education for both your kids, medical is covered by your medicare deduction of course, but a paid leave each year of twenty four days, parking at our premises, that kind of stuff. Oh, and of course continuing education for you."

"Parking?"

"Yes this is Australia my friend. It freaked me out out when I first experienced it. If you park your car in your employers yard that is considered a benefit here in Australia and though you don't get any money for it the tax man considers it less money that you spend on parking and therefore a benefit to you. So you have to pay tax on it."

"Death and taxes."

"Too right mate. But I don't want you to forget that there's more to Funzi than the pay packet -- in remuneration terms. The stock options are not cashable for ten years but we'll be a long ways from where we are today in ten. You could be worth a fortune then. Even putting aside the pay side for now there's a lot going on at Funzi and a lot more coming. You'd be a part of the team that you've already met and well you know what you're facing."

Not wanting to seem ignorant I commit mistake number 2 -- number 1 was opening the door and letting the thugs in -- and tell him I'll have to think about this some more. I should have grabbed this job offer. Years later I'd look at the stock price and live the 'what if' scenarios. He talks for another hour telling me there's a dearth of IT people in Australia with the situation getting worse by the day. In turn I tell him that I've been quite aware of the world-wide shortage of personnel in the field and have been pushing for students to learn more about IT all these years. I tell him my story of my being the first in my home region to build a computer -- indeed to have any kind of computer -- and to have built it from first principles -- from individual transistors. I tell him about my belief that IT will be the field to be in in the fast-approaching future. I tell him about 'The Technological Singularity' something that, surprisingly, he's heard of before. We dive into animated discussions on Ray Kurzweil's inventions and Von Neuman's creation of the stored program computer. He seems to enjoy the talk immensely and has trouble dragging himself away to head back to work.

I'm elated at having not one but two opportunities popping up on my horizon just days after I

arrive in Australia. I tell Vaughan I'll carefully consider his offer and get back to him within a week or so. He does some more selling telling me that the ethos of his company and his driving force is to create a team of buddies that aim for the stars in the hope of reaching the moon.

We part company in high spirits.

Burns Beach

We start to hunt for a house to buy heading out onto the Hay Street Mall and a bookshop we've seen there. It's a drag having to cart the kids around with us wherever we go. Ami remarks on this saying she's coming to appreciate having our workers 'back home.' We come away with four newspapers and a couple of housing magazines. We also pick up a street atlas. Back on City Beach for the umpteenth time we let the kids play in the sand while we sit on a bench and go through house-for-sale ads. We select a bunch before lunch and then head back to the motel stopping at a Cheesecake Shop to pick up a favourite of Ami's.

Over lunch we pour through the various ads and find there's a bunch of open houses. After a siesta we're off dragging the kids with us and visiting house after house. The reminders of what we'd been through with our own property hunting in Kenya are strong. There I had secured a large software contract to build a management system for a Macadamia nut processing company and had immediately asked Ami to work on finding a plot of land to build on while I focused on my startup --- CyberCollege LTD. Then I kept her supplied with money while the house was being built. Ami had gone visiting a bunch of prospective properties not finding anything she liked. Then one evening just as I was finishing one of my hardware systems lectures she showed up in the lecture hall doorway gesturing to me to finish up and come out. I ended the class early and she hastily explained that she wanted to show me something. We'd headed out to the outskirts of Nairobi North. There she parked the car at the top of a hill with a steep drop to blackness below. I'd walked to the edge of the road and peered over. In the distance I'd seen black water. I wandered onto the plot with her and I'd been sold. From steep decline to enough stone blocks on the plot to build a ground storey of a house, there was enough here to captivate me. The next morning dawned on a plot lying at the outlet from a small dam and I revelled in Fish Eagles and Malachite Kingfishers darting about a green forested lake edge. From that moment on began the saga that was to become the hand over fist struggle to build our home, our dream home. And we'd done it -- after eighteen months of delays, building double parabolic walls block by block many of those blocks laid by our own grazed fingers, we'd built the first sprayed-in-place, steel reinforced concrete home, resistant to earthquake, unique in structure, unique in design and five thousand square feet of home every inch of which smelled of our love and attention. Leaving that home had been the most gut-wrenching and traumatic thing I'd ever done worse even than having to physically identify my assailants in the police station. As I recovered from the deep depression of PTSD this forced extraction from my home had proven to be worse than any other form of mental torture. Lying on the floor of that home waiting to die had been the most peaceful thing I'd ever felt. The house had enveloped me with 'zen,' with love and with the sure knowledge that we'd come such a long way there was no need to push ourselves to achieve more. That day as I lay there dying I remembered the

words in 'The Circle of Life' sung by Elton John in the animated movie, The Lion King:

From the day we arrive on the planet
And blinking, step into the sun
There's more to see than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done
There's far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found
But the sun rolling high
Through the sapphire sky
Keeps the great and small on the endless round
It's the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the circle
The Circle of Life

and my wretched soul once again ached for my gorgeous home on the edge of a lake in Kenya.

Now here we find ourselves in Perth, Western Australia and I know without any doubt that we'll do it all over again and do it just as well notwithstanding this temporary descent into the abyss. My days of depression seem to recede away from me into a vast distance from which they seem destined never to return. House after house we visit and know we'll find something and even though we have no money at all to use even for a downpayment we 'know' we'll manage it somehow. I push the pains of leaving my huggable home in Nairobi into the background and search through the property listings, drive out to as many as I can find, talk to realtors and to Don, our solicitor and friend and finally short list three properties. One on Burns Beach firmly sets itself into our hearts and the price, though exorbitant, at 1.3 million dollars is something we know we'll manage somehow. We've managed the funds to build our Nyari house and Ami is confident that we'll manage the funds to buy this Australian home.

I go to see a bank manager at the Commercial Bank of Australia where I had opened an account shortly after arriving. I chat him up in my usual manner and, having had a lot of experience dealing in finance and with my background in accounting that I had acquired while studying to become a hospital administrator, plus my two prospective job offers I quickly secure a 115% loan facility: 15% extra to enable any alterations to the house and to put in a better driveway -- one made of concrete blocks rather than the gravel one that the house has. We go to the house to check on it once more and the view from the third floor overlooking the beach is breathtaking the waves seemingly crashing right below the dining room. We fall more and more in love with it. I call the realtor and present my offer of one million.

"I can't present that to the seller. Are you crazy -- it's too low," she says.

Not being that good with realtors at this stage of development of life skills I allow myself to be pushed to the 1.3 mark and call up the bank manager to tell him that I've arranged things with the seller. All goes smoothly and we begin to anticipate owning this beautiful house which while it will never replace our Nyari home, hints at being ample compensation. We go to bed on the night before we're to finalise things and chat about the future.

"Tomorrow it all comes together again." I say to Ami.

"Are you sure about this Neal?"

"What do you mean?" I almost bark at my best friend.

"It's a big commitment."

"I've done it before haven't I? I got the money together for our Nyari home didn't I?"

"Yes and I know you can do it again and again. But it's not going to be easy and it's going to squeeze you into a corner isn't it?"

"How so?"

"Well, the uni job -- teaching -- won't pay that well. The Funzi post will pay well but not for a long, long time. So doesn't taking on a 1.3 million loan at 6% force you to take on the Funzi job and give up the teaching one which means no cash for a while and you'll have to do what? Other work? How will we come up with the monthly payments on the loan?"

"So be it then isn't it? It makes the decision for me. I just put my head down, take the lecturing job and pay off the loan over the next twenty years. Others have done it, I've done it myself."

"Don't get angry with me but you've come through a tough time and this Funzi job startup and all that the company is -- that's going to be another Cybercoll all over again. And the lecturing job -- that's even more Cybercollish."

She pauses before going on.

"And are we sure that we're going to stay here? Shouldn't we travel to New Zealand and see about the offer you have there and what life is like there. All that we've seen and read seems to indicate that it's a very beautiful, quiet and secluded place."

"Ami, we won't be able to delay too long you know. They'll let the house go."

"I know," and she adds cautiously, "Perhaps we should let this house go and put the jobs on hold for a couple of months as we go see what's going on in New Zealand. They're so keen on having you they'll surely wait two months? And in New Zealand you'll be the owner of that business -- a boss of yourself just like in Nairobi."

"I thought you were set on this house?"

"Not like I was set on the Nyari plot. I don't think I'll ever be set on another house like I was on that one."

"I know what you mean." I begin down the 'funky road' again then pull myself out of it by my bootstraps.

We carry on like this throwing ideas back and forth. Before we know it we've been debating like this first in bed then at the kitchen breakfast counter and finally, just before lunch, at the swimming pool with the kids splashing about once again. Though we decide to take a couple of days to decide we already know deep in our hearts what our decision is going to be. I wait the couple of days that we've promised ourselves fending off the calls from the bank and then call the manager to tell him that we've reconsidered. He's surprised but listens to my explanation that I have to see what awaits me in New Zealand before I'll decide. The realtor blows her top but her tantrum just washes over me; I'm passed letting humans bother me with their nonsense any more; there's life that I've seen that has made these petty things not worth spending any time on. My strength, my mental fortitude grows in leaps and bounds. I become aware of this: The 'observer' between my ears watches me as the skills that rescued me from PTSD take over and put me firmly on the side of the living.

I call it all off and make the phone call to SM to tell him that we've spent enough time in Perth and will soon be coming to join him in New Zealand. After the call Ami and I head off to the Cheesecake shop and down an entire kilo-size cake; there's a strange elation in us; we're on the move again. As we polish off the cake she remarks that we've spent almost a year in Perth: Where has the time gone? It seems like just last week were up north exploring the Kimberley's.

Last days in Perth

We check out the southern part of WA. During those three weeks we camp in Albany in the far south, spend time below the house on Burns Beach and roam around Perth each and every day. I return the Land Cruiser instead opting for a small Toyota Echo to conserve money now that we're not travelling into remote areas. The Land Cruiser has been a joy to drive but it's really thirsty and the Echo is a welcome relief from watching a fuel gauge move almost faster than a rev counter. We drive back and forth and learn the ins and outs of the city of Perth. We get to know the city so well that it becomes unnecessary to refer to the A to Z any longer. I call up both Martin and Vaughan and take them out to lunch. We talk about many things and they both tell me they're waiting to hear from me as soon as I get back. I buy a cell phone and fit it with a SIM card. The first call though -- to Ami at the motel -- chews up so much money at Aussie

Dollars 0.45 per minute that I wonder why I bothered with a phone.

The Long Haul

On the day we head to the airport a little saddened to leave the city we've come to know so well we tell ourselves we're headed towards even greater things. We leave the car in the parking lot with the keys in the ignition (as instructed by the rental company) and board our flight. I think about how fast this car would disappear in Kenya if left like this even for a few minutes and nod my head at remembrances of 'near-free' entry into so many National parks on our travels.

It's a five hour flight to Sydney and then a layover of almost another five before the three hour flight to Auckland. In Auckland we're greeted by a delay of three hours before we can board our final flight to New Plymouth. We're totally wasted when we arrive in New Plymouth. Having been in airports for close to 20 hours straight we're exhausted and I don't even enjoy the window seat that Ami has so graciously let me have through which I've watched a landing almost into the sea as we set down in Auckland. It's a relief to see that SM is already there to pick us up. A rainy, cloudy day in early February greets us in the airport parking lot. Winter is on the way. SM's enthusiasm is infectious; he keeps saying I'm the big brother that he always wanted. This is comforting and we head off to his home meeting his wife, sons and parents once more before being shown to a lovely room where he says we can stay as long as we like. The first thing we want is a bed but after a couple hours of sleep I'm up and sitting with SM discussing business ideas. He suggests we head out and look at the business that he and I are going to transform together -- a business that he's been running for several years now but one that has not made much progress away from the small business it has always been. He is looking to me to transform this our business -- his promise to me of 50% of the business on our LSD trip here last year holds. I'm keen to see what he's changed since I was here last.

The Cameron debacle

Jumping into the car we head out to Merrilands and then onto Mangorei Road. I begin to pick up and learn these street names. We stop on Devon Street East and open up 'the shop.' I'm looking at the new carpet and neat layout of the reception -- changed since my last visit -- and remarking that it's a nicer look when SM's phone rings. He speaks to the caller at the other end and as he does so I can see his face darken. As soon as he's done with the call he turns to me to say that his -- our -- top customer was on the phone talking about one of our staff -- Cameron -- an ace technical man who has just visited the customers site and when he left a phone, a nice new cell phone, has gone missing. SM pauses and looks at me asking, without him saying anything, what we should do next.

"You'll have to call the police SM -- this is our biggest customer, we must not lose him."

"I guess you're right Neal."

"I am SM -- call them now."

He makes the call and talks to someone explaining the situation and is asked for the customer's phone number which he dictates.

"They said they'll have Vodafone monitor that line and if the phone is used we'll have the culprit. We're not to call that number and we should call JA and tell him not to call his phone either."

"Now call JA back and tell him you've told the cops and we're waiting to catch the thief if it is Cameron."

"I can't afford to lose JA Neal. I mean WE can't afford to lose him. He's bought a ton of computers from us and he runs that oil rig out at sea and at one time SMA used to be flown out there by helicopter to deal with their computer network on the rig."

SMA is his wife. She works in the business too, mainly handling the books now but from what I've heard in the past she has been at techie level too and was instrumental, with SM, in setting up the business.

"It's now in the hands of the cops and you've done what you can SM. If JA goes elsewhere after you've done this much then there was nothing much you could have done anyway was there? Better just stop fretting and wait and see how this pans out. And don't fret too much. We're the only Apple shop in the region and JA has bought a bunch from us -- where is he going to get the support that he needs if not from us? They're not useless Windows machines; they don't develop too many faults but their maintenance is not exactly a walk in the park now is it? And now you have me with my UNIX skills so are they going to leave us? I think not."

We head out from the shop and cross into the CBD if it can be called that in such a small town as New Plymouth. I learn that the town's local name is Taranaki and much prefer to call it that. SM gives me a short tour and we end up on Back Beach atop a cliff that will become a favourite haunt of mine. We go as far as Oakura when I see the mountain and request that he take me out there to get a closer look. The snow-capped Mount Taranaki looking like the Mount Fuji that I've known from photographs, is iconic and it feels great to be living at the base of this mountain on this green and beautiful island. 'Land of the long cloud' plays in my mind's eye and I feel I've landed in paradise.

Later that evening over some fish and chips that we bought on the way back, the cops call to tell SM that the phone has just been used and the transcript and recording of the call is to be delivered to them. They promise to bring it in to the office in the morning. SM is concerned but relieved once I explain to him that this will show JA that we're serious about keeping his business and are doing all we can to see that he is treated the way any good company would treat its valued customers. SM brings out a computer projector that I'd noticed him pick up while we were at the shop and proceeds to connect it all up to his DVD player and home theatre system. We watch a movie on a big screen sipping Sambuka while it runs. This will become a frequent pastime of ours -- the four of us -- the team that we have decided to become to build a

bustling big business out of our joint venture. The happiness spreads chased along by the alcohol and soon we're laughing in the kind of camaraderie that can only come from friends that know they are onto something that is going to take them to great heights.

The following morning I'm up and ready to leave for my new office before 8am. My partners are not ready for this. I only flew in yesterday and they're more laid back here starting work at 9am. I explain to them that the issue with Cameron has to be dealt with quickly. SMA has to drop her kids off at school so I grab a ride with her and find that they've arranged that I share her office with her. It's small and cramped and my little corner is dismal. I push sentiment aside busying myself with connecting my laptop into the network. I tell myself I'm the new Andy Grove setting up Intel Computers; great things lie ahead for us; I can put up with the hardship of this corner in the sure knowledge that great things lie ahead. I'm soon connected to the network and running port scanning software figuring out what each machine is that is connected into the local net. My machine is soon working flawlessly and I install some backdoors on the reception computers and get down to figuring out how to monitor staff to make sure another Cameron debacle does not catch us with our pants down. SMA comes in and looks at my setup.

"That was quick Neal. Are you OK in the corner there?"

"It'll do for now SMA."

She proceeds to light incense sticks. How do I tell her that I hate the things? The stink from the bloody inferno will become the bane of my existence in this little office. It will choke me and instil in me a dislike for her and her superstitious beliefs. It will colour my judgement of all things that she says. For now though I put up with it.

Mistake number 3: Never let life live you; YOU live life instead.

SM calls to me from his office. I head over there.

"Cops are coming by in a few minutes Neal."

"Good. Talk to them and if you like call me in and I'll listen to what they have to say."

"Of course you should come in," he says, "they should know you're part of this business now."

About a half hour later SMA has gone off somewhere and I'm reading a manual on NMap usage as I try to figure out why there seems to be one node on the network that no one seems aware of when a knock comes on my open office door. I look up to see a uniformed police woman peering in.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Mr SM," she says.

"Do you mind?" I say somewhat forcefully. I'm a little peeved that she has just wandered down to my office door from the reception without asking anyone for assistance. I'm still aggressive towards cops to this day and am not about to give any quarter to a police officer no matter whether from Kenya or from New Zealand. I'm quick to bite off her head.

"Sorry?"

"This a private office," I say, "Go wait in the reception and someone will direct you. You can't just barge in here."

She scurries away.

It's my first experience with authority in New Zealand and my misgivings having dealt with police and other authorities in Kenya after my shooting comes out as overly-defensive-strong-offence towards them. The police had brought their own case against 'my' thugs and in all proceedings I had been angry and on top of things bullying them all officers, nurses, doctors, magistrates, all. The anger that I'd felt just after the shooting, the anger that had ducked and run when it faced the depressed Neal, has come back with a vengeance. I am not having any bit of police or any other intrusion into my life now.

SM does not call me to his office for a good twenty minutes. Then my phone rings and he says, "Neal, can you come in here. The police have arrived."

I walk into his office to find two officers there -- the lady cop I threw out and a tall, youngish male officer with her. They both look terrified when they see that it's me.

"We've met," I say shaking the lady cop's hand.

"Sorry about that earlier, there wasn't anyone at the reception."

I raise my eyebrows and say "You should have waited at the reception not barged into my office." They look even more terrified. SM looks from one to the other and then at me and smiles.

"The officers here were saying that they can confirm Cameron used the phone last evening. They have absolute proof of this. They're asking what we want to do about it."

"Arrest the bugger," I say.

"Is that what you want Mr SM?"

"No question about it," I butt in before he can answer. "Cameron committed a crime did he not? Arrest him. We can't have our customer thinking we're condoning a crime."

"You're right sir," says the lady cop, "but the prerogative is yours."

"What do you mean," I ask angrily, "he committed a crime -- he robbed our client of a phone. Is this not also a police case? It's not just us that have been wronged but also our client and it's up to the police to bring a case against Cameron -- on our behalf if necessary."

"I guess so."

"What do you mean you guess so? Am I wrong? Am I pissing in the wind? From where I come in Africa this is a crime and if I don't take action the onus is on YOU to take action." I glance at SM and realise he's barely managing to hold it together after my 'pissing in the wind' comment.

"Yes, you're right. We'll draw up the paperwork and arrest him."

When they leave I turn to SM who's grinning from ear to ear now. SMA comes into the office and is told the story. They're both in awe of my level of aggression. The awe turns to fear; they're not used to anyone being aggressive in the least. Here emails are answered after a two-week layover in ones inbox -- it's rude, apparently, to answer an email any quicker than that. Over the next few months the Kiwi laid-back, relaxed, don't-bother-anyone attitude will strike again and again. The idea that one should not answer an email for at least two weeks so as not to appear too rude or aggressive annoys and frustrates me. An incident at a bank where I'm given a bank statement of my partners not by mistake but just because I naughtily asked for his statement rattles my cage. The slow business climate, the tendency even for customers to order computers and then not pick them up for several days --- these things begin to chip away at my confidence now that I'm in a safe environment not having to worry about my physical safety any more. Safe it may be but the pace! The pace is killing me! A doctor friend will soon tell me about mental barriers in New Zealand comparing them to the physical barriers -- the burglar bars -- that we have in Africa, in his native South Africa. These things will eat at me and tie up with a robbery I suffer in New Zealand of much bigger magnitude than anything I've been through this far, These things will put nails into a coffin -- a New Zealand coffin -- but before I can take steps to extricate myself but that's still far in the future and I get ahead of myself too quickly.

For now it hits me --- Kenya again, thuggery, petty theft --- it's all the same the world over. It's not the place that matters any more, it's just the way the world is What the world has changed into.

Bankers

Cameron does a few days in prison and then the cops call us and ask what we'd like to do with him. Without saying anything to me SM tells them to let him go -- that we won't be pressing charges. He reasons with me that we've already achieved what we wanted and our client is convinced that we've taken all the steps that we could reasonably have been expected to take. I am for pressing charges and leaving the bugger to rot for at least a month until the cops decide

to press their own charges, get a fine imposed and then let him go. SM tells me Cameron's parents called and begged that we don't press charges but allow their wayward son to be released. SM explains to me their low-income status, their relationship with the boy not being the best and so on. Apparently the boy is gay and the parents have religion-drive objections about this. I have no quarrels with any person's beliefs gay or otherwise but after a talk with Cam I come to realise that his life has turned a nasty corner mainly as a result of the religious bigotry his friends and parents have been frustrating him with. I sympathize and give in putting the matter behind me but not before I have a serious thought about these softies that I am surrounded by. I tell SM this and later one evening at the dinner table I can't help but point out that these Kiwi's would not survive one minute in Kenya. I tell them that they'd be shoved around, mauled, mangled underfoot and strung out to die by the lions that are Kenyan business people. SMs retort is to say that that's the reason they moved to New Zealand fifteen years before I got here, that they love living among these peaceful people who have no worries in the world. I feel like retorting myself that that is why nothing seems to happen around here but I bite my tongue in the house in which I am a guest and focus on the simple task that I'm finding surprisingly difficult: settling down. Ami is busy looking for a house for us to buy and we spend some time each evening going through ads. That, at least keeps the mind-numbing slowly, slowly pace from driving me totally insane.

A month passes by the incense in the office beginning to become a problem. It penetrates my nostrils, my clothing and I can even smell it on my skin well after I leave the office. I take to the shower as soon as I get 'home.' I have to get this stuff out of my natural body oils as soon as I can. Inundated and [incensed] by smog though, I still work hard at streamlining office procedures. I produce an SOP - Standard Operating Procedures manual. I hold meetings and produce the minutes for them. SM and SMA are impressed saying they've never before been in a meeting from which minutes were produced. I should have taken a cue from that but I'm too caught up being the 'big boss; big brother; mentor' to this team of mine. I'm grooming them for a big business even as I struggle to plant my six-foot frame into a small seat crammed between a wall and a desk in a room barely five feet wide.

"Neal, there's something else I want to show you." SM says this one morning as we head out together to the shop. We head straight down Eliot Street instead of taking Mangorei Road. On Gill Street just after we turn off Eliot we enter a parking lot and SM shuts down the car and jumps out. I follow him into a shop that he opens up with a key. The building is single storey and empty.

"Is this yours?"

"Not exactly but it could be ours."

"Ours?"

"Yes, it's for sale. Let me show you around."

We wander around a space of about two thousand square feet. This is less than half the size of my Nyari house. "What are they asking?"

"One hundred and twenty five thousand."

I have to calculate quickly in my head. It's a factor of fifty yielding six and a quarter million shillings in Kenya money. "That seems pretty cheap. That's for a title deed and we then own this outright for that amount?"

"Yes, yes. Outright if we come up with the cash." I second-guess. Was there a hint of fishing for the money from me?

I shy away from the level of 'enthusiasm' seeing Ami in my mind's eye warning me about putting money into other people's ideas and dreams.

"Can we get a bank loan?"

A pause and then, "Yes we can, I know the bank manager at the BNZ. We can go see him once we're done here. I have already clued him into the fact that I might come in seeking a loan and he knows that my partner is coming in. He'd like to meet you. He has the paperwork. He said that 60% would be possible."

SM sells me on how good the building is, the location, the fact that we get to own it, what we could do in 'so much space.' I don't fight very hard pointing out that the location only matters in terms of business traffic and that I can't really make any informed decision because I don't yet know the 'lay of the land' here. Visions of incense burning my eyes and clogging my nostrils drive my thoughts far more than I like and I ask him if we can see the bank manager. We head off to the bank which is located just down the street from this future shop. After a short chat with the managers receptionist we're ushered into his office and I'm introduced to Mr SK. I hit it off with him almost immediately. He's very interested to hear what I have been through coming here from Kenya, my education, my experiences. He says he has a lot of African clients and they're all very industrious, very hard working and -- looking out of the side of his eye -- aggressive businessmen "if you know what I mean!"

"I understand SK." I say smiling back at him from across his heavy mahogany desk.

"Our idea is to take our IT business to the next level and these premises might just be the ticket. But I'm more interested in the LVR you are offering." LVR is Loan to Value Ratio and from my studies that I've been doing while in Perth and this one month here as well as my studies for the ACCA -- the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants -- I know that this is a term these people focus on a lot.

"Oh! You don't like the LVR?" he says raising his eyebrows even as a smile creeps across his face.

"SM tells me you're offering us an LVR of 60%."

"We can talk about that of course. What did you have in mind?"

"More like 125%." I just put out there, just like that.

"More than the building is worth? We could not go for that Neal."

I spend a few minutes telling him that the building is in bad shape and we're going to have to spend some money on it and that after that is done it will be worth much more than it is now. I tell him that I'm thinking of offering 100k and putting in 25k into refurbishment to turn it into our offices. I say it will then be worth at least 250k. If he, his bank, were to loan us 125k now he'd end up with a building that he has funded for 125k but that is worth 250k meaning an LVR of 50%.

He smiles at me and says, "You're quite a smart cookie Neal. You have any other ideas you're hatching?"

"I'm just starting SK. There will be more. I've been held back for too long and now that I've come back from a very dark place I'm ready to burst onto the scene." He does not get where I'm coming from -- the shooting and such -- and I'm not about to enlighten him, at least not at this early a stage in building a relationship with my future banker. I already like this man; he's courteous and easy to talk to and that smile on his face, that mischievous smile, makes me relax in his presence.

"We should talk more, socially also. Leave your number with my girls and I'll call you if you're OK with that. And with regard to the shop don't worry about that. Put in your offer of 100k and we'll see how it goes."

"Of course SK. That would be very nice. And while we're at it I'd like to open an account at the BNZ and bank with you guys."

He sees a token gesture and knows it for what it is but seems genuinely pleased to have met me. Two days later he calls me at my office and invites me out to coffee. I borrow SMA's car and head out to the Starbucks a few metres from the bank. Over coffee we talk about my business experiences. I tell him about the first internet based college that I created and then sold in Kenya. I tell him about Fundi and Curtin University in Western Australia. I describe our home in Kenya and what we went through to put it together. I give him a feel for Kenya, about how we fight to conserve our heritage, our wild places there, my role in that endeavour, our resident associations and lots more. He is particularly taken by the idea of devolution and how we try to run our affairs -- roads, street lighting, security and more on our own instead of relying on the city councils and the government to do it for us. I tell him about how we Kenyans don't have a shred of any entitlement attitude. We part company with him promising that he'll call me

to show me some business ventures that are for sale that I might find interesting.

Setting up Shop

We put in the offer of 100k for the new shop and what do you know? Within a couple of hours SK is on the phone to tell us that the seller has banked our cheque. As soon as formalities have been complied with Ami rents a U-Haul trailer and we start moving from the old office to the new. SM organises various artisans and we swoop into the building with them. Carpentry -- counters for the tech lab; painting -- we all wield rollers and brushes; carpets -- at the end of the 4-week-long project we lay down a corporate-blue carpet and move in. It's been hard work and reminiscent of how we built the Intel offices in Nairobi, with help from friends and family.

Now finally I end up with a separate office and can start to work in earnest on business development. SM suggests a training arm and as I already have a lot of experience in that arena I work on starting another internet based college system. But I am quickly disabused of my ideas that Kiwi's will want this. Indeed in this part of New Zealand the attitude is more of a retired bunch of people rather than the go-getter, build-a-life mindset of a younger person. We come to learn the term 'Big OE' meaning 'Big Overseas Experience.' A uniquely New Zealand term it applies to every young Kiwi's propensity to want to leave her home town and head out into the big, bad world to learn what life is like outside her [sheltered] neck of the woods. We come to apply it to even the city inhabitants who would much rather leave New Plymouth to study in the big cities of Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington, than stay here at home and pass on their business to us. The training arm of our business languishes. Now we also find ourselves with no walk-in business because of our location which is not like the old place with lots of people passing by our open doors. Fortunately the technical parts of our business thrive. I am able to sort out any and all technical issues with Apple computers. I am also much sought after for Linux systems as I seem to be the only one around here who can deal with those. We hire a couple of new techie types and they're quick to learn about dealing with the kinds of problems that our clients present us with. In the evenings I push ahead with my masters thesis. That goes well and keeps me busy -- a follow-on from the MCSE; it feels like I've never stopped studying and I'm not about to now.

Ami and I learn the ins and outs of New Plymouth. We join a gym and go through the induction test in which the trainers test our stretch limits, our strength and endurance, measure our body fat levels and recommend a routine. They create baseline charts for us and give us keys to our lockers. At one thousand three hundred dollars a year membership it's far more expensive than our Parklands Sports Club membership and the gym is nowhere near the PSC gym in quality and number of machines. There is one thing though that is much, much better: You can use the aerobic machines -- the treadmills and stationary bicycles -- while watching TV through your own headset and all you have to do is choose a TV set on the machine you're using and listen to that channel. Even today I ask for such a system in Nairobi -- to no avail though -- and instead settle for watching TED videos on my iPad while I run on a treadmill.

Passing trade continues to elude us even as the technical repair work flourishes. SM introduces

me to a friend of his JS who is originally from South Africa. JS is keen to work with me. His problem though is that he cannot work long hours as his eye surgery -- LASIK -- to correct his vision has gone wrong and now the corneal injection -- the growth of blood vessels into his cornea's -- has led to blindness for which he has had two corneal grafts, in South Africa, and suffered the same problems again. I ask why not have the surgery in New Zealand but he says he does not trust the medical care here and would rather wait until he can get two more corneas in SA and go there to have it done again. We meet regularly and JS and I work on figuring out a business plan that will earn some money. JS, SM and I attend an Apple roadshow in Auckland and it's as impressive an affair as any that Apple are famous for the world over. We come back inspired to garner as much Apple business as we can. We stock the shelves with Apple gear but these are early days; days before the iPad; days before the iPhone successes that are still far ahead on Apple's horizon.

Buying a car & then another

SM and I head out to a customer site in Bell Block, sort out their network and head back. Near the New Plymouth Golf Club I see a Mitsubishi Pajero with a 'For Sale' sign on it parked with a few other cars on a grassy verge. I ask SM to stop and we have a look at this car. To my trained eye it looks like it has not seen much use. I ask SM if it's OK to call up the number on the windshield ad telling him about the risks of encountering a con-man if one were to try to do this in Kenya. He assures me that it's perfectly OK to call. I place the call and find the owner wants just three thousand dollars for the car. I ask to drive it and he's at the car within the fifteen minutes that he says it'll take him to get to us. The test drive reveals nothing untoward. I make him an offer of two thousand and we settle for two thousand five hundred. I tell him to bring the car round to my office the next morning and he asks for the address and then,

"Just take the car mate, I'll come around for the cash, say eleven?"

A little bewildered by this demonstration of trust or naivety, I get in the car and drive it to SM's house. SM's dad is intrigued that I bought a car off the street and laughs when I tell him that I've not even paid for it yet. He tells me that it took him quite a while to get used to this behaviour too. The next morning, cash exchanged, I purchase a windscreen repair kit and repair a small stone damage. I learn that I have to "buy some K's" meaning that I have to go to a post office and purchase a sticker for the car. This sticker entitles me to drive the car on the open road for the number of kilometres I've paid for as witnessed on the front of the sticker in big 18-point font. Diesel being cheaper than petrol diesel engined car owners have to pay a tax that brings the price advantage back to neutral so you have no advantage over petrol engines. Only farmers are allowed to keep the savings from the cheaper fuel. I shake my head even as I write this. Why the lack of desire to promote this less polluting power mode I will never understand. Why charge the diesel owners who are doing more for the planet than the petrol heads?

Ami, the kids and I take to visiting various places. We leave on Fridays after lunch; I arrange with SM and SMA that we will not work Friday afternoons but try to get to grips with our adopted

home. We find a very big difference between Kenya and New Zealand. In Kenya it was always a big deal to travel anywhere out of Nairobi and to do the kind of trips that we are often making we would have had to prepare really carefully. Car things -- fan belts, spare drive shaft, coolant, gearbox and engine oils -- all have to be obtained and stocked on board. Food has to be organised and water too. An itinerary has to be left with someone responsible. Forget one of these things and you might be in for a very bad time. In New Zealand? Want to go somewhere? Just head out of town any time. Come Friday afternoons we simply head out towards Bell Block and fuel up there. A small shop anywhere along the route provides the groceries we need. A motel provides nighttime accommodation.

Our first trip we head out to Mokau stopping there at a place whose delicacy is 'white-fish.' Put into an omelette these are delicious and we down a bunch before heading out on the road again. We quickly notice the signs that say 'Free coffee for driver' and remind ourselves to bring my cup along next trip. Being the adventurous kind that we are, part way up Highway 3 we divert right onto Totoro Road and thoroughly enjoy the road winding up and down steep ravines. The tarmac is easy to drive if somewhat boring compared to back home. We make frequent stops. Going through a little town called Aria we find our way to Mokauiti Road and then Highway 4 to Taumarunui. The evening finds us skirting the southern end of Lake Taupo admiring it's blue-green waters and by eight we're in Napier safely bedded down in a motel after a soak in a hot spa. SM calls me and is amazed to hear where we've reached and how we got there. He says we used the 'Forgotten Highway' and are now 'clear across the country.' He says he's never driven this road that we've just come over -- in his entire fifteen years here. We're shocked that a person can live in a place and not explore his back yard!

The next day through the so-called 'Desert Road' we head back through Maori country to Palmerston North then Whanganui and back to SM's house through our now familiar Back Beach road. The stories we tell of our adventures have everyone shaking their heads in disbelief. And yet they don't seem inclined to do what we have just done. We shake our heads in disbelief.

SM introduces me to Mike Hareb and we purchase an Isuzu Mu after Ami falls in love with it on first sight. Powerful and two-door-light I can just feel the economy in this machine. Ami offers to take us out the following weekend in her car. The weekend approaches quickly and for that and many weekends subsequent to it we travel the North Island from Auckland to Tauranga to Wellington alternating between my Pajero and Ami's Mu. We get to know the island like the back of our hands.

A college for sale

SK calls inviting me out to see another property that's for sale. He suggests I bring SM with me. We troop out SM, Ami, SMA and I. JS decides to join us and we head to a college that's been lying empty for a long while. There are dozens of teaching rooms and accommodation for students living on-campus. The asking price is just over a million dollars and for that we get a

seventeen acre campus with several buildings. I find the price suspiciously low and then SK says:

"Look guys, you could buy this and divide it up building homes and selling those. You'd easily get your money back and more. I'd be willing to loan you 60% of the mil."

SM is for doing this and pushes me asking if I'd be willing to put up the money. I wonder out loud why I'd need him if I were to put up the money. He is unperturbed by this, smiling broadly at me. I wonder at the tolerance; he never gets angry at me or anything that I say or do. I can be quite pushy at times especially when I'm trying to teach someone about business. Now I reflect on all that I've been doing this far - the SOP, the fighting to get our minds around the 'computer repair and sales shop' mentality and into something we are yet to find. SM suggests that we get into real estate and takes us to see a housing estate being built by a doctor friend of his. It's a fancy estate and his markup on each house approaches 50%. I am impressed. Ami too and she gets moving on looking for a house to purchase to live in here in New Plymouth and if the price is right to sell and move onto to another one perhaps two?

In the meantime I start looking into the real estate business in New Zealand. I quickly find a number of books, magazine articles and seminars and attend a seminar at a local hotel. The seminar is well attended and I make a number of friends. The organiser tries to catch my eye and succeeds. Soon SC and his wife Anne are sitting with me having a chat over coffee and cookies. They explain the system that this organisation --- The Investors Forum --- employs. It's easy to follow -- they put together a team of experts -- architects, engineers, project managers, realtors and more and come up with a property development plan and then get a handful of investors together to fund the project. The project is then carried to completion the investors getting one or more properties in the project to keep or sell on. They hand me a number of project prospectuses -- brochures and detailed project plans and ask me to study them. They take my cell phone and home numbers and promise to contact me in due course to find out what I've managed to figure out and research on my own. I find this all very interesting appearing a much better and quicker way to get into real estate than going it ourselves on our own path buying up land and building a single dwelling. This 'Off The Plan' style of real estate development as it's called is not new to me but the quality of the projects that they've built so far is. That quality is astounding.

I start to look for a lawyer and remember that SM's cousin is a lawyer in a neighbouring city. I talk to SM and he has a word with his cousin. Turns out the cousin's law firm is a very big one much respected in New Zealand. Ami and I drive over to his offices and show him the plans. He's very taken by it all and asks if I'd be willing to introduce him to the group. I could not ask for more and agree to do this. In the meantime he says he'll do some due diligence of his own and keep in touch with me. He calls after a few days to say the group -- The Investors Forum -- has checked out, has done a deal of good work and has routinely returned 35 to 50% to its members. Ami and I are pleased to hear this. Ami continues in her search for a home for us to buy. In my turn I'm hatching a plan to leverage my savings once they're in the home and use them to buy into The Forum.

Buying a house

After going through dozens of ads and driving out to meet realtors and wander through the houses we find one off Heta Road. Late one evening we meet the realtor who tells us the house measures 3,500 square feet and was built by an architect for his young family. We walk into a gorgeous house with salmon pink carpet all over and a garage that easily houses two cars and has a section with enough room to fit my entire Nairobi containerised workshop.

Asking price? The realtor says 350k. I ask for a lower price and she says she'll get back to me. The next morning we meet again at the house; the owners have already moved to Auckland so the house is empty. I'm ready for her. I have a cheque in my shirt pocket -- it's all that I have in my savings account that I had moved to New Zealand when we got here. She tells me she spoke to the owner and the price is not negotiable. I then spring the cheque of 280k onto her.

"I can't tell the owner this is your offer. I told you the price is NOT NEGOTIABLE."

"Sue, this is my offer. Go present it to him."

"I can't. This is way too low. He'll be very upset with me."

"Sue, I know the rules -- the REINZ rules. You HAVE to present any and all offers that are made in respect of any property." REINZ is the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand and it's a good thing I've been reading, speed reading all that I can get my hands onto. After all this house buying might become a business of ours. Sue is trying to pull the wool over my eyes looking for a higher price because that will translate into a higher commission for her but I'm not having any of that.

"I just can't."

"I'm sorry to hear that Sue. I have no option then but to seek the advice of my lawyer and REINZ on their code of practice."

"Well, I'll give him your cheque but he's not going to like it and well, he'll contact you and you can deal with him then."

"Yes you do that and yes I will deal with him."

Sue goes off a very unhappy lady. Ami and I hang around the house a little while and then shut the main door and head off to work. Just after lunch SK calls me from the bank, I'm sitting in my new office working on a business plan.

"Hello Neal. How you doing?"

"Fine thanks SK. How can I help you?"

"I just wanted to tell you your cheque has been banked."

I head into Ami's little corner room to tell her the house is ours and store away in my head a tactic that works for me over and over again. I never met the former owner -- and builder -- of my Heta Road house. He took my offer and I ended up with a house that would quickly appreciate to 50% more than I paid for it. Life in New Zealand really is starting out with bang. Robert Burns "The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry" is far from my mind in these heady days.

Moving in

"SM -- we've got some news for you"

"What? You look very excited, must be very good news."

"Yes it is. We bought a house."

"Fantastic. Is it one of the ones we saw together?"

"You might remember -- No. 40 Heta Road -- we saw it together about a month back when it was open house. Remember -- we had seen a bunch of houses back then."

"Heta Road -- that's just up from my place."

"Yes, we'll be close by."

"Hey this calls for a celebration. Party, party," he shouts out and his wife comes in from her office.

"What's going on guys?"

"Neal and Ami bought a house on Heta Road."

"Hey, congrats guys! That's really great."

"We have to go see it right now. You got the keys?" SM asks clearly very excited.

"Realtor will bring them over in a few minutes or we can pick them up from her office on Lawry Street."

"Let's go -- I can't work any more. Let's go."

We head out to Lawry Street and pick up the keys. Then it's off to the house in SM's rocket car

-- a Toyota Premio. We're at the house in minutes, the four of us, and I'm fitting the key to the front door and turning it thinking -- this is our house now, our new home in New Zealand. It's a mixed feeling, bitter sweet. Our dream home will always be the Nyari House and it swims into view as the door to No.40 swings open. It feels almost like betrayal, this giving ourselves to another home. For a long while we are unable to settle into this house. In fact we'll never be able to settle into it, never able to fully 'own' it but for now it's going to be the home that settles my mind and robs the PTSD of any and all vestigial grip it may have over me.

Now begins the mad task of equipping a home with furniture, machines and the other knick-knacks of life. I sell the ETFs - Exchange Traded Funds - that I'd set up on the London Stock Exchange when I had some funds left over from the Nyari house building project and from the odd software jobs I did while waiting to move here. Now I bring these in and we buy a dining table, beds, gas heaters, kitchen stuff and more. We'd shipped some of our stuff from Nairobi in single boxes and it hadn't arrived yet three months into our stay here. We sleep a few days on the floor but soon are into a luxurious new bed. The weather is still warm enough but winter is coming. At the moment it's like a typical June in Nairobi -- not too cold but not steaming hot either just bearable. Within a few days though we find that it's getting a little too cold to simply jump into bed; we can see that the kids are feeling the cold too but not saying anything to us. So the next purchases are electric blankets and a gas heater for our master bedroom. As winter approaches the temperatures plummet but it's mostly getting into bed that is troublesome.

SM and SMA visit us often and we make other friends in a local teacher, imported from India, and her hubby. They become very close as their daughters are roughly ours in age and the four kids get along. We settle into the routine of life here. We're up at 7am each morning and have breakfast with the kids and then head off to drop Acacia at her school -- Saint John Bosco School -- not too far from our offices. Acacia starts school at 9am. Gaia goes to kindergarten, kindy as they call it here, and that starts at 9:30am. This creates a quandary for us. Not wanting to waste money and pollute too much we don't want to take both cars to the office so I head out with Ami. We drop Acacia off at her school and then head to the office. Gaia tags along with us and Ami brings her into the office. At 9:15 Ami heads out almost back to Acacia's school but then diverts to Merrilands School dropping Gaia off there. Gaia loves the school -- they only paint in class she says, much better than her school in Nairobi where she had to recite her alphabet and do some reading. Here they play, play and play and there's no school on Wednesdays! This seriously cramps our work scene. Ami can't work on Wednesdays but has to look after Gaia. The rhythm of everything we're trying to achieve is cracked apart to say nothing of Gaia's falling way behind in her mental development.

A bright spark on the horizon though is the Investors Forum. SC calls and comes over to meet me. He's impressed that my net financial position has no debt in it whatsoever. He catches onto my idea that I'd use the Heta Road house a security to get into a Forum project. We toss ideas around and then he mentions that there's going to be a Robert Kiyosaki seminar in Auckland. I'm a fan of Kiyosaki's work and have all his books, his games and read up all that he writes as often as he releases it. I sign up and drive to Auckland on my own leaving Ami to look after the kids, see them off to school each day and do some work on her own in the office.

Kiyosaki

The seminar is fantastic. I get to meet the man himself. Kiyosaki is warm and friendly and an inspiration. I thank him for his Cashflow Quadrant diagram that changed my life. Once I decided enough was enough and moved away from the business my sister and I built, instead opting to go it alone, all had changed. I'd given myself a chance to create my own path and to move from the left to the right side of 'The Quadrant' as Kiyosaki had taught me through his books. He grins from ear to ear when I tell him that I loved his book Rich Dad, Poor Dad so much that I bought seven copies, one for each car, one for each loo and the others for my office, study and living room. I head back to New Plymouth late that night having spent a heady time with Kiyosaki, his staff and a few seminar attendees who, like me, knew this chance to be mentored by the man himself probably would not come back again, ever. Driving through the wee hours of the morning to the sound of Mombasa Roots on the stereo in the Mu, I reflect on all that I've been through to get this far. I spend time thinking about the close calls I've had when I've nearly lost my mind. I feel strong physically and mentally. The car is fast, powerful and easy to handle on the slopes of Challenger Mountain. My driving skills have me revelling in the dark, alone in my speeding steed, cruising well above the 100 kph speed limit around tight hair-pins and through pitch black tunnels cut in mountain sides. I stop at Urenui to fill up my insulated mug with free coffee wondering at the station attendant up at this hour. We chat a little then I head out again passing the otherworldly lights of the Methanex gas plant around 4am.

As I near Waitara I'm getting very sleepy and suspect that I'm suffering the occasional 'microsleep' with which I'm all too familiar from my endurance motor rallying 'back home.' I begin to see a number of flashing lights each time I crest a brow in the road and wonder at what these could be. In Bell Block I find police cars with lights flashing and quite a crowd of onlookers. I'm held up for a short while and ask an officer what is going on but he just motions me forward and I leave the scene craning my head about to catch a glimpse of whatever has all these people astir this early in the day. Arriving at No.40 I open the garage using my remote heading to my bed through the bitter cold that has been gripping our home for a couple of weeks now.

The next morning the television carries news of a shooting in which a teenager shot an age-mate over some argument. Drugs are mentioned, crack cocaine, crystal meth, marijuana, the gun -- a Remington hunting rifle. I'd seen these being carried by some men near the forests around the start of the climb up Challenger Mountain. On that occasion I had been with SM and he said they were hunters going after boar. Boar meat would become a favourite of ours but for now alcohol abuse, blamed for the rise in youth crime, has my attention and a reference made to the shooting of a Steven Wallace in April 2000 has me mesmerized. He was shot four times by a police officer using a Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol. The newspapers carry words to the effect that in earlier times the Waitara Police Station used to close at 11pm each night but in recent times it was decided to close later and later due to increasing youth crime. This sentence grabs and holds my attention. I keep staring at these words. They roll over and over in my mind. I repeat them to myself like some popular song that I can't seem to stop echoing in my mind. Another reference to an officer, Duncan Taylor, shot and killed by a teenager in Manawatu just a short while back plays in my mind too. Later that very day I'm at home parking the car

exhausted from my lack of sleep of the previous day and yet still elated from the seminar when my neighbour walks up to me and invites me to a meeting of our local neighbourhood watch. Neighbourhood watch? What's this? Deja vu all over again? Another Nyari Estate in the making? I put a reminder on my phone and that evening head out to the house down the road from us. A lot of people are there and I can't help feeling that I'm looking at Nyari and the aftermath of my own shooting.

Neighbourhood Watch

The meeting starts at 6pm sharp and yes, it's Nyari Residents Welfare Society all over again. Apparently there's much more crime than I had led myself to believe. A figure is bandied about -- the Chair of the meeting talks about their being three hundred thousand crimes a year. And he mentions a number of break-ins in the New Plymouth area as prompting today's meeting. I stick up my hand and offer to tell my story. I tell about my shooting to a wide-eyed audience. Some shake their heads while others look more rattled by the minute. I speak about the radio network we put into place, the 24-hour guards, the patrol vehicle and the police post that we built with our own funds. Devolution crops up but the entitled are not able to grasp what that means. Neighbourhood policing though is something they can relate to; that's what they've come here to talk about.

Another speaker asks to say his bit and shocks me with his revelations. He talks about the impending lowering of the driving age to fifteen. Many heads nod at this and a little murmur goes up. Much more murmuring is emitted at his mention of the legalisation of marijuana use. He mentions a house at the very bottom of Heta Road where a couple was found to be growing the plant in every window sill and in a garden greenhouse that took up most of the rented house garden. He tells us that the landlord is in trouble now with the authorities as he is deemed to be negligent for allowing this crime to be perpetrated under his roof rented out or otherwise.

That weekend I drive home from the office at lunch time on Saturday and pass under a banner that says 'If you give drink to the Under 18s you need to have your head examined.' The banner is a production of the New Plymouth District Council and I shake my head at the stupidity of it all -- lower the drinking age then tell the people not to give drink to kids.

I park my Pajero in the carport and head to our living room throwing open the sliding doors to let some light and cold, bracing, fresh winter air into the house. I've been sitting on our deck for about an hour when I hear an agitated young female voice from across our fence. I listen but cannot make out any words. After a short while there's a loud noise and then some more shouting. Now I can make out obscenities and then a man shouting.

"If you walk out now don't come back."

"I won't." Comes the reply.

The intonation is my neighbours; I've been friends with him for a while now having made it a point to meet all our neighbours with an offering, as soon as we moved into the house, of cake or something special we make. I walk to the fence to see what's going on.

"Neal, please help and drive out behind them," he says.

"What's happened Grant?" I see his head bleeding profusely. "I'm coming over."

I rush out through our side gate, across the pavement in front of our house and into his garden. I find him coming out to the front. Blood is now staining his shirt collar as it trickles down his face past his right ear and down his neck.

"Where's this blood coming from Grant. What happened?"

"It was Jane, she hit me with a two by four."

"Where is she?" I ask this wondering what I've let myself into.

"She's gone -- with her boyfriend. They took off in his car -- that red Toyota that was parked here. I came home and found the car parked in the front there and there was a six-pack on the back seat. I just told her not to go out with that lout as he'd be drinking if not already pissed."

"Where have they gone?"

"Probably down to the park."

"Let me see that cut."

"Please, Neal. Don't worry about my cut. I'll take myself to the hospital and get it sorted out. Please drive up Junction Road towards the park -- they've probably gone there. Just make sure they haven't ended up on the roof."

"And what do you want me to tell them if I see them?"

"If you can, please have a chat with them about this drinking and driving around -- they're both just turned fifteen you know."

I don't tell him that I find this a very dubious course of action and that I'll drive the road but I doubt that I'll find anything. I don't find them. I'd in any case told myself that I'd not interfere with a couple of young hoods that think hitting their parents with two by fours is normal behaviour. As I drive back I consider the consequences of having moved here and I'm sorely conflicted when I hit my sofa seat and turn on the TV to dull my mind to the thoughts that are rushing around my head.

John Bosco board

One morning I've dropped Acacia at school and am about to head out to the office when Mrs MB the principal comes out to my car and asks me if I'd agree to have a short chat with her. I follow her into her office.

"My name is MB, I've been the principal here at John Bosco for seventeen years now."

"Pleased to meet you Mrs MB."

"Oh! Do please call me M."

"How can I help you M?"

"I was talking to my teachers yesterday and they mentioned that your daughter -- Acacia? -- is very much ahead of her peers in year nine. We were wondering if you'd mind if we put her with the year ten students?"

"Um, what is she ahead in?"

"Everything actually. She's ahead in math, in science and in English."

"You find this surprising?"

"No, not at all. This happens from time to time. When we have students come here from other countries like India, China or now from East Africa, in Acacia's case, they are often well ahead because our systems prohibit us pushing students any harder than what is prescribed." She reaches into a desk drawer.

"Can I ask you for a syllabus, policy document, education guide or such?"

"Certainly," pulling the drawer open. "I have an Education Council framework somewhere here." She does not find it in her desk drawer and reaches for her phone quickly barking some orders into it.

A few minutes later while we chit-chat about Kenya, the weather there and such, her office door opens

"Thanks Anne."

"Dr Aggarwal - here is the framework. You can keep that copy and go through it at your leisure."

"Thanks M. Looks pretty thick. Bedtime reading I suppose."

She laughs at this. "So, we'll try Acacia out in year ten and let's talk after you've had a chance to review that framework and understand what we're on about here."

I head out to the car wondering what this is all about and what I'm getting myself into now. I spend a slow morning -- all mornings are slow here -- and get through about half the framework before lunch. Early afternoon -- not my best time -- is a good time to read through the education framework and what I see in there is not exciting me about the prospects of my kids education in New Zealand. That evening I quiz Acacia about her day with the year tens. "Easy peasy" she says. "They don't know anything here. They don't know their tables and they can't even spell. Mr Lyall says he wants to teach me some extra maths but I don't want to do it."

The next morning I talk to SM and SMA about these things.

"Neal," SMA says "The belief in New Zealand is that there's no hurry to get the kids to learn their tables and stuff. It's punishment to push them to learn this stuff so early. They'll learn it all anyway. There is a big catch-up when they're going from high school to uni you know."

That phrase 'catch-up' becomes a standing joke between Ami and I. Our friends AC and SC have something to say about it too. SC has been a teacher in Bombay before they moved here. She spends two hours each evening teaching her two daughters what the schools will not teach them. Her kids are far ahead of their peers and top of their classes.

Much against her 'better judgement' Acacia does the extra tuition with Mr Lyall and then I have my meeting with M.

"Dr Aggarwal we have a problem. Year ten is not good enough for Acacia -- she's ahead of those students too. Mr Lyall thinks she could easily compete with the year twelves. Her English teachers also think she's good to go with year twelve. Would you consider putting her in that level?"

"M -- I don't think that's a good idea. Twelve-year-old girls have things to talk about that Acacia will not be able to follow. They have boyfriends, want to go out to parties and such and are just going to make Acacia feel out of place -- that is if they even accept her into their groups."

"I agree and that's what I told Lyall too. You're going to have to do what other foreigner parents do -- teach them at home and Lyall tells me he's already teaching Acacia at year twelve level in math so keep that going."

"We're already doing that M. My wife has taught at kindy and primary levels and is able to provide that guidance to both our daughters. I must say though, I'm quite disappointed with the level of education here. Is there a private school I can send my daughters to?" I'm learning to 'use the lingo' that they understand here and wondering more and more at what SC has already said and is doing for her kids. I recall SC's story about how she was reprimanded for posting student grades to a notice board when she first started teaching at her school here. Grades are

NOT under any circumstances to be discussed and students are not to be admonished for poor performance. I had rolled my eyes at this. Now my heart skips several beats.

It begins to dawn on me that I might have made a terrible decision -- taken a wrong turn in the road. My kids' education is going to take a hammering --- this moving to the 'first world' is not panning out to be all that it's rumoured to be.

"I'm afraid not Dr Aggarwal. The system does not allow that. In any case there are no private schools around here."

"OK, I guess we're stuck with The System then. Still it's disappointing."

"There's something else I'd like to talk to you about."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I was wondering if you'd come to our school board meeting -- the education board -- we meet once a month to chart the way forward and to monitor our progress. Our next meeting is this evening. I know it's very short notice but could you come?"

"It is short notice but OK I'll be here. It is here in this room is it?"

"Yes. Right here. That's grand! I'll be looking forward to having you with us."

I attend that evening and then many more evenings -- in fact the entire time that we are here in New Plymouth. It ends up feeling like I've always been part of this board. I give out information on how we run things on the education side in Kenya, what my online establishment did, what the country's goals are. I shake my head a lot. Kiwi's seem to have evolved in isolation -- cut off from the rest of the world on their distant, lonely isle out here at the bottom of the world. Their instinct to 'dumb down' nearly everything I suggest is depressing. Acacia advances to the next year topping her class easily. It means little -- topping a class because you can recite your nine times tables -- does not inspire confidence that my child is heading towards great things academically. During the course of the year we find a taekwondo dojo and enrol Acacia and Gaia in it. They have a lot of fun attending class three times a week; even Ami joins so that she can set an example for them and keep the kids pushing forward. I come up with a full-blown policy document that M takes to the regional board meeting. Much of what I've developed is liked and I'm asked to meet with the regional board. I do that and they're impressed with what we've done in Kenya. They're all but blown away with the fact that in Kenya one can follow the International Baccalaureate program which is fast replacing the British systems 'A' Levels. They seem a little smug that they gave up 'A' levels feeling that it was too stressful for their children. I can see that the level of education I expected here will not be offered any time soon as they are more concerned about degree of stress their kids will be put under rather than focusing on how they are going to compete against other nations in years to come. I can see my 'brute force' approach and attempt to get them to implement my policy document is simply a waste of time. I

think back often to my days at CyberColl and how we had striven to advance the human lot. I'm dragged down by this crucial part of my life -- my kids -- and what is facing them, little though they know it. I'm crushed by my inability to change a course of their lives that I'm responsible for. I'm forced to resign myself to a failed education for them both. The irony lies heavy on my shoulders -- that which so many have egged me on about -- that the future for our kids is better in 'the West' becomes a non-sequitur. 'The West' is not all that it's made out to be. That in Kenya they would not get the kind of education they'll get in developed countries becomes another nail driven hard into my New Zealand coffin.

Investors Forum

The house fully set up with furniture, kitchen amenities, electric blankets and even a clothes line we settle into life -- the routine -- and all that goes with it. The kids make friends and we go out to the occasional school function, are invited to dinners and even a Diwali function for which the local church has lent us their hall. We watch the changes in the weather as the year unfolds and chafe at the bit when life becomes a boring run-of-the mill existence. Long walks at the shorefront continue as do weekends on back beach with the kids playing in the black sand. A few times those trips are topped off by finding a bunch of guys jumping off a cliff near Corbett Park turning their paragliders this way and that in the onshore winds. I watch them for hours on end and am mesmerized remembering the documentary I once saw on TV while in Nairobi, a documentary about a man who taught geese to migrate by using an aircraft that he designed and built and had his daughter fly. I wrack my brain for the name of the documentary but cannot seem to dredge it up out of the depths of my mind. This movie had made me cry; to fly like that -- in an aircraft as light as he had built. To be able to take off from a farm field in as little as fifty metres -- these are dreams for me. This is how I want to fly; how I dream of flight. Now to watch the paragliders fly about the cliff I feel the same yearning to fly again but have no clue where I'd start here in New Zealand. Though I've flown in Australia from Jandakot airport just south of Perth I've not tried hard enough to fly here in New Zealand and the busy-ness with life, business and settling down has kept my mind tied up and prevented me dwelling on this --- this gift that I have now lying dormant in me --- this gift of flight that means so much to me but that I have for a long time pushed into the background of my mind.

StC calls. "Neal, we're holding a seminar in Auckland, a seminar of the Investors Forum. Would you be in a position to attend?"

"I would love to StC but I'll have to figure out where to put the kids. I'll call you back this evening and let you know."

"Sure thing. It's slated to run over two days so you'll also have to find somewhere to stay in Auckland. The America's Cup is on so accommodation is hard to find right now. You might have to live somewhere well out of the city and drive in each morning."

"I'll call you back after I've talked to Ami and I don't think accommodation will be a stumbling block. I'm sure we'll be able to find something. We're not fussy."

"I love your enthusiasm. Always ready to take on anything huh? I look forward to your call."

I talk to Ami and we call AC and SC and ask if they'd be able to keep Acacia and Gaia for a weekend. SC is very accommodating and insists that we leave the girls with her and go attend our seminar. I call StC back and give him the good news. He comes by the following morning and drops off several prospectuses and the itinerary for The Forum seminar. Ami and I pack the girls off to SC and ACs care and we head out to Auckland making the five hour journey under the shackles of the 100 kph speed limit. When we get there we struggle to find a motel and finally give in and take up a very expensive room in the Copthorne Hotel. We don't have a view of the yachts but we do have one of the Auckland domain -- a park across which little though we know it now -- is the plot of land where we'll be building a block of apartments of which we will be the proud owners one day soon and out of which we will be cheated in a manner we would never have imagined when we left Kenya for the safety and honest living of 'The West.'

The two days of Investors Forum seminar are nice and pleasant in a hotel conference room with nice furniture and good coffee. We meet Dan McEwen, the principal entity that started off The Forum and now one of Australia and New Zealand's richer men having built hundreds of properties. He is a regular Kiwi-Kiyosaki and we're all impressed with his ability to take on questions from the floor with aplomb and provide expert answers to nearly anything he has thrown at him.

A lot is covered and it starts out with the 200+ attendees being given a thick, very thick folder full of various papers sectioned off into legal, architectural, project management, loan structures, asset protection and other topics. All are gone through very carefully by speakers who are well versed in their topics and subject matter experts in their respective fields. Both Ami and I are suitably impressed and have our one-on-one meetings with each of the professionals. The final session of the seminar is a trip out to various sites that are listed in the prospectuses we were given. A fancy air-conditioned bus takes us around Auckland with a speaker at the front talking to us through a microphone. It feels a little 'hard-sellish' almost like a tour guide in one of those touristy places in the national parks of South Africa. The redeeming thing though is the information we've been given by so many experts and that that material is sometimes so hard to understand that they'd not be teaching it for fear of losing their clientele. Thus it is that we convince ourselves that we're not being misled.

"What do you think?"

"Hard sell."

"I don't think so Ami. Why bother with all this teaching?"

"What if it's a smokescreen?"

"Could be of course."

"Maybe they just want our money."

"There's always that chance. But the stuff we've got out of this already is worth quite a bit. Look at the asset protection lectures -- I'd have paid for that."

"I agree about that. Putting the properties into trusts I'd not thought of that before."

"And telling us how to protect ourselves from the other investors and even from The Forum itself? Does not sound like they're after a quick buck here."

"There's also all those projects. Were there over fifty that we read about and saw pictures off? And StC and his wife have already been part of three and they were all successfully completed and rented out or sold on."

"Yes there is that."

We head back to New Plymouth picking up our girls who've not missed us much having kept themselves busy with their friends. SC is pleased with our girls saying they diligently sat and did their homework when her girls had their set times come up. She's even taught them while she taught her own kids.

The next week every evening is spent pouring over the prospectuses and we finally settle on a large development of nineteen apartments on the Auckland Domain. Located on George Street the criteria we've been taught of location, location, location are easily met via the domain itself, Parnell College, University of Auckland, the hospital including the Starship children's unit and the shops all within a stone's throw distance from the two and a half acre section of land. The next task is to get the bank to loan us the money taking our Heta Road property as collateral. Our lawyers draw up the necessary papers, charge us a bomb and then send it all off to The Forum and just like that we're into the project and eagerly await news of it's meetings minutes of which are regularly sent to me. It takes a while for things to get moving on the ground but I don't worry as I've set things up so that I don't have any loan interest to pay until I actually make a draw down on the funds. The Forum does not ask for the money saying that they'll only take funds from the members when they actually start. It all bodes very well for their honesty and integrity which they had made such a big deal off in the seminar.

The shunning

Trouble begins brewing on the western front --- the shop front. I get a call from Dr Global -- a New Zealand outfit that is trying to set up an internet based remote medicine website. They've heard about my work in this area having done some digging into who I am. I answer a call and go in for an interview at which they present me with the offer to become Chief Technology Officer at their firm. I consider this deeply looking carefully at the drool-worthy pay scale. George Street is soon going to be needing money and that will mean a draw-down on my

already set up bank loan and then the monthly interest payments to make. I had planned to draw additional funds to make those payments but with the offer from Dr Global the amounts payable to the George Street project seem paltry indeed. Thoughts begin to form of getting into another construction project just like StC and wife have done thereby multiplying their savings very quickly.

On the shop front though things are not going too well. Just as we get things set up with a nice front window, advertising on TV and in the dailies we begin to be hit by the realities of education in NZ. Not only are my kids futures at risk in their schools but we don't seem able to attract anyone to our courses. What worked in Kenya falls flat on its face here. We lower our fees, offer UK degree programs (though we've not cleared this with the education board yet), programming courses, set ourselves up as a Prometric testing centre and offer exams like the Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer and Cisco Certified Network Associate ones that Ami and I have ourselves taken and passed. We tie those exams into courses that we offer creating a one-stop-shopping educational experience for the computer less-literate. We also educate them in what a vendor certification like this can gain them. We put forward my own case that I needed 125 points to get into New Zealand but was able to score (combined with Ami's score) 265 points!

I walk into the office one day to find SM and SMA sitting at their desks talking dejectedly about the state of our business.

"What's up guys?"

"Neal, we were racking our brains about how to generate new business." SMA says.

"Have you had a look at the SOP -- I've put in there a section on loss mitigation and alternative strategies?"

"I haven't had time to read the SOP."

"None of it?"

"Actually no, none of it."

"SM, I put in a lot of work into that document and there's a ton of stuff in there that a standard business faces." Turning to SMA I say "SMA remember you gave me E-Myth to read?"

"Yes I do. Did you read it?"

"Yes of course. I read it in a single sitting! It's one of the best books on business startups that I've ever read. I've ordered four copies via Amazon, I think it's that important."

SM: "Neal, these ideas and theories are great but they won't help us achieve anything. We need business to come in and money to be generated. I can't continue paying off the loan interest

from my savings."

"I hear you SM but you really MUST read the SOP and E-Myth once again."

A bombshell is dropped and hits me smack in the face:

"Actually I don't think I'm going to read the SOP or E-Myth. I don't see any point in that. We ran this business for fifteen years before you came and we did alright."

Struggling to control an anger that surfaces so quickly it even surprises me I say, "SM? Are you saying my coming here is what has caused this lack of business?"

"Well we had a fair bit of business and were doing OK before. Once you came we bought this building and now we're faced with payments that are killing us or soon will be."

Pushing the anger down hard I put on my calmest voice and remember my epistemology classes in my Psychiatry courses from way back in Uni in Kenya. In a conciliatory tone I say, "Help me understand this. We have a one twenty five thousand loan or thereabouts and the interest charge is 6.5 percent right?"

"Yes that's right."

"So we have to come up with what -- about eight thousand dollars a year to service that loan right?"

"Correct"

"So 8K is what the business was earning before I came here and that was the aim, that was enough?"

"It was 8K more than we have now."

"From what I understood I am here to move the business from a small one to one that can grow into a big entity. 8k a year is not a big business, it's not even a medium sized business."

"How is it going to grow? We don't have any business at all now."

"We still have the hardware maintenance, Apple and Linux support part of things don't we?"

"Yes, but now we have to pay you out of that part of the business too."

"You've not paid me anything at all yet SM and I've not asked for anything have I?"

"No you haven't but we'll soon have to factor that in. How are we going to manage to pay you

and pay the loan principal and interest also?"

"I told you I'd go without any pay at all until this business is up on its feet and growing didn't I?"

"It's not working Neal." THE BOMBHELL. "We should not have tried to create a business like you said. You have the experience to do this but we don't know about big business and it's failing already."

"It's not failing SM, it just takes time. And you have to study the business model that I created and put it into place step by step. If you don't read the SOP and the book how are you going to follow the plan?"

"We can't afford the time. We need to meet our expenses, run our home, keep the kids in school."

We go back and forth like this me trying to convince them that delayed gratification is key to creating a large, successful, sell-able business but they just can't see it. They want the money now; they want the business to earn spending money for them right away. Little did I know it then that I'd face this same problem another three times after leaving New Zealand. Little did I realise that it would take those three more failures to finally ram it into my thick head that delayed gratification and the willingness to knuckle under, tighten the belt and create a big, even huge, business is a talent few have.

I begin to wake up to the obstinacy that I've since encountered too many times for my own liking. It slams into me that I no longer want to go through trying to convince others that there's a method to my madness, that it's worked before and that it will work again and again. I have created businesses and sold them to people who found that what I had created worked as 'turnkey projects' with them only having to show up and follow the recipe I'd laid out and it would all work like a well-oiled machine. I give it a solid try but after a further hour or so of discussion I've had enough. I try to get a summation of the goings on, a final conclusion, a way of thinking that they are not going to deviate from.

"So guys, are you going to put the business model that we've all worked to build into place or not?"

"I'm sorry Neal," SMA in her whiney voice, "We just can't. We won't survive trying to do that."

"I'm sorry to hear that guys. One thing I've learned is to pull the plug on a project that has no hope of working and that is what this project has become. So, I'm going to leave now and stop thinking that we can build a business together. I've learned that if I carry on trying to flog a dead horse I only end up with more grief. I hope we'll stay friends and meet socially and be cordial to each other but just not do business together. Our mindsets are different and that's just how things are. OK?"

"I'm sorry to hear that Neal," SM says, "I had genuinely thought we could do business together but it seems you come from a place where business is much more serious than for us here in NZ. We have a laid back way of looking at life but you guys have a developed world, fast track attitude. In New Zealand people like to live life, to sit back and smell the roses. This rushing about trying to make big bucks is not for us."

Choking back angry words I say, "I'm sorry you see it that way SM. But keep going. You have a nice building now and what you've always done will get you what you've always got and as that is what you've always wanted you'll be fine." There! At least I got that favourite of mine in.

And just like that it's over. I had been dragged out thousands of kilometres from my home on a promise to create a life here with these two but that has not panned out. I drive home disappointed but at the same time strangely elated. I can't help feeling that I have closed one door and am about to open another.

Dr Global, Open Source, Ubuntu

A series of meetings at Dr Global become the next phase of life. Over the course of a couple of months I meet with the various 'C' level people at the company and we hammer out strategies. I get along very well with their CFO (Chief Finance Officer) as our financially bent minds prove to be highly compatible. Product development plans, monetization, project plans and more occupy the time. I spend time at home too working in my study -- a spartan affair with a LOC-3 aviation map of East Africa pinned to one wall. From time to time I glance at that well-worn map and think of home and imagine what might be happening on the savannah as I sit and freeze my butt off in the rapidly approaching winter. From time to time I get called by various people including the mayor of New Plymouth. All of them want me to help configure Linux machines while a few need some pointers on this or that complexity. I marvel at the irony of it all -- here are a population that won't educate themselves and have ideas of playing 'catch-up' when they get to university while at the same time there are some, a small elite group, who are at the very bleeding edge of technology implementing and living in a linux environment while the rest of the world hangs onto the apron strings of Microsoft's Windows. The more I work with linux the more I begin to see the openness of the platform -- that very open nature that allows me a look at the insides of the operating system, learn what it's doing, tweak it to suit my own needs. On my blog I start to write some technical articles about linux -- about the kernel mostly -- the innermost part of the system -- the part that fascinates me most. I begin to break away from my own Microsoft apron strings letting go of my MCSE - Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer - status as I get more and more work experience supporting the growing Linux user community of New Plymouth.

Then one day in my email comes a puzzling communication. It's from MS in South Africa. He talks about how he's sold his company and now has a vast amount of money that will last way beyond his last days on Earth. He writes that he wants to find a bunch of software developers that will be willing to write a piece of software for Africa, by Africans and that will be given away free to anyone anywhere in the world complete with its source code. I have heard of this model

before of course. The vast open source movement is something I've taken advantage of myself. EMACS -- Editor Macros -- is a piece of software that I've used for over 20 years at this point in time. It's been an all-consuming favourite text editor of mine -- indeed I write these very words using it!

Open source software has featured in my life from the time that I put together a minicomputer that I found languishing in boxes in the Kenyatta Hospital in Nairobi. That computer had been a donation from a foreign government and as no one had known what to do with it they'd just let it rot in one of the library basement stores. I'd found it there and asked my professors if I could put it to use. They'd been delighted that someone would take on this job of which they knew not where to start. They were like a bunch of kids imagining me bringing them some new tool to play with. I poured through manuals and not only put together the machine -- a PDP 11 -- but even wrote software for the UNIX operating system that it ran. So I knew about the open source movement and I readily signed up to MSs mailing list.

At first I am sceptical that I might have been sussed out by one of those Nigerians who has allegedly suddenly come across a cache of money and is willing to part with some of it if only I can help him get the entire booty. But then MS here is offering me what? Nothing! I'll get no money at all for my efforts. In fact I'll end up spending on my computer, my electricity, my sanity and will pull long hours working on something really, really difficult. MS says that the gain will be the satisfaction coming having built something of great importance. Reflection on this has me wondering about what sort of satisfaction I'll eventually experience but I do take up the challenge once satisfied as to the absence of Nigerian-like incentives. As soon as I sign up to the mailing list the mails start flying back and forth. I reply to three or four a day. The total load the group is exchanging comes up quickly approaching one hundred substantial mails a day. The complement of skills that MS desires for the team is met when we achieve a total group size of about two hundred. Now this becomes an all-consuming passion. Every day I wake up to an exciting thought: What's going to happen today?

Our first task is to come up with an idea for a truly African piece of software. Much hammering back and forth of keyboards goes on for about a month. Consensus is slowly reached that we should build a linux distribution that we'll give away as per MSs wishes. Starting from a distribution called Debian will mean a 'leg up' that will put us far ahead of the race by not having to reinvent the wheel. Increasingly the 'talk' heads towards a Debian base. MS follows our discussions putting in an encouraging word here and there but more or less leaving us on our own. About five weeks into our deliberations he jumps in with clear enthusiasm that the idea of an operating system has grabbed his attention. He promises to put ten million dollars into the effort and to keep the software free for all time. None of the money will go to any of us developers but will instead be used to set up a company, pay office staff, stamp the CDs on which the software will be distributed and to pay for postage to anywhere in the world, maintain servers and so on. MS challenges us to come up with a name. Many are tossed about until a group in South Africa come up with the name 'Ubuntu' which in the Zulu language of that country means humanity. MS falls in love with the name almost immediately and we plow headlong into the development process. My project management skills -- in which subject I had

done my masters degree -- now come in handy as three others and I split, rejoin, coordinate, push and shove, cajole and generally massage the huge team of two hundred modelling it into a software development team. In addition to this I join the kernel development team and find myself propelled into heaven. Here is something I can sink my teeth into, something that can hold my attention for hours at a time. I forget to sleep startled when the sky out of my study window gently bleaches into early morning after an all-nighter of coding. Dr Global which had held my attention for a while there now takes a back seat. I still talk to them from time to time and even go in with some ideas but I start to get sucked into the web of linux source code it's intricacies, convolutions, surprises and sheer size at all of ten millions lines worth. I'm a naturalist suddenly thrown into a rainforest. Everywhere I turn there are delicious goodies to marvel at; every stoop to look at the forest floor brings up more intricate tracks to explore. I am in heaven.

A year of coding goes by Ubuntu shaping up nicely. Through all this year SM and SMA ignore us -- do not visit us even once though they live but five hundred metres from us practically on the same street! AC and SC though are great friends celebrating our kids' birthdays with us and even going on long walks through forests with us albeit the wet and green type not the plain text, truly magical world of code that I, almost guiltily navigate in the depths of so many nights.

The beginning of the end

The beach incident

The Foreshore Walk in New Plymouth is one of the best attractions a city has that I've seen anywhere in the world. It runs for several kilometres and we head out there often taking Clemow road to the end past Lake Rotomanu parking at the beach head and starting our walk from there. On this day we have Gaia and Acacia with us so we opt instead to head out to Kawaroa Park to give the kids a chance to play on the swings and monkey bars there foregoing our usual daily ten kilometre constitutional.

The kids have a swell time and we both play with them until a bunch of other kids show up and they quickly make friends. Ami and I then sit on a bench watching them as they do their thing and we have one of our impromptu meetings. After a while Gaia comes to us saying she's tired. We put her in her stroller and ask Acacia if she'd like to take a short walk on the foreshore. Ami takes her down to the beach part way down the track and I walk Gaia in the stroller aimlessly heading along the beach wondering at the lack of odours that are so characteristic of our own Indian Ocean but absent here. After a short while Ami and Acacia join me and we walk a little more purposefully. Then Ami says she'd like to take over the stroller from me and walk at a faster pace while I stroll with Acacia. She's off and quickly heads up the track while Acacia and I stroll talking about this and that. We stop when I notice Acacia's shoelaces open on one foot. I squat down on one knee and put Acacia up on my knee. I tie her shoelaces and am about to put her back on her feet when a man walking his own child in a stroller passes by and stops to say,

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"What?" I say quickly annoyed and ready to bite this guys head off.

"Someone could take that the wrong way."

"Take WHAT the wrong way?"

"That putting your little girl on your knee."

"What's wrong with that?" I realise I'm beginning to whine.

"It's all right mate -- just saying."

"I don't understand what you're saying -- I'm tying her shoe laces."

"I know mate but you can't be careful enough."

He heads off leaving me bewildered. I wonder what he's been on about?

Later that day:

"Hey JS -- I have a question for you."

I have gone over to JSs house in Motorua and over a cup of hot coffee we're talking about software, our plans for the future in lieu of anything that we can do with SM/SMA. JS had hoped that there would be work that he could participate in eventually making him a part of the business through proof of his IT skills. JS has had a tough life with failed LASIK surgery (the surgery that gets rid of ones prescription glasses) leading to near-blindness that has necessitated multiple corneal transplants. Additionally an 'affair' with the police after he crashed his car and his fiancée was left with a broken leg has left him very bitter with the legal system in New Zealand. The police brought a 'dangerous driving' charge against JS which he feels was totally unjustified seeing as he skidded on a wet road at below the 100 kph speed limit the car going off the edge of the road rolling over and his fiancée breaking her leg. According to him he was not driving dangerously and was below the speed limit so he can't understand how a dangerous driving charge can be brought against him. The ensuing case saw him convicted, suffering a large fine to the state and losing his driving license for a year which year he is still serving as he talks to me. Worse, for the rest of his life he will live behind a criminal record which will preclude him from much of life's opportunities. Being driven around wherever he needs to go is a drag necessitating even that I go to meet him at his home rather than him coming over to mine. Hope for JS now lies in being able to do something with me. I bring him home often and we have a lot to talk about. His having accompanied his parents here from South Africa often puts him in the same frame of mind as mine. JS is the person that came up

with the phrase -- 'Africa is the place where you feel your soul's roots go down to the centre of the earth.' This phrase will echo in my story as it comes back time and again to haunt me.

"Shoot Neal."

I tell him about the encounter on the foreshore and he recounts his own experiences. He talks about a friend whose son had a large boil on his lower back that his father used to put ointment onto each day. Hired help that came in to the guys house twice a week to clean up sees this and calls social services to let them know his concerns. The father was picked up and charged for indecent behaviour. JS goes on to tell me another story too sordid to recount here, a story that starts with a father bathing his daughters and leads to an accusation of indecent behaviour, a protracted court case, a prosecution, conviction and one year prison sentence. That leads to a divorce and eventually a return of the man to his native South Africa fed up with the legal system and the behaviour of his wife.

I am flabbergasted! I cannot believe that this society, of which I am trying to make myself an integral part, is this warped out of its collective mind. I almost cannot believe this until JS offers to take me to meet another person who's suffered just such a fate. I decline the offer but it does lend credence to what I've just been told.

A week later and I'm showing AC and his wife, our good friends now, some pictures in our on-line albums when AC blurts out:

"Neal -- you should remove those photos of the kids in the bath."

"Why?"

"They're naked in there."

"But they're just kids and nothing is showing AC. I wouldn't put on-line any photos that might in future be an embarrassment to my kids."

"Even so -- even though there's ample soap bubbles in the photos -- I'd remove the photos Neal. You've not heard the stories of what goes on here. People have been prosecuted for such things. I know it's silly but you need to be extra careful. Remember SCs story?"

SCs story took place when they had just arrived in New Plymouth from Bombay. In Bombay SC was a high school biology teacher and was used to the teaching methods used there --- methods much like ours in Kenya. Tests handed out to students are marked and handed back the grades entered into a register. Often times grades are discussed in class and some teachers post them on a notice board. In university in Kenya my grades were posted on public notice boards for the entire university to see indeed for even the public to peruse. This serves as validation and proof of my achievements and tells the public what to expect of me in future should they come to depend on my medical skills. In school it was fierce competition

engendered by our grades on the notice boards that kept us fighting to get higher and higher scores by working at learning all that we could from our books.

SC on arrival in New Zealand sought a teaching job and teachers being so rare and hard to find quickly secured a position at a local school -- the senior sister school to the one Acacia is now attending. SC handed out a test, marked it and put the grades up on the class notice board. She then picked out a student that scored a zero and asked her, in class, why she had handed in a test paper that contained such weak and uncaring answers. The student was sullen and would not answer but reported what her teacher did to her parents. The parents took it to the principal and SC was called in to a board meeting where she was given a severe dressing down. The only thing that saved her was her claim that this was the way she did things all her life in India -- shaming lazy students in front of their peers. Following the dressing down SC was given explicit instruction by a team of teachers on what she could and could not do in New Zealand. As she tells us the story she is obviously still bitter about the problems that she sees with the educational system -- problems for which she can see no solution and for which she can provide no suggestions. I have been even more strict with my students in Kenya and as a result have had some of them produce grades that have astounded us all. SC explains the situation to me: As in Australia as I discovered at Curtin, one is not allowed to rank students in New Zealand. Nor may one compare one student to another. No student is to be reprimanded in public or in private, they can only have suggestions made to them as to how to improve their knowledge not their grades. And if they don't want or seek such advice none is to be given.

Another educational nail-in-my-coffin. A coffin that is steadily building towards completion.

Legalising prostitution

At the bottom of Heta Road there has existed, for as long as we have been living there, a building of nefarious reputation. There are a lot of comings and goings of various people that we know talk in hushed voice about what goes on there. I do not put much substance into their utterances but the world's oldest profession is mentioned from time to time and it strikes me as particularly ironic that in one of the best neighbourhoods in New Plymouth this is going on. It crosses my mind that the lowering of the drinking age and the legalisation of marijuana use in New Zealand is going to be a feature of a cocktail that might grow to lethal proportions and that within those lethal proportions environment will be my two girls growing up into adulthood.

I dig into some research on the topic after several articles appear in the newspapers and various talking heads on TV debate the upcoming Prostitution Reform Act that seeks to decriminalise brothels, escort agencies and soliciting. A huge brouhaha erupts over this as parliament enters the final stages of it's debates on the topic. Even as the debates rage on police continue to raid brothels, streets and even the private residence down the road. Coming home one evening I once again find the flashing lights I'd seen on my way back that night from Auckland all those months back. I turn away from home and park on the street where a yellow tape prevents me going any further. Getting out of the car I look over the shoulders of the small crowd that has formed. Amid sniggers I watch as police officers pull various scantily-clad 'ladies'

out of the building bundling them into their patrol cars.

I remark about this to Ami the next morning when the newspaper carries an article on the arrests. Picking Acacia up from school it comes as a bit of shock to me when she asks me "Daddy, what are drugs?"

Successfully dodging the question I meet JS and GG that evening over a beer at GGs house just a few houses from mine and this current news topic comes up:

GG: "I don't care what others do with their lives but if they legalise prostitution in this country what next?"

JS: "They already legalised pot and lowered the drinking age to fifteen. Not much left to keep people in check is there now?"

Me: "GG already had a bad taste."

JS: "What?"

GG: "Oh, you don't know about that do you JS?"

JS: "Know about what?"

GG: "About my incident with Jane?"

GG goes on to explain what happened to him in the two-by-four-bashing incident in which I found him bleeding profusely from his head urging him to go to hospital while I headed out to make sure his daughter was not lying dead somewhere on the road out of New Plymouth her 15-year-old boyfriend, of legal driving age, having crashed the car after imbibing that six-pack of beers that GG found on the back seat of the car.

JS is shocked. "I had not heard of this. Were you hurt?"

GG: "Helluva headache I can tell you mate."

JS: "No permanent damage though I can see."

GG: "Fortunately only seven stitches."

JS: "Stitches! It was bad then?"

GG: "Oh, it was bad enough."

Me: "And what came of it. Did Jane stop?"

GG: "Stop what? They don't think there's anything wrong with what they're doing. She's told me in so many words that the police are OK with pot and they have legal driving licenses so they can't be doing any wrong. Just her 'old-fogie' dad giving her a hard time."

JS: "In SA this is not on. No drugs are legal, prostitution is illegal and the driving age is 18 and a revision upwards to 19 is being considered."

Me: "I came across the whatsapp nonsense just a few days after I got here."

GG: "So you encountered that one huh. What happened?"

Me: "I was sitting at SMs dining table with SMA helping her son do his homework when I noticed that the boy was behaving a little strangely. He had some sums to do and was working through a sheet-full of the things. He'd stop every few seconds and look down into his lap and then look up and write on the sheet. I caught SMAs eye and signalled to her to look at her sons work. She caught him -- he was using a calculator in his lap to do the sums and simply writing down the answer. We've all done it I guess but what followed was the dismaying bit."

JS: "I can guess."

Me: "She slapped the boy across the face. The little bugger went all dark in the face, looked at her and sped to the phone and holding it up towards her said 'I'll call WHATSUP'."

GG: "Yeah, that's a common one here."

Me: "Once it had been explained to me that WHATSUP is child services I almost shouted at SMA to sit down and told the boy to go ahead and call them. Then I asked him what he thought they'd do for him. He was very indignant and determined to call them but the scary position I put him into quickly turned the tide. You can imagine what I said."

JS: "Oh, yes, no problems there. I've done a similar thing a few times."

GG: "The kids are out of control here."

Me: "We're losing the battle GG, we're going to have a belligerent bunch of dunces that are promiscuous, drinking gang bangers. This is not what I brought my kids here for."

The Act was passed replacing the previous legislation. It removed voluntary adult (>18) prostitution from criminal law and replaced it with civil law at both national and local level. I laughed out loud to read that sex work would be prohibited for those on temporary visas and immigration for and investment in sex work was to be prohibited. But the last straw that snapped this camel's back came when Work and Income New Zealand recognised sex work as legitimate work and sex workers were allowed to apply for previous convictions to be removed

from their records. And then the back finally gave in altogether when banners started appearing across New Plymouth. They spanned the entire road and in their gaudy colours announced:

"IF YOU GIVE DRINK TO UNDER 18s YOU SHOULD HAVE YOUR HEAD EXAMINED."

I shook my own head in amazement. Lower the drinking age then tell your people not to give drink to the young ones. Lower the driving age then tell your new, young drivers that drinking and driving is dangerous. Legalise marijuana use and prostitution? And then what? Wonder why HIV rates are going up? I thought back to that nurse I talked to at the Base Hospital. The one who told me that she'd get \$340 on the dole for sitting at home or \$385 per week if she worked figuring that if she worked the long, arduous hours of a nurse she'd basically be earning \$45 a week for her efforts! What was this society coming to? What were their leaders thinking? Is this where I wanted to raise my kids?

4 seasons in a day

When we made our LSD (Look, See and Decide) trip a year before finally moving to New Zealand much had been made of how this was the country where one could have all four seasons in one single day. It had seemed such a wonderful thing. Winter, we were told, was no big deal, it never got too cold, central heating was not required and it was such fantastic weather all year round. Our LSD trip (pun intended) had been made in very early winter and, true, it was not THAT cold. We had lived with friends and traveled the country. Ami and I had traveled light -- not even the kids were with us on that trip. We'd covered New Zealand's North Island pretty comprehensively visiting Auckland, Tauranga and the west coast and New Plymouth of course. In New Plymouth we'd met our long lost friends from Kenya. SM and SMA had shown us the business that they wanted us to share 50/50 with them.

Now those who know us Kenyans will understand the term koroga and understand how important that event is to us. A koroga is (a swahili term) a 'cook-out.' The weather in Nairobi is so calm and mild -- it rarely if ever exceeds 28C throughout the year, stays above 15 C at night in most places and there's little wind. The mercury seems stuck at 1020 hectopascals and even we pilots become numb to calling out that figure to the control towers wherever we may fly in the country. Korogas can vary from a pot on a charcoal brazier with a meat curry in it to a full chicken on a kettle barbecue to anything in between. Accompaniments vary from beers to papadam, crisps to chevda and again anything in between. The koroga is a Kenyan-Indian invention but now ALL people of all walks of life in Kenya practice this art form and it really is an art form with the artists varying widely in their capabilities and particular nuances. Friends come from near and far and there is much merriment and joking. Conversation can likewise range widely from current affairs to the political situation in the country and the world at large to planning the next koroga perhaps at some remote site or on a camping trip. In my time I have organised and successfully executed many hundreds of korogas. Impromptu ones are frequent and usually hosted by Ami, myself our two little ones and while my aunt was alive and living with us, she'd be part of the party too. Sunday lunch times were always spent at my Dad's house just five kilometres from mine and his style invariably was chicken curry and chapatis washed down

by our world famous Tusker beer.

So as winter rolled in and the weather turned inclement it came as a bit of a shock that the 'four-seasons-in-a-day' could be skewed towards a wintry axis rather than being smack between all four settings. Still Ami and I would make it down to the foreshore in all conditions blustery winds to cold blue skies, and put in our ten kilometres a day talking and enjoying each others company.

Those days we could not make it to the foreshore for whatever reason -- usually heavy rain -- we'd wait at home until skies cleared even just a little and we could brave the pavements around home and get our walks in. Occasionally our neighbours would watch the crazy 'Aggarwals at Number 40' walking in the sleet or hail. We'd wave back at as many as we could trying to make as many friends as possible. I guess though that the crazies were proving to be enigmas few could understand. Off and on while walking we'd pass a house where the cars had been pulled out of the garage and the people occupied the space their barbecues sizzling away. Ami and I in our turn would wonder at these crazy Kiwis that did their korogas inside a garage.

One late June Saturday afternoon the sun popped out of the clouds and snow-clad Mount Taranaki glistening in the view across our garden I dive into the deep freezer to fish out a couple of kilos of wild boar (a favourite of ours as most of the other butchery meat tastes like cardboard to us), pop some charcoal into the brazier, haul it onto the deck and set it alight. Ami and the kids see what is happening and lay our camping tarpaulin onto the pathetic little lawn we have in our backyard. The meat sizzles smells permeating the cold air. They waft this way and that and I wonder when GG will pop his head over the fence to encounter Ami who in customary Kenyan-Indian fashion will invite him to join us. Though he never did come a head-popping and a visiting the invitation has been handed out countless times to many other friends and neighbours.

Today the meat browns nicely. I begin to anticipate the browned meat in my mouth and reach for a knife to shave off a thick slice when it hit us hail, great big pea-sized, hard stones that fall from a grey sky that just minutes before had been blue, not the deep blue of Kenya, but still blue with not a cloud to be seen anywhere. Cursing in spite of the kids presence Ami and I struggle to get the brazier into the lee of the eaves and to pull the tarp into the house. Before we can manage it the hail changes to great big drops of rain that drench us all kids included. We head to the showers to warm up and then suitably changed into warm clothing head back to the deck and our now somewhat charred meat. It rains hard outside; it's a miracle that our charcoal still burns in the stove. The bigger miracle though is that we're not 'down and out' due to this debacle of a day but busy devouring our barbequed meat excuse for a koroga.

We've just got the fire going nice and toasty once more when the hail begins again and we have to think hard about what to do next. And then it hit us of course move into the garage!

Winter!

So they were right -- it never did get that cold in New Plymouth but six degrees celsius is one of those temperatures that is neither here nor there. It's too cold to sit around doing nothing and

yet not cold enough to put snow on the ground and support the sporting activities those conditions would make possible. Certainly one cannot sit on the deck and admire cold, clear skies. A walk is a painful event if you have not organised suitable head gear and wind takes on new meaning to innocent Kenyans not suspecting what wind can do when it hits you coming through a 6 degree C refrigerator. Evenings become particularly miserable and we head indoors as soon as the sun sets. We have a gas fire in the living room and now it makes sense to spend as much time as possible in that room as outdoorsy as we might be. We even move the TV so that we can sit as close as possible to the fire while watching our favourite documentaries. We do not subscribe to the multitudes of channels available on the various cable TV systems; we've never been much by way of TV-junkies believing instead in reading. Fortunately we don't succumb to television and the loss of all of that life that a television-watching habit can steal from you. We watch the occasional documentary and sit reading most evenings our gas fire silently warming our room to bare tolerance levels.

But come 10pm and time to head to our beds and misery sets in. The sheets are freezing cold. It hurts to tuck the kids into their beds and watch them squirm and shiver complaining to us about the cold. Eventually we give in and buy them both electric blankets while Ami and I brave the cold still unable to mentally justify the 'wastage' of our planet's resources that electric blankets still seem to signify. Eventually we too succumb to the misery and get ourselves a queen sized electric blanket for our brand new, super soft, fantastic bed. But even that is not enough. The cold air in the room is killing too! Once more we cave in and buy an oil-filled electric radiator and watch in dismay as our electricity bill heads north of three hundred dollars a month keeping all these warming devices running. Days of Kenya will electricity bills non-existent on our off-the-grid home are far in the past now.

It never gets cold enough to need central heating hrrmph! That is not our experience. Even SM and SMA change to a wood-fired central heating system in due course, though we only hear about that from second-hand sources for they never come to visit us any time during the years we live five hundred metres from them in the same suburb.

Such is our Kiwi experience of relatives and friends!

Losing our health

We keep up our walks -- every morning we drop the kids to school braving the 50kph killer speed limits and 20kph strangulating school zones. Then we head back home and don our walking gear or head to the foreshore weather permitting. We get moving as quickly as possible and put in our '10K' talking and enjoying each others company.

More times than I can recall we talk about Kenya and often those thoughts will be triggered by something we see on the walk. One time it is Kikuyu grass which we find growing here and there. Kiwi's have figured out the virtues of this grass and have adopted it. In turn it has turned invasive and taken over areas where local native grasses, small weak tufts of which cannot compete with our imported Kenyan powerhouse are pushed out of the way for the invader to

exert its dominance unchallenged. That Kiwi's even call it by it's Kenyan name -- Kikuyu grass -- though they know not what that name means nor where it came from -- is the way we are first surprised to learn of a word from home that continually serves as a cruel reminder of what we have left behind. Ignore it as we might it grows EVERYWHERE and it draws our minds back again and again to thoughts of home.

The second reminder hits us one day while walking on the foreshore near Buller Street. As we are walking we notice a plant, an unruly, straggly bush with small bursts of brightly coloured flowers.

"Could that be Lantana?" I say to Ami stopping her in her tracks.

"Nah! Lantana this far away from its native home?"

"Only one way to tell," I say plucking a flower head and crushing the flowers in the palm of my left hand and then bringing it up to my nose. "Yup --- for sure."

"Let's see. Ah! Sweet smells of home."

"Any of the fruits you love so much to chew on."

"Not yet I think. But this will be fun -- to come down here and eat the berries."

We continue our walk talking about how the Lantana back home must be growing all over the place and remembering how we had joined the Kenya Wildlife Service on one of the clearing projects in the Nairobi National Park and sweated our way through days that stretched into weeks of clearing the noxious weed from the park. The only way to get rid of Lantana is to cut it back to leave only the root stock, pull the cut branches away to get access to the root and then dig the root out in its entirety. It is back breaking work under a usually unrelenting African sun. We'd cleared acres of the stuff and eventually got the park free of this impenetrable mass of thorny bush of imported plant turned invasive.

The memories of home triggered by the smell of Lantana clinging to our hands are followed by a sudden onslaught of a cold, drizzly wind gets us both depressed. The depression lasts the rest of the week and come Saturday evening we are really digging ourselves into a deeper and deeper hole. Ami breaks the spell:

"Neal, let's go buy some food from that new Indian place."

"That new place? What's it called?"

"Uh, something like fire, candle"

"Flame?"

"Yeah that's right, flame."

We head out there parking outside, kids with me in the car, Ami heads in and is back out a half hour later with some Tupperware containers. Heading home we feel better for having taken the drive into town and for the hot food that is soon to be heading into plates to be spooned down eager throats.

"This is chicken, this one beef and this mutton."

I slop portions of each into my plate and attack with gusto.

"Hey -- they've cheated us. These are all the same!"

"Let me see," Ami says filling her spoon with another helping.

"Shit! Yes, they gave us chicken only. I feel like returning this."

"They're not going to get away with this. Let's go back there and complain."

Such a drag as it is we bundle the kids into the car once more and head back to the restaurant only to find Ami, red faced and fuming heading back to the car with the food containers, slamming her door shut and saying "They're different but they're all the same."

"What does that mean?"

"They really are different but the meat here is such shit they all taste the same. They showed me their cook pots in the kitchen and they really are cooking beef, mutton and chicken but they're all just cardboard."

This is what we must face: The meat is all the same once you cook it. Take a piece of wonderful looking, mouth-watering red beef out of the fridge, toss it onto the coals and let it sizzle. The smells are just wonderful and it tastes great. But put some mutton on there with it and it is only too easy to confuse one for the other. We try different butcheries and even compare the meat with the frozen rubbish from the supermarkets. It all tastes the same. The only consolation is wild, hunted boar. Now that tastes a bit like the 'real' meat from back home.

And we gain weight. How we gain weight. Try as we might, cut out the fats (this is in the days before we learned of our folly with low fat diets), grill as much as we can, limit our total calories, walk, walk, walk we gain weight. The only consolation is that I also gain muscle. Though I do not train very consistently nor comprehensively in the gym, I gain over an inch on my biceps! I have not managed that in twenty years of training in the Parklands Sports Club gym and now, here it comes so easily. But with it also comes fat. My weight goes from my usual 180 pounds, which weight I had recovered after the more than 73 pounds loss following the shooting to 210 pounds

within a year. Ami too gains and no matter what we try to do we just cannot shift any of that fat. We start to get sluggish. We start to find it difficult to get out and put in our '10K.' Excuses begin to creep into our day. Both of us develop worrisome blood glucose levels. Luckily we don't become frankly diabetic but my makeshift Glucose Tolerance Test that I do at home begins to show signs of latent diabetes and Ami's blood pressure heads towards a steady 85 millimetres mercury diastolic. We try to ignore these signs of impending doom but the thoughts hang around the dungeons of our minds nagging at us.

Then Gaia starts with her own health problems. It begins suddenly. I go to wake her up one morning -- always a nightmare with Gaia and always a job assigned to me. Gaia, since her very first days will wake up in a tantrum and it will take as long as twenty minutes to get her to settle down. I am stirring her awake when I find her scratching furiously at her arms. On waking her and passing through the traumatic phase I sit her on the dining table and take a look at the numerous little red spots on her arms. Calamine lotion takes care of that episode but it starts to recur. Soon there are the classic patches of eczema on her forearms, symmetrically distributed and even appearing on her scalp under her hair. A large patch appears on her back and starts oozing. I try everything -- changing to a non-perfumed soap, creams, food elimination strategies -- everything. The horrible 5cm by 5cm eroded skin patch on her back stretches me to the very end of my tether while she itches her way through a hell few of us can fathom.

"Ami. This is too much."

"What?"

"This eczema Gaia is developing -- it's obviously a reaction to something in the environment."

"Can't we do anything about it?"

"Short of starting her on a course of steroids what can we do? And do you want to start steroids in our baby?"

"No, no. Let's not go that route."

"Remember what happened to MJ when he went to Canada?"

We relive our neighbours story of his irritable bowel syndrome that turned into a more serious illness accompanied by bloody diarrhoea that necessitated hospitalization in Toronto. In hospital while those around him died one by one MJ had finally freaked out and discharged himself, sold his car and come back home to Kenya and then, hey presto --- all symptoms disappeared the very day after he landed in Nairobi!

This story depresses us greatly but more is to come. The news arrives that an aerial spraying campaign is to be carried out over Auckland to eradicate an Australian imported pest -- a moth that lays its eggs on Apples the caterpillars doing a lot of damage once they hatch. I read the

stories with growing alarm. A light plane, helicopter and Fokker Friendship aircraft are slated to douse the city with insecticide. They inexorably go ahead with the project covering 8000 hectares of West Auckland to wipe out the painted apple moth. 90 million dollars is spent and 160,000 people are covered with the stuff they spray. I read that more than 80 people are evacuated each time the spraying is done. Some people complain of their houses rattling and amateur video appears on the internet and on TV showing the Fokker swooping low over houses and climbing steeply at the end of its runs. Many health complaints are received and though this spraying does not spread to New Plymouth the craziness brings back memories of the seeding of Mount Taranaki with 1080 (fluoroacetate) poison. Eradication of the possum was the excuse. The aim -- to eradicate possum and goats to save Kiwi and Whio. When it happened, Operation Egmont as it was known, had us up in arms and Ami and I both signed up to Greenpeace to do what we could to battle the insanity. We were very active attending meetings, organising protests, picketing the authorities and more but nothing could stop them poisoning the very home we had chosen to live in. Not only did our wild boar eating have to stop but our minds were wrecked by this apparent stupidity in the authorities and our inability to effect any change in policy unlike in Kenya where our environmental activists, us included, play such a prominent and key role in policy making. These people here do not figure on unintended consequences.

"If Gaia starts to wheeze Ami, that'll be it. We'll just pack up and go." Wheezing in Gaia would signify asthma something I've always blamed on allergens caused by 'modern' living styles -- not something we'd expect to find our kids developing in our tough and unspoiled environments in Kenya.

HND

Sunday morning. We awake as we usually do -- at 7am -- it's too cold to get out from under the covers. We fall back into sleep in fits and starts and dream weird little dreams waking to make small excuses to each other for falling asleep yet again. After about an hour of this we hear Gaia and Acacia stirring and then suddenly they're both jumping onto our bed and squirming their way under our covers. Acacia's ears are cold and the tip of Gaia's nose is red. In between teasing her that she's a little Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer there's a ton of tickling and tossing of Acacia into the air on top of Ami's folded legs -- something Acacia has always loved to do. Finally we get the courage to get out of bed and we all jump out pulling on thick bathrobes or fleeces and running downstairs to the living room where I get the gas fire going as quickly as I can. Then it's into the kitchen for me to put some ground coffee into the filter machine and set it bubbling away. A bunch of eggs go into a frying pan while another holds sizzling sausages. Yet a third browns some thickly sliced tomatoes. Then it's to the dining table and we laugh and joke as we warm up the warmth flowing internally from our stomachs through our veins and from outside from the reluctantly warming air inside the dining room. Slowly we fill with a peaceful, restful, Sunday-feeling.

Time goes crawling by. Eventually though we pull ourselves away from the table too aware that we have to get 'the chores' done. So we assign Acacia the task of clearing up the dining table

and loading the dishwasher with dirty dishes while Ami heads for the bedrooms to empty out our big African baskets that we used back in Kenya to hold our dirty clothing. I make a beeline to the 'wet room' that leads into the house from the garden. From there I extract the vacuum cleaner and heading into the furthest room at the back of the house, my study, I begin the job of vacuuming the house. I've done the ground floor and am heading to the upper floor when I pass Ami and the kids heading out to wash her car; mine is not dirty as it only goes to the office and back while hers we take out on our weekend safaris something we've been able to keep doing all through this long stay in New Zealand.

By 11am half the chores are done and we can get together for a cup of coffee. I brew some more of the filtered stuff and we head to the deck and relax for a bit. Then again we're driven to get more chores done. Today I need to work on my Pajero and replace the bushes. During the week I had called a local garage and asked what they'd charge to do the job. They had quoted eight hundred dollars! Yikes! When questioned more deeply it turns out that the bushes, polyurethane bushes from Australia, will cost eighty eight dollars and the rest is their labour. DOUBLE YIKES! I am furious at this and it reminds me of the time I called a garage door outfit because our garage door had a broken hinge on it -- a little sheet metal thing that could not cost more than five bucks. A guy had come over and looked at it very cursorily, it was a simple job after all. He had then said it would cost about two hundred dollars as the type of hinges my door had were no longer available and he'd have to get his welder and weld it in situ. Furious is the only way to describe my reaction and livid was my colour I'm sure when I declined to have him repair it and he presented me with a twenty five dollar bill for having come out to Highlands Park to quote on the job. I had paid him cash with stiff arms and fingers and struggled mightily to hold myself in check lest I kick him in the shins. I had been so angry that I'd jumped into my car and headed to the nearest hardware store bought a MIG welder for a hundred and eighty dollars and welded the bloody hinge I'm sure even before the guy had settled down to his evening tea.

Now the same thing happens with the bushes. I ordered them on-line from a shop in Auckland and they appear at my doorstep the very next day. Then I head back to the same shop and for \$400 I buy myself a 1.5 ton press. I now head to my garage to take the car suspensions apart and fit the bushes the way I've always done it back home. I spend that Sunday afternoon doing that while Ami and the kids cook up a scrumptious chicken curry lunch that tastes fabulous even if the meat is little more than pieces of cardboard. By evening the suspensions are still lying about the garage floor and I'm about halfway through. We decide to leave it at that and take the kids to the nearby Waiwhakaiho River. There's a scenic reserve here where we sometimes walk through the forest on days when we're a little fed up with the usual foreshore jaunt. The kids play about feeding the black swans and ducks some pieces of bread that we've brought with us. I shoot a few photographs of Mt. Taranaki and then we sit on a park bench and talk.

Ami: "These chores take so long to get done. Today we've spent the entire day -- -our Sunday --- doing this."

Me: "I know. We'd never have had to do this in Nairobi. Josephine would have left the house spic-and-span yesterday." In Nairobi nearly all of us have hired help as labour costs are not

what they are here in New Zealand. We're growing weary of this 'waste-of-what-could-be-productive-time.'

She preempts my comment on this, "I used to be able to get so much done."

"You don't have to tell me."

"Yorkies -- can you imagine having one single dog here let alone our troop?"

"Please NO! I've done enough vacuum cleaning."

"And what about you, your workshop, your fixing the cars, your modifying those rally cars."

"Tell me about it -- I'm Josephine here," managing to laugh.

"It's like we came here to work our butts off ..."

"While getting nothing done."

"Nothing, NOTHING."

"I call it an HND."

"What's that?"

"Humility and Discipline. Remember what people used to say to us when we mocked them about their having to do the dishes in the UK? That it teaches one humility and discipline. Bah! It's just a monumental waste of time. When Arjun said that he'd never move to any country where he can't have house help I laughed at him. Now I understand. It's not laziness; it's complete, daylight robbery of life. So much cannot be done; we waste away our days here doing what? Dishes? Life in the first world is highly overrated. I'd rather live in Kenya and have my burglar bars than these mental bars." I say this referring to a surgeon colleague in Auckland who, one day, stopped us all in our tracks and told us what he considered the primary difference between the first world and the third world from which we all came (he had moved to New Zealand from South Africa).

He had said, "In Africa we have burglar bars on windows, strong metal doors, dogs and perhaps even a gun. In this country we have mental bars. We can't do the things we used to do back home because we're afraid of litigation, afraid that we'll be accused of abusing our children because we discipline them, afraid even to drive because of the draconian laws."

And I'd said, "Doc -- add to that doing all the washing up, dishes, cleaning our houses, cleaning our cars, cooking our food from scratch, even cutting the onions and there's no time for anything." At the time it had seemed like we were making a mountain out of a molehill. Only

later would the full import of this hit us.

"Hey -- I've just thought of something Higher National Diploma."

"Touche!"

We used to offer a Higher National Diploma at our college and now the acronym fit. "And you used to manage the HND Ami while here you're trying to get one!"

"I'm tired of this I want a life."

We left it at that but it portended tougher days ahead.

Trikes!

Through our stay in New Zealand I've been trying to fly and keep my passion for flight going. It's proving to be very difficult. Getting my license converted to an NZ PPL (New Zealand Private Pilot's License) is a nightmare. I have already successfully done this in Perth and hold a Kenyan PPL with an Australian conversion and my considerable Kenyan flying hours of course now supplemented with a few Australian ones. But the Civil Aviation Authority in New Zealand insists that I sit the law written exam and then do a General Flight Test. After much bickering on this requirement they finally relent and accept my Australian PPL and my hours in my log book as proof enough that I don't have to do a general flight test but they do insist that I sit the Law written exam and get a New Zealand Class 2 medical certificate before I can fly here. The exam goes fine -- slamming exams for 95+ percent has never been much of an issue for me. I've always been clear that exams are about knowing 'how' to do exams and not about the knowledge that one has of one's subject. So I attack the Air Law text book with gusto, do lots of past papers build my mind maps and ace the exam in double quick time. The medical however proves to be a nightmare.

I call around and finally resort to asking JSs dad (an ophthalmologist) where I can get such an examination done. Apparently there are no AMEs (Aviation Medical Examiners) like we have in Kenya. We finally find a clinic that will do a regular medical check for me and I clear that with the CAA before heading out to the clinic. It's a long wait and then a doctor sees me and goes through the usual. After a daylight robbery bill of one hundred and twenty dollars is paid I walk out with a medical certificate and head to the CAA offices in Auckland. It's one of the longest drives to Auckland that I have ever to make seeing as I head out there on my own and my sole reason for going is to get to the CAA offices and complete this process so I can start to fly again.

I'm in for a shock --- the CAA take one look at the certificate and pronounce it useless for flight qualification. I'm crushed. I ask why I was told this would suffice on the phone. They stare blankly at me. I ask who else I can talk to but they don't know any AMEs either. The CAA THEMSELVES know no AME? I head back to New Plymouth thinking --- how does this differ

from the runarounds officialdom hands down in Kenya? I am dejected and downcast. I begin to think that I'll never be able to fly again. My flying days are over -- it is yet another sacrifice I have to make to move to this place where life is supposed to be better than that I came from. But by the time I reach New Plymouth my mood is lifting and driving through the sweeping bends, brows and going much too fast, well beyond the speed limit, I resolve to fight and fly again.

Back in New Plymouth I start to make enquiries and what do you know, I find a John Armstrong who lives just a few houses from me who, I'm told by the New Plymouth Flying Club, is the right person to see. I head off on foot and walk the short kilometre or so to his place knocking on his front door. He answers and characteristic flyer-camaraderie emanates from him when he learns that I am a bush pilot from Kenya. We exchange stories over a boiling hot cup of tea and then he says "You'll want to see this," and leads me out of the house towards his garage saying as we go, "The wife is not too excited that the cars now have to live outside and have done so for over a year."

I help him pull up the heavy manual garage door and behind it

a glorious Tiger Moth her twin wings glistening with the new coat of dope they've recently had lovingly applied to them!

We spend a few minutes going around the 'moth' and I offer to help where I can. I tell him I have a ton of very good tools and he's keen to hear about the MIG welder that I just bought and the reason for it. He sympathises with me regarding labour costs in NZ. We get along the way only kindred souls can and he starts off a cascade of fortunate events.

"You need what? A Class 2 medical?"

"Yes John." I tell him my story about the runaround the CAA gave me.

"What a waste. I just get mine done right here and mail it to them. Just do that. Dr Barclay at the Base Hospital will do it for you. Here let's call him right now.

He calls and hands the phone to me. I speak to a very kind man who sounds a little elderly but in full control of all of his faculties. We arrange to meet the very next morning at the Base Hospital and I leave John's home in high spirits promising to keep in touch and offering my help again.

In the morning I'm up early and bounding out of the house with the now, newly polybush shod Pajero. I'm at the Base Hospital in a short twenty minutes and meet Dr Barclay. As I thought an elderly man and very much like one of my former flying instructors in Kenya, Sir Henry White. He looks at the medical certificate that I was given and shakes his head doing a quick once-over on me. Asked what the charges will be he answers, "For a fellow flyer and colleague can there be a question of money?" and then adds, "Would you like to do some flying together?"

"Affirm," I say and we head off to Stratford where we pull a Bantam ultralight out of a hangar, top up her tanks, start her up and head out for a few circuits. It's a horrible aircraft and I just can't get the hang of her. After six circuits we're heading back to the strip when a strong wind comes up and she crabs almost forty five degrees on final approach. It's all I can do to hold her on the centreline and she makes very little forward progress the wind almost driving her backwards. Barclay screams at me to take control, to 'fly the plane' not let her fly me. I try but have to hand control to him. He lands her masterfully.

"Don't let it get you down Neal. The weather in New Zealand is like that. You rarely get a smooth, silky day. You'll get used to it. And remember these very light aircraft are not the easiest the fly. The lighter the more difficult. Those guys that fly those Air Buses and Jumbos get a fright every time we ultralighters hand them the controls on one of our stallions."

I have to smile at that but I don't say to him that I don't WANT to get used to it. I vow never to fly Bantams. I'm dejected heading to his car when he surprises me with, "Do you know what a trike is?"

"Yes I do" I say almost jumping at him. "Are there any around here?"

Years ago I had been relaxing by the TV in Nairobi just idling away some time after a hard day when a documentary-drama popped up. It was entitled 'Fly Away Home' and as it unfolded my eyes opened wider and wider and by the end of it they were brimming with tears and I had found the aircraft and sport that I could not wait to get my hands into. It would be years though before I'd get a chance and now Barclay presents this tempting thought to me. I have seen trikes fly overhead from Jandakot in Perth but this now seems close enough to perhaps touch?

"Yes, yes. I know quite a few friends who fly trikes. I can get you in touch. Many of them are doctors. When we get back I'll dig up some numbers and call you."

"That would be fabulous," I say telling him about the documentary. Later that evening he calls me.

"Neal call this man, his name is Ethel, he's a doctor too. He's been flying trikes for a while now and lives in Whanganui. If I remember right he has his own trike and will be able to put you in touch with the right people."

I call immediately; I cannot not wait to get into a trike. Dr Ethel is friendly and we arrange to meet the next day in Whanganui at a restaurant there. By this time I have bought myself a Nokia cell phone and it has made life that much easier though a lot more expensive. Calls are charged at New Zealand forty cents (about Kenya shillings twenty two per minute at the time) but the ability to call Ethel when I arrive in Whanganui proves to be a boon to me. I head out on the 160Km trip at 6am the next morning arriving at the McDonald's just off the main thoroughfare in time to meet him at eight sharp. Ethel is there ready and waiting for me. We chat a while and then leave my car in the parking lot, jump into his four-wheel-drive and head out to a farm near

the seaside.

The field is fenced all around and is really tiny. I think that it might be a place where they keep their trikes but have no time to spend on those thoughts because Ethel is pulling on a large metal door. The door slides sideways to reveal one of those sights that touches me in such a way that I know I'll remember this moment for all time. There within the simple metal shed are two trikes. Ethel is rambling on about something something about having bought the land and built this shed on it for his own and his friends trikes but my mind is somewhere else. I am staring, standing stock still. There it is --- within inches of me --- a trike --- nay, two of them! --- I have dreamed of this for years.

"They don't bite Neal. You CAN touch them and have a good look around you know. You do that while I get things ready."

I walk forward and put my hand out onto the fabric of the rear seat. Leather. Cool to the touch. Alive she feels. The front seat --- forward and lower. The instrument panel, pedals, control bar, wing, wheels. It all comes too fast.

And suddenly Ethel is there thrusting something into my hands. "Here Neal. Put this suit on --- it's a heated suit. You'll need it. This is NZ after all."

I don my suit which fits me well. It is thick and has an electrical cord hanging out from the belt on my right side. Then we push the trike out onto the grass outside the hangar and Ethel walks me through a very thorough pre-flight inspection. That done he shows me where to put my feet and how to swing my leg over the front seat headrest and plant my butt into the rear seat. This I do and then don the helmet he hands me. He busies himself with his own suit and helmet and then connects mine to a connector in a side panel and my helmet into a little intercom box next to the suit heater connection. Before I know it he's in his seat and very quickly over the radio comes the call, "CLEAR PROP!"

I am busy watching all that he is doing and talking to him when he asks me questions. I hardly notice that we have already done an intercom check nor that the suit has started to get distinctly warm the warmth spreading from my torso deliciously down to my legs that were already cold down at ground level. Ethel moves the wing up and down, banks left and right and then guns the throttle. The trike moves haltingly over the longish grass and taxis down the slightly worn track that we had just driven over to park his car by the hangar side. Very close to the fence he turns her and I marvel at how her turning circle is as tight as that of a motorbike. Then we stand there her engine ticking over for what seems an eternity but could not have been more than two minutes.

"Sorry Neal. Forgot to keep up the patter. Just warming her up. We need at least fifty celsius on the coolant. This is a Rotax five-eighty-two and we need a stable fifty before we run her up to full power. We're almost there now. Final checks. Your helmet."

"Check"

Your harness?

"Check"

"OK, let's go fly. Tauranga, Zulu Kilo Alpha Charlie Foxtrot, ready departure runway one eight. Any traffic."

This is really happening I think as I look up and see the opposite fence. It looks impossibly close and not too far away beyond that there are some pretty tall trees. I guess that the fence is perhaps a hundred metres away. I am about to ask Ethel about that when he says, "Charlie Fox is rolling 18," and the engine note changes into a steady roar just behind my head as the trike lurches forwards. It gains speed at an impossible rate -- far faster than even any rally car I've been in. The fence rushes towards us the grass turning into a blur under our feet. I do not have time to think. In an incredibly short time -- seemingly instantaneously -- we jump into the air. We JUMP into the air. There is no other way to describe this. Used to flying heavy metal aircraft (I since learned to call them tinnies), I am taken completely by surprise when this cloth and aluminium tube machine is airborne in under sixty metres. We clear the fence with ease and I do not even see the tops of the trees as Ethel pushes the trike into an impossible, at least for my conventional pilot equipment between my ears, angle of climb.

"Woo, woo," Ethel shouts, "You seen a climb rate like that?"

I do not answer and he swings his head around to look at me. What greets him from behind the clear helmet visor is a face streaming with tears all cascading down a grin that stretches my face until I am sure something must crack and split.

"OK. I see you," he says intuitively grasping what he has just done for me "Enjoy."

Whanganui

We head out over the sea and just off the coast the air is silky smooth the little city of Whanganui visible just off the breakers. Doc Ethel has me take the controls from the back seat and try some gentle turns. He proves to me that she's the most stable aircraft I've ever flown and stays in a turn with no further input after the initial push on the control bar to get her into it, and does so with such aplomb and accuracy that we run into our own propeller wash after a complete 360 turn feeling a slight buffeting as we hit our self-created turbulence. I have some trouble dealing with the opposite controls -- as compared with a tinnie, 3-axis aircraft -- and a little trouble also with getting it into my head that the weight hanging under the wing -- us, the engine and carriage -- are really what causes her to turn, climb or descend. I amaze myself with how quickly I get used to it all though and soon we were flying over black New Zealand beaches.

"I have control, Neal." Ethel's voice says in my headset.

"You have control."

"Watch this."

We enter a steep descent and the thousand feet that we have climbed to bleeds off rapidly the black sand rushing up to meet us. I watch spellbound but trying to understand what Ethel is doing. As the ground nears he keeps holding the bar in and diving. Just when I think we must hit that sand burying our dead bodies into it, he pushes out smartly on the bar and the trike rapidly slows and settles ever so gently onto the sand. I feel the barest of bounces and then the engine roars to life and I'm pressed into my seat.

Within seconds we're airborne again.

Smiling, Ethel cranes his head to face me, "How was that?"

"Fantastic. Just like that, landing on the beach."

"Let's go inland and you can see what use she'd be like as a conservation machine." I'd talked quite a bit with Ethel about my work in wildlife conservation in Kenya and wondered if such an aircraft could be used in national park fence patrol, tracking poachers, counting animals and so on.

"Ok, here we are over over this farm. Over there a water trough. Let's make that a proxy for a waterhole back in our national parks."

He comes off the throttle. The trike sinks. Soon we're no higher than an average tree and the power comes back on to check the descent. Speed is 40 kph as he pushes out on the bar and slowly brings in more power. He continues to bleed off speed until we're flying at just below 30 kph and have quite a bit of power on as we head for the trough.

"We can cruise like this just off the ground all day long. Pretend that you are inspecting the waterhole."

He enters a steep turn over the trough the port wing pointing straight down over it and we orbit it in an impossibly tight turn that allows me to look right into the trough and see the bottom peeping out at me through the water. We're not more than twenty five feet off the ground! Levelling out we head towards a flock of sheep. A little power and he let's her climb and we're very soon at one thousand feet above sea level again. As we approach the sheep Ethel says, "Watch, they'll not even notice us."

And it's just as he says it -- we pass over the sheep the engine purring gently and they don't even turn to look around. Cutting power again he let's her settle into a glide and we're back at

fifty feet or so over the sheep and they've not noticed us. We glide past and over a ridge before the power comes back on and as we climb I look back to see the sheep happily chomping on their grass the occasional one looking back curiously at us.

"This is perfect Ethel. I can just imagine myself in a trike over a herd of elephants right now."

"You make me homesick Neal," he says as we head back to the paddock -- our paddock.

"There's going to be a bit of a bump over those trees there on our final approach. There's always a rotor there -- don't let it alarm you."

Sure enough as he cuts the motor and we drop just past the trees there's a sudden wrenching of the carriage to the left as Ethel corrects for the rotor. It's not too violent and we're soon rolling on the grass, turning and taxiing back to the hangar. We put the trike into her covers and roll the doors shut, jump into his car and head for the town. We join a group of eight or ten people and Ethel buys me lunch. Over my Caesar's salad I listen to these people talking and I feel so close to them. The roll and lilt of Afrikaans being spoken animatedly in deep voices, soft voices, gruff tones and accompanied by laughter makes me miss home all the more. A phone rings. It's Ethel's. He speaks for a while and then there's much animated discussion which I love listening to though I can't make out head or tail of it.

"So sorry Neal. How inconsiderate of us, we're babbling away in our language and you're just sitting there left out of it all."

"Ethel you have no idea, no idea how it sounds to me. I could sit here all day. I just love listening to all of you talk, for some strange reason, it is making me very homesick to hear your talk. Though Afrikaans is not spoken much in Kenya."

"That was a good friend of ours -- another surgeon calling from Durban. Here's there in a medical conference. Took two kids with him, left the wife and one other child here. That's them over there by the cars. He's decided to return to South Africa and is not coming back. The kids have decided to stay with him there. They've been asking all through this trip why the family left SA in the first place. It's created an uproar as you can imagine."

"And all of you are from SA, yes?"

"Yes, and now there are another two couples, families with children, that are asking that very same question."

"What about you Ethel?"

"I've decided to do another 'look-see-and-decide' only in the other direction."

"You're confusing me now. I've only been here a short while, a lot shorter than you and I'm having doubts about my decision to make NZ my home for the rest of my life."

"Neal, I can't be responsible for causing you to make such a major re-change in your life. All I can tell you is that I left SA for NZ fifteen years ago and I've never regretted being here. My professional life, family life, recreation -- everything has been very good and NZ has been kind to me. I've not made a lot of money but I've been happy."

"Then why the indecision?"

"Well, I too went and attended a meeting in Jo'burg a while back and there's there's just something missing. I don't know how to put it."

"After all this time you still feel there's something missing doc?"

"Yes. I just can't put a finger to it."

"And? Are you thinking of going back?"

"I've thought about it."

"And you Christine? Are you in agreement with this? Move back to all the crime, living with guns in the house, making sure to lock the doors, dogs, security companies and all that?"

"You know Neal, as Ethel says there's something about Africa. Perhaps it's that we were born there. There's something you can never get away from."

"I know what you're saying guys. I've seen it in my Uncles and Aunts that have moved to the UK and the US. They never really get over the move away from Africa. And it haunts them on their deathbeds. It really scares me that I might end up in the same boat."

"Well you don't have to."

"Doc? You're at it again? Confusing me?"

"Let's change this topic Neal. We'll keep in touch on the phone and by e-mail and chat about this some more. For now we're going back to VISIT SA in the coming months and then we'll decide."

"OK. You said you could put me in touch with someone who'll teach me to fly a trike and perhaps sell me one?"

"Yes, yes. His name is Colin and you'll love the guy. He taught me all that I know and he'll be more than happy to teach you. Tell you what, let me call him right now." He whips out his cell phone and dials.

"Hi there Colin. Ethel here. Yes we're fine. Listen I have a friend here. We've just been flying and he's keen to learn to fly trikes. Here, have a word with him."

I take the phone from Ethel and speak, a little shakily at first as I face another chance to meet another man who will give me yet another gift of flight. My first gift had come from Trevor Dixon who had put me into the air and given me the gift of flight that I'd been hunting for for so long. Now here I am perhaps to become lucky again and meet another kindred soul?

Trev

For the longest time I'd wanted to learn to fly. As a teenager I'd hung around Wilson Airport doing that very cliched thing -- cleaning aircraft, talking to mechanics and aeronautical engineers, hoping and praying for flights but not getting any. Once and only once my dad managed to arrange a flight for me with a friend of his. That had been a flight in a tinnie with no doors on her. She'd been an aircraft used in wildlife conservation and often a vet had sat in the right seat dart gun in hand going after a rhino or elephant that needed treatment and having to be immobilised to have the treatment meted out. It was a noisy affair my hair, short as it always has been, flying in the wind that came roaring in through the doorless hatches. After that flight I was more determined than ever to learn to fly; I would never forget the smell of avgas, the roar of the exhaust, the feeling of being there, right there in touch with the elements of our Earth. But studies would get in the way and then costs

In 1984 at the age of 24, I headed out to Wilson Airport and enquired at Pegasus Flyers what it would cost to learn to fly. I was told twelve thousand shillings. This was a considerable sum at the time and though a little dejected as I did not have anything like that in my savings, I headed home determined to raise the money. I saved every penny I could and in two long years managed to put the sum together. Heading back to Wilson and Pegasus Flyers I was elated that I'd now begin on my lifelong dream. Asking what the cost would be to pay up-front for a full course leading to a Private Pilot's License I was told it had gone up in the intervening two years to 18,000 shillings. Disappointment once more. Back to the drawing board --- save, save, save. Back to Pegasus only to be told that in the year that had passed fuel costs had soared and the cost of a course was now 25,000 shillings. Back again to saving and then to another rise in cost. This loop repeated over and over rather like my nightmare loop after the shooting. Had this loop been the cause of that one? 25000, 33000, 48000, 94000, 120,000. It seemed like I'd never get there. Then thanks to my Ami -- the break in storm arrived.

I found an insurance salvage vehicle -- a lovely red Toyota Levin sports car with that engine that they've never been able to create again -- the 'Sweet Sixteen' -- a sixteen-valve, purring, beautifully balanced, fast revving 1600cc engine that was the envy of nearly all the other manufacturers. I bought the car for twenty thousand shillings my idea being that for such a small outlay I'd be able to give Ami a lovely car to drive to work instead of her taking the rally car which she had been doing for quite a while. The car had suffered a head-on collision and was an insurance write-off. I towed it to my workshop (I was working at the Aga Khan Hospital at the time while running a very successful motor-vehicle repair workshop from home. Ami would keep

the workshop going when she was not at the Nairobi Hospital and we had a couple of mechanics to help us with the heavy lifting). We had the car all fixed up and painted in a bright signal red and looking really nice within a month. We rebuilt the chassis frame with new metal and the body panels using fibreglass where we could. I'd wake up early to work on the car at 4am each day and head off to the hospital at a quarter to eight before heading back again at 5pm to work on the car again breaking for dinner at six and then working on the car from seven until just before midnight. Then four hours of sleep and back to welding, panel beating and painting at 4am. I presented the keys to Ami and the conversation went like this after her drive around the block.

"I love it Neal, the colour especially. Can I ask how much you could get for this car if you sold it?"

"About one-forty thousand?"

"And what did you say a PPL would cost at Pegasus?"

"About that amount."

"Then why don't you take this key back, sell the car and get that flying license? You've been fighting to get the money together for so long now. I love the car but I'd like to give you a present of it -- a flying license -- my present."

I did not fight it -- I had thought about this and had already decided to repair another insurance write-off and get the money for a PPL that way.

"I'll do another car Ami. This one's for you."

"To tell you the truth Neal, I love driving the rally car. She's got all that power and the ground clearance to boot. I can get out of any situation on the road if I'm in her and she gives me so much confidence."

"Are you sure?" It was not a question really. The dreams were already gelling in my mind, big puffy clouds sailed by my wings, blue skies beckoned, the smell of avgas filling my nostrils.

"I'm serious Neal. Sell the car, get your PPL and be happy -- you've wanted that for so long now."

The ads went up on notices boards in various malls in double-quick time and I sold the car for 160,000 shillings. I headed to Pegasus and this time I DID have the money needed for the entire course. I deposited the entire amount in the airport-located Kenya Commercial Bank Pegasus Flyers bank account and headed back to the flying school offices.

"Kimutai here's the payslip. I want to start flying," I said with, I'm sure, a gleam in my eye and a

grin on my face.

"OK. You know we have three instructors. The one that has a free slot for a student right now is Trevor Dixon. He's not here right now. Today he has a student at noon. Do you want to wait for him."

I hesitated, "I think I'll come back -- I can go do some work -- it's only ten now."

"I will ask him to call you. Write your phone number here."

I left the number of my land line back home and headed to the hospital and was not home until 6pm. I immediately enquired if anyone had called for me (those were the days of landlines) and was told that a mister Dixon had called and had left a number.

I was quick to call. "Hello, may I speak with Mr. Dixon."

"Speaking."

"Hi, Mr Dixon this is Doctor Aggarwal."

"Ah! Yes, I had called. Kimutai said you want to take flying lessons. Can we meet at the Aero Club?"

"When's good for you?"

"How about tomorrow at say eleven-ish?"

That next day being a Saturday suited me as I did not have to go into the hospital and headed to the Aero Club getting there well before eleven. I wandered around and sat a while watching aircraft touch down on the threshold of runway zero seven not for a moment thinking that this runway would become a haunt of mine for several months to come. A middle-aged very English man approached me just after eleven. He was dressed in what would later be to me his signature white jeans and sported a lightweight checked shirt. In his hand was a cigarette from which a wisp of smoke trailed behind him.

"Hi, I'm Trevor Dixon, you must be Doctor Aggarwal seeing as there's no one else here." A big smile lit up his face.

"Call me Neal," I said smiling back.

"And you call me Trev."

And that was how a friendship began that would develop into one so profound, and through which we'd share so much, that I cannot even hope to do it justice in mere words here. We

talked for a good hour Trev telling me what to expect in learning to fly in Kenya and from Wilson Airport in particular.

"In all honesty Neal, I must lighten my own conscience and tell you that you'd be better off getting our license in say, the US and then coming back here, converting it by sitting the Law exam and flying here. It will cost you less, be less trouble all round and you'll have fewer headaches not having to deal with the nightmarish officialdom here."

"Trev. I don't care about that. All I want is to fly one hour at a time. If I don't ever get my PPL I really don't care. I just want to get up into the air and fly."

He fought me hard telling me about the horrendous traffic problems at Wilson, the very tough exams covering the ground subjects especially the Signs and Signals exam where the passing mark was 100%. I was unfazed. I wanted to fly and I was going to get into the air by hook or by crook.

"Again I'll say Trev. I'm not going to look past one single hour of flight. Can you give me an hour's flying right now?"

"I like it Neal. That's the kind of spirit I've been looking for, for a long time. Too many students turn to aviation as a last resort after they've failed at everything else. Could not get into medical school, then dental school, pharmacy, vet school, law and finally did not manage to secure a place in accounting classes. So they turn to aviation -- I guess having to count someone else's money will turn anyone potty."

We laughed heartily at that and I avoided telling him that at this point in my life I was contemplating accounting school myself in an attempt to get out of mainstream medicine and into hospital management. Trev said, "Let's go, ready for a flight right now?"

At the age of 32 eight years after my first attempts to join a flying school I was going a-flying. My head already in the clouds we headed into the hangar, pushed out 5Y-AZW -- Five Yankee Alpha Zulu Whiskey -- out to under ridiculously blue African skies and my adventure began.

Maiden flight

"The radio is going to give you a few headaches. For now I'll handle it. You try to listen to what I say but don't bother to write it down or to try and learn it. It'll all come very naturally in a while."

We'd just done a pre-flight inspection and Trev had taught me how to do that starting at the pilot's seat, the left hand seat in all aircraft the world over, and working my way all around the aircraft. I'd read this in flying manuals of course and knew most of it off my heart having spent more than twelve years pouring over books I'd begun to think I'd never get to put into practice. Trev was obviously impressed that I appeared to grasp things with lightning speed. If only he'd known how much I'd dreamt of all the things that were now happening to me for real.

"OK, here we go. First thing, start her up. See that knob at the extreme left there? Twist it and then pull it out very slowly; that's the primer."

I muttered something about how useful this device would be on my lawn mower to make starting easier having worked this out for myself some time ago and drilled a tiny hole in the air filter box through which I'd inject a small quantity of petrol before pulling on the starting cable. Without that petrol injection it would take several pulls on the cable to get the engine to catch and run, with it the very first pull would have her running.

I did as I was told, pushing the plunger in slowly and then turning the ignition key while standing on the brake pedals. The prop turned a few times and then she caught and roared into life. I learned some more checks and listened to Trev call up the tower on the radio and soon we were taxiing to runway zero seven and then applying full power and picking speed before we defied gravity and climbed the thousand feet from ground to six thousand feet above sea level and headed to the 'local area.' After a silky smooth forty minutes of flight that literally had my 'head in the clouds' Trev said, "OK, let's head back now. Can you tell me where the airport is?"

Without hesitation I pointed over my left shoulder and a bit towards the tail of the aircraft and said, "There."

"Very good Neal. Most students have no sense of where they are for quite a while. Only a few can maintain a sense of awareness like that. Take us back will you?"

"I banked the aircraft gently to the left as Trevor talked me through the procedures he wanted me to follow."

"Come back on the power -- pull the throttle lever out a little. That's it -- now we're descending -- come down to six thousand five hundred feet. Before we get onto the runway centreline we want to be at circuit height. We don't want to be too high and coming down on other aircraft that might be below us."

He continued his instructors patter and I flew on that dreamy feeling enveloping my mind. I lined the aircraft up with the runway centreline and heard him say, "Zulu Whiskey is short finals runway zero seven."

The controller came back with "Zulu whiskey you're cleared land runway zero seven." I heard him answer that with "Cleared land zero seven, Zulu Whiskey." To me he said, "You're doing very well Neal. Keep going like that."

He talked me through the landing and as we neared the ground: "Very good, now hold her off the tarmac. That's it, pull back on the column. That's it, pull, pull. Good, good. Don't let her touch. Pull, PULL, keep her off."

A siren wailed just before the wheels screeched and we were rolling on the ground. "That's it, hold the column back into your chest, keep her nose wheel off as long as you can. Now gently lower it to the ground. And brakes. Excellent."

Then we went all quiet. No radio chatter. No talking to me. He just sat there. I sensed some tension but put it down to how difficult it must be to take a new student up for the first time not knowing how he might react. I taxied the aircraft to her parking spot not saying a word and not getting any in return from him. Then I did what I've always been very good at -- I parked Zulu Whiskey exactly over her tie-downs. I shut down the engine, set the parking brake, pulled out the jacks to my headset and jumped out of the aircraft. I waited for Trev to get out of his side which he did very slowly and then we walked back to the hangar. Not a word was spoken.

As we were putting away our headsets in the office cupboards he turned to me and said, "You're a bloody liar."

"What?"

"Liar!" and he stormed out of Pegasus and was gone.

I ran after him following him to the bar at the Aero Club. "Trev, Trev what are you saying?"

"You have flown before. There's no way you could have done that on your first flight. Just no way. What are you playing at?"

"That was my first flight Trev. That was my maiden flight. I have read a lot about flight, aircraft and such but that WAS my first flight."

"No way."

He got off his bar stool and headed out of the club. I sat there dumbfounded not knowing what to do next. The barman looked at me. I stared back my mind a big fat blank. I ordered a coke with lots of ice and sat there sipping it. Ten minutes later Trev was back.

"Tusker," he said gruffly to the barman. Drawing deeply on his cigarette he looked at me. "Are you going to insist that you have never flown before?"

"Yes, absolutely Trev. I've only been up in a light aircraft once in my life -- that was with Tony Molesworth a few years ago."

"Tony is a member here -- his aircraft is on the apron there. How can you explain that you can already fly?"

"I can't. That was not flying. You were there telling me exactly what to do all the way through the landing. I was not flying. It was you -- I was only doing what you told me to do."

"No, Neal. That's not it. I have never come across that before. That was unsettling. If you've never flown before I cannot explain that, I cannot understand what you just did."

So my maiden flight was mixture of wonderful, heady emotion mixed in with confusion, questioning and wonder at what had just happened. In the months to come I'd demonstrate this over and over again --- the ability to grasp flying concepts, actions, procedures, theory, practical application -- all of it. I'd excel and do all the exams scoring very high marks in all the papers. In my General Flight Test -- the practical exam - Captain N.B. Patel of Kenya Airways would be impressed enough to give me my PPL at the absolute minimum hours required by Kenyan law of the time -- 55 hours -- writing into my log book "Qualified PPL --- minimum time pilot --- to do four circuits and demonstrate forced landing to satisfaction of instructor."

Trevor grinned from ear-to-ear at me as I walked on air into the bar at the Aero Club and then ducked behind the bar counter, reached for it and pulled on the cord that rang the bell. I bought drinks for all of six people at the bar at 11 am that day -- and beamed at them. I looked at Trev -- he smiled back at me holding my gaze and raising his pint said:

"To you Neal. I have never seen anything like these past fifty five hours. To many happy hours of flying for you."

And with that, his teaching through the past eight months, the camaraderie, the flights we'd had together, the korogas and so much more he now added to our friendship the gift of flight -- that special gift that only he could have given to me -- a gift that changed me forever and that lives in me to this day. Though my buddy, my soul-fly-mate is now gone he lives in the air in and through me. He may have slipped the surly bonds of Earth but he has not slipped MY bonds.

and he never will.

Colin

I take the phone from Ethel and speak, a little shakily at first as I face another chance to meet another man who will give me yet another gift of flight. My first gift had come from Trevor Dixon who had put me into the air and given me the gift of flight that I'd been hunting for for so long. Now I speak to Colin and ask him if he'll be able to take me on and teach me to fly a trike.

"No problem Neal, the difficulty at this present moment is the weather -- we've had a lot of rain and the winds are quite severe. That said though we're flying when the tinnies are stuck on the ground. We can give it a try though. Are you living in Whanganui?"

"Actually no Colin. I live in New Plymouth."

"Wow. A long way from Tauranga. Almost right across the country!"

"Not a big deal for me Colin. I'm used to African distances."

"From South Africa? Another migrant Neal?"

"Actually from Kenya."

"Oh! We've not had one of those!"

I like the way he talks and this last joke of his. Seems like a very personable guy and gung-ho enough that I could learn to fly trikes with him and perhaps even buy one off him to bring back to New Plymouth. I arrange to keep in touch with him over the phone waiting for a break in the weather so we can put in some flying hours together.

After a cup of coffee with Ethel and friends I head back to New Plymouth. It's a long drive during which the microsleeps plague me once more. Eventually though this too passes and I arrive in New Plymouth to hugs and kisses from my three musketeers. They're all excited to hear about my adventures and Ami can hardly believe that what we watched on TV all those months back is now coming to pass for real.

Now the waiting begins.

At first I call Colin every day but then pull the pressure back to once every other day. The weather is unrelenting. High winds sweep the north island; the south island lies in deep snow and day after day the television fails to carry promising news. A strange discomfort sweeps over me; there is a weird sense of urgency that grips me --- I begin to feel that I MUST get the flying done as soon as I can --- something pushes me and I walk around every waking moment with 'ants in my pants about this.' Finally I can take it no more and ask Colin that we take a chance and have me come to his neck of the woods to spend a weekend hoping for a chance to fly -- even just a single hour. I tell him about my 'ants' and he agrees that we have to get rid of that feeling.

I bundle Ami and the kids into the car and we head out after lunch on a Friday. It takes close to four hours to drive the 310 Km and when we get there my cell phone again proves it's worth as Colin directs us to the Tauranga airport and his hangar. I'm all a tingle as I walk around his yellow and blue trike but we can't fly that day -- it's already dark and the wind is howling outside the hangar. Colin gives me the name and address of a friend of his who owns a motel and we end up there after a hot meal at a nearby KFC.

The next morning I'm up early and pacing about in the dark. As soon as it's light enough I'm on the phone with Colin and hear these wonderful words.

"The day has broken well Neal. No wind at all. Come over as quick as you can. I'm here and getting the trike ready."

We cram ourselves into the car and head out to the airstrip which is only a couple of kilometres away from our motel. As soon as we get there we busy ourselves with the trike while Ami and the kids look on. In short order I'm strapped into the FRONT seat and we're taxing out to the nearest runway. Colin handles the radio and I'm surprised to hear the answer to his call

"Tauranga Zulu Kilo Tango Romeo Kilo with two on board endurance five hours, request taxi"

"Tango Romeo Kilo cleared to holding ZERO SEVEN"

It feels just like home on Wilson Airport. The lingo, the universal lingo of flight is the same, and that zero seven runway feels like I'm back on Wilson's runways. We do our holding point checks and pull onto the runway, get our take-off clearance and the power comes on as Colin tells me to push the bar all the way forward and the throttle all the way down. The trike takes off in the usual ridiculously low distance of sixty metres and we're climbing steeply over a golf course within the first minute of being airborne. Holding to the runway centreline we head out towards the beach and then follow it towards some islands before turning to come back along it. Colin has me do some turns and then we head back to the airport joining downwind for a left hand circuit. We fly a few circuits doing some touch-and-goes and then come in for a full stop. I make the landing OK and we taxi back to our hangar.

"You're already flying her Neal. There's not much I need to teach you. You just need to get some experience so it consolidates in your brain that when you get into a trike you must automatically switch brain circuits and handle the controls correctly. We should also get in some heavy-weather flying so that if you ever encounter that on your own you know what to do."

"I also want to do some low level and some slow flying."

"Oh, don't worry. There's going to be plenty of that. Let's rest a bit now and then try for another hour."

But there's to be no more flying that weekend. Frustration levels mount in both Colin and I as we sit in the wind-buffed hangar and wait for another chance to fly. Finally Sunday evening arrives and the family and I head back to New Plymouth having exchanged promises with Colin that he'll keep in touch and I'll come on my own to spend as much time as it takes to get me to my solo flight and then some hours of consolidation flying before I begin to think about a trike for myself.

Return of the prodigals

Wildes on NatGeo

It'll be awhile before the weather lets up. For now it gets really, really cold and windy in New Plymouth. We hang around our fireplace and watch TV. I write code and talk to Colin from time to time but there's no chance of any flying. Finally the weather begins to let up. Buds appear on our cherry tree and the grass on our handkerchief-sized lawn goes from a brittle grey to a bright green colour. One morning, the kids playing outside on our deck, start cooing and squealing with delight. Ami and I rush out to see what the excitement is all about to find them peering through the cracks in the paving stones.

"Look mummy, look. ANTS!" Shouts Acacia. Gaia grins up at us.

I am immediately depressed by this and feel myself sinking into the depths of SAD -- Seasonal Affective Disorder -- at a high rate faster than any trike sink with the bar pulled all the way in, the throttle cut completely. My descent is so rapid and so deep that I peer fixedly at the ants and then head off to my study. I rummage about in my doctors bag to find the valium and panadol -- the lightest drug combination that can tip me out of this level of 'funk' when I dive headlong into it. This time it's this lack of so many living things in my surroundings that has done it to me. Coming as I have from Africa -- that place of the most amazing biodiversity -- this country is getting me down by the day. I've been cooped up unable to partake of my favourite pastime -- flying -- for the whole of the fall and winter -- SIX months. I've visited forests where I can find nothing living in the undergrowth and even the plant life looks contrived and human-planted and now these ants have appeared. Of all the living, thriving things that I'd have 'back home' this is what I have to enjoy for the rest of my life? Even that gigantic, cricket-like weta which I've looked for on all my travels is nowhere to be seen. As for Kiwi's -- the only ONE I've seen was in a zoo somewhere -- Auckland I think. I sink to thinking about pathetic Auckland Zoo where a sick elephant milled about his pen, a huge, festering open sore on his flank and a giraffe reached up to acacia branches that had been so obviously and carelessly attached to the ceiling to simulate his natural environment but instead ended up looking like a feeble attempt to show off the zookeeper's prized 'pet.'

The next morning I take a break from the coding that I've been hard at through the night and after a smallish breakfast am sitting in our living room the TV turned on. Switching to Discovery Channel I catch the tail-end of some Myth Busting edition and then the programming switches to a documentary with familiar scenes and sounds of home -- the Wildebeest migration across the Masai Mara Game Reserve. Ami joins me and we watch spellbound as always when documentaries of Africa are shown. The wildees hesitate at the far bank of the Mara River. Zebras neigh at them. We smile at each other. How many times have we seen this scene --- for real? Ring-necked doves coo that familiar sound that always told us we had left the city and now were in nature. Sounds that set us free 'back home' but now tense us up. The zebras neigh

some more and finally the first wildebeest throws himself into the water followed by a rush of others pushing from behind all tumbling into the brown torrent. Some are grabbed by crocodiles as the spectacle unfolds captured by the sensationalist media house.

Suddenly I'm looking across at Ami and watching the tears stream down her face and all I can say is "What are we doing here?"

Those words cause her to break down completely. Sobbing hard me holding her in my arms we say no more, just hold each other and relive the loss of our home; the loss of our very souls. Words uttered by our friends both here and back home come cascading into my mind

"Why are you going?"

"You were the last person I'd have thought would chicken out and leave this Eden we live in."

"If you had this in Kenya Neal why did you come here? This place has not even half what your photos show."

"Neal I've lived here for fifteen years now and I've got used to it but Africa is the place where the roots of my soul went down to the centre of the earth."

"You always said you'd rather die having truly lived the very last day than live out your days on some kind of autopilot."

I look at Ami now sitting close, real close to me, Wildees bleating on the TV. A lion roars in an evening scene and I turn to her and say "What ARE we doing here? Why can't we just pack up and go back?"

Just that.

Just that one sentence.

And a new phase of life takes off. We start to hunt for a freighter that will take our stuff back to Nairobi and begin to plan our return.

Consolidation Flying

It takes a while then it hits us: Move back? MOVE BACK! We came all this way spending ALL our hard-earned savings that had taken us year upon year to gather up. We'd built three massive software systems and sold them all. We'd sold a highly successful business in order to move here and we'd gone through the entire process of moving our entire home base to NZ, putting our kids in school, purchasing a home for ourselves, failed at getting a business going

with those that had promised us so much. Now to reverse the entire process?

And then this hit me with even more force What about the flying what are we going to do when we get back? what are we going to do there? dots Can we start yet another business venture? Slowly it begins to gel. What if we could start a totally different business from the ones we've been creating this far --- the Information Technology based ones? What about a business offering specialist services that could only be offered by having a technology that few others can ever dream of having? A flying platform that is sorely needed in Kenya? A trike? To do aerial photography, to inspect conservation areas -- their fences, their animals, gather GPS data from suitably collared animals. Track and eliminate poachers? How about coming full circle and putting an IT spin on the whole thing by implementing a telemetry basis to it all? What about mapping the national parks in Kenya -- we've never had good maps for any of the parks.

"No knee-jerk reactions Ami. Let's think this through carefully." We were lying on a mat on our little patch of grass the sun shining on us but not warming us at all -- reminiscent of the sunshine on Mt. Kenya.

"You're not going to chicken out are you Neal?"

"Me chicken out? I took a bullet, this is not something that will freak me out. Anyways -- what a dream -- to kiss African soil once again."

"Good then let's give it a thought, a few thoughts."

"Well we'd first have to find someone to ship our stuff back. I don't want to make the same mistake of going cheap and trying to ship everything in little packets. This time let's spend properly on the shipping. Anyway we now have a lot more stuff -- we have an entire home to take back with us -- and no one to make false offers to help us ship our stuff offering to pay for the shipping as their contribution to our move."

"C'mon Neal. Dad was just helping."

"Of course and we've learned now haven't we -- that if you pay peanuts you get monkeys!"

"I suppose so."

"So can you work on that -- finding a company that will ship our stuff in a container and I'll work on getting the flying done, perhaps even a trike instructors rating so that we have that business avenue if we chose to use it."

Ami quickly found shippers: New Zealand Van Lines, Hooker Pacific and New Zealand Freight. She called them up and decided that Van Lines seemed the most friendly had the best prices and would professionally pack all our stuff and containerize it. We selected these guys and told them to stand by for our instructions.

As luck would have it the weather turns a full 180 degrees. High winds and grey, overcast skies give way to blue, still days ideal for flying. At least that is the weather in New Plymouth at the base of 'our' mountain. I call Colin and he confirms that the weather at his end is also pretty good. I arrange with him that I'll spend two weeks flying and leave the family to keep up their daily grind while I take off for Tauranga. On arrival there I book myself into the same motel and head to the airstrip. Colin and I fly day after day building up the hours. I soon have a solid repertoire under my belt -- soft field take-offs, short landings, low level over some remote beaches, stalls, steep turns and the all-important recognition of an incipient whip stall -- the one thing that will surely kill you in a trike. I manage to go solo after three hours in the trike and then we do a few cross-countries flying over Matamata Hills, down to Opotiki and as far inland as Hamilton. The weather begins to turn as I near fifty hours of flying in Tango Romeo Kilo and I get a chance to fly in thirty knot winds that almost have me flying backwards at the runway threshold and thrown up into the air in a ridiculous 25m with only me on board (lighter aircraft). I help Colin with various mechanical jobs including a service on his Toyota Starlet as my days near to head back to New Plymouth.

Finally the evening arrives when we total up my log book, stick in the various ratings shake hands and I leave for another microsleep-filled but happy drive back. Before I leave I give Colin my ground subjects books. He'd said on one of our evenings in the hangar that he was in need of a good flying library and I've seen enough of these books that I can recall them page by page. Twelve years of reading the things before my first flight with Trev and now here's Colin -- given me the gift of flight for the second time in an aircraft I've dreamed of flying for years -- the least I can do is leave him with a parting gift.

I've done it -- I've got a trike rating under my belt and can envisage a microlight aircraft business back in my home of homes. I drive back to New Plymouth no microsleeps clogging my just images of wide open skies, a trike under my hands, elephants roaming the plains below me.

Packing up

I contact my good friend Mike at Hareb Deken Motors and he quickly sells the Isuzu Mu for nearly exactly what I'd paid him for it. The money so raised is used to pay Van lines and they show up with a huge low-loader complete with forty foot container on it. Two Samoan guys loaded up with tape dispensers and boxes of brown paper professionally pack all our gear. We have a ball with them -- these islanders rhyme well with us. When I'd been running the business with SM we'd hired a Vanuatan by the name of Witaka and I'd got on famously with him too. Now here we are -- we pull the cars out of the garage put our stereo system in there and fire it up and to the blaring music we pack and pack and pack. Every little thing goes into padding. The biggest nightmare in all that packing proves to be our New Zealand Rimu wood dining table that weighs a ton. Manhandling that is a hefty job (pun intended!) but the four of us get it done eventually. The container packed the truck leaves for their warehouse in Bell Block and we settled in to our now empty house remembering those final scenes in the movie 'Out of Africa' -- still my favourite movie of all time. Karen sits on the last of her boxes and Bror comes over to

visit. Then he springs it on her that Dennis has died in a flying accident. We are only too aware of something having died here leaving us with no reason to stay a minute longer in New Zealand.

Next we get our rental agent to come over and sort things out with him, leave our Pajero with our good friends at Hareb Deken Motors and rent a little hatchback to get final things sorted out. A trip in the hatch to Stratford, some last minute signings and our house is taken care off. Tickets to fly back to Nairobi bought we sit in our house on our last evening a warm feeling sweeping over us not just due to the mulled wine flowing in our veins but also in anticipation of setting foot once more on long lost Kenyan soil. No TV to watch nor computers available to fire up and keep us busy if we wanted we direct our thoughts to the journey home and what it will feel like to land and walk on African soil. We stay up all night after AC and family make a final visit to say goodbye. No hair nor hide of SM and his lot -- a Swahili saying comes to us and we laugh heartily -- 'Asante ya punda ni teke!' -- which translates into 'The thanks of a donkey is a kick!'

Come that Tuesday morning the day we'd make our return pilgrimage Colin calls.

"You lucky bastard Neal."

"Thanks Colin. Really -- thanks for all that you did for me."

"I wish you all the best Neal. You know there's going to be a lot of 'fall out' from what you are doing."

"How so?"

"Already I'm getting calls from Ethel and friends asking me if they've heard that Neal is actually heading back having decided, even after a decent exposure to NZ, that this is not as good as his situation was in Kenya. There will be some that will follow you back."

"Yes Colin. I have a number of others even at this end that have voiced their desire to return. I'm lucky that I have the means to head back."

"We ALL have the means Neal. Most of us don't have the you-know-what's to do it. I really wish I could head back."

"Well you have my flight books and manuals and one day, one day you have to return those to me so come to Kenya -- we'll start a trike-flying business together and you can give me back my books."

"It's a thought I'll give some serious consideration to Neal."

"Again Colin. Thanks for all that you did and you have a home in Kenya if you ever decide to

head that way. Keep in touch."

"That I certainly will do."

There are no loos on this aircraft

On a bright Tuesday morning I awake to thoughts that the next day we'll begin our journey back to 'the land of our living.' I laze in bed for what seems an eternity Ami softly purring by my side. The cold air of the dying summer finally braved I head out into our front yard waving to a neighbour jogging by. I look east and catch sight of the rising sun behind snow-capped Taranaki and think about the Maori legends of the mountains.

Ruapehu, the beautiful maid, was married to Taranaki. One day, while her husband was away hunting, she was wooed and won by Tongariro (another large New Zealand mountain). When Taranaki returned at the end of the day he surprised the guilty pair. A titanic battle ensued in which Taranaki was defeated. He retreated towards the west coast, carving out the course of the Whanganui River as he went. When he reached the coast he moved northwards to the western extremity of the North Island where he rested. There his great weight made the shallow depression which afterwards filled with water and became the Te Ngaere swamp. I recalled our trips to the active volcano Ruapehu which in Maori means rua (two) and pehu (to explode or make a loud noise), our amazement at the mud-flows, spewing smoke and ash and our other numerous explorations of the area. I think about my flight with Doc Ethel over the Whanganui river and the many valleys, hills, dells, beaches and surf I'd flown with Colin. I'll miss this country, this little emerald green island. I'll miss the peace and the total abandon that we'd had here; no care about anything -- no worries about tomorrow. No thugs, no deep planning for trips to avoid --- death! Just a kind of suspended animation we'd enjoyed. It had helped me immeasurably to recover from the mental wounds I'd suffered on my person from the shooting, the 'chup' stories, the uprooting of my life from my beloved Kenya and the transplantation into this new place. I'd come to like New Zealand but most of all I'd finally come to understand that

all places are the same, they each just have their own and different problems and one has to come to terms with each place and it's peculiarities --- to learn to live within their limitations.

But, I've had enough of this sojourn in laziness, the wasted passage of time, the squandering away of my life. I need to get back to the land of the living. I need to become productive once more. I need the embrace of the arms of Africa, that mindset that only my home will give me, that drive that I'll only ever experience there. I need to go back to my roots; I need to once more head into the fray, to live life to the fullest in, as I had said it so often by this time, Africa --- that place not for the faint-hearted.

Tying up the loose ends is the work of the day. I call our rental agent to check if all is in order. Yes. Our lawyers, yes, the house is duly employed as security on our development project in Auckland. We have to get rid of our last vestiges of garbage -- empty boxes, used rolls of masking and duct tape, the odd nail or screw and lots of paper waste. Having no car to deal with

this we call up the garbage disposal people and are told that we can leave it outside our driveway and they'll pick it all up for a fee of \$180. Having no choice I pay the sum on the internet and dump all the rubbish outside the house in a rage at the ridiculous cost, money wasted, for what --- for garbage! At least the money tied up in the house -- our life savings -- will be employed to useful ends and will be earning even as we start over in Kenya. I remember Kiyosaki's words make your money work for you; don't work for money.

So with all in order we board the plane at the New Plymouth airport lugging 205 Kg of baggage which the baggage clerk does not charge us for when we tell her a bit of our story and that we're heading back to Kenya. More than that though our two little kids, as they do on numerous occasions, get us the concession we need through their sheer cuteness-factor. We sit in the departure lounge a little while hoping against hope that some or other of our acquaintances or friends might show up to bid us farewell. That most missed of all -- my former business partners and the reason for us coming to New Zealand in the first place -- SM and SMa do not show. To the bitter end they keep up their year long shunning of my young family and I. Finally, just as the final boarding call comes, the aircraft sitting on the little airport apron so reminiscent of the same in Malindi, my phone rings. It is JS.

"Neal. Sorry I could not make it to the airport. I don't have anyone to bring me and I'm still under the driving ban the police imposed on me."

"No problem JS, I understand. Goodbye and good luck with your vision. I hope you'll find the solution. Hopefully the next corneal grafts will take and you'll be fine after that."

"You don't know how I'm feeling Neal. In fact, even if there was someone who could bring me to the airport I don't know if I'd want to come. This is too painful. Today, as you head back, I feel my roots coming apart. I feel Africa under my feet but she's not here."

These words will stay with me to this day even as I write this. First uttered on the 3rd of March, 2003 it is now 11 years later that they still ring echoes in my mind. I count the lucky strokes that have allowed me to pull up and return to the love of my life. But then I also fully realize that I was able to return only because of what yet lies between my ears, only because my mind is so clear-thinking, so logical that any, ANY form of suffering or sacrifice only makes sense to me if it leads to greater gain through delayed gratification or through trading one thing for a greater one. No sacrifice will endure if it stems from belief of things for which one has no evidence, the definition of faith.

The speakers crackle to life, "Ladies and gentlemen this is your captain speaking please note there are no toilets on board this aircraft. Anyone who needs to go should do so now before we leave. The flight to Auckland will take just over an hour."

This is so much like flying Cessna Caravans carrying passengers to the Masai Mara -- something I'd done often enough with friends that owned airlines back home -- that it at once puts me in high spirits a warmth flooding through me that I've missed for too long now.

The landing at Auckland is uneventful and we haul ourselves onboard an Air New Zealand 747 for the flight to Sydney. On arrival there we transfer to the South African Airways Jumbo that will take us across Australia, over Perth, across the Pacific Ocean to Johannesburg. That 13-hour flight is the longest and most tedious, boring flight I have ever made. All in all our total time getting back to Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport adds up to 31 hours. Fortunately for us the crew on board the longest leg -- the one from Sydney to Joburg -- are some of the best we've ever had the privilege to fly with. They keep the kids busy, giving them little kiddy packs full of games, colouring charts and such and keep coming back to check on our 9- and 4-year-olds.

In Joburg we board a Kenya Airways 767 a dreamy mood coming over us. Anticipation almost rips us apart; we're heading HOME! As we walk down the aisle between the seats 'Hakuna Matata' plays on the speakers and we smile at each other. We are ebullient, smiling at other passengers who sometimes smile back no doubt unable to figure out why we are so obviously brimming with joy. Eventually the four hour flight time passes and the aircraft brings us over the Nairobi National Park, Ngong Hills passing on our port side Ami at the window seat almost unable to contain herself taking Acacia out of her seat belt to see HOME and laughing at the stewardess who scolds her for removing the child's belt. The wing flaps come back as I crane over Ami's shoulder, the Nairobi National Park passes below us and then the Mombasa highway. Suddenly we are rolling on the tarmac as the tears roll free down my face and I turn to Ami and through her and my tears we laugh as we have not laughed for a long, long time.

Kissing Kenyan soil

There is no jetway bridge to take us directly into the terminal but we do not care. We bound down the stairs onto the ground. I drop my hand bag and camera and kneel on Kenyan ground -- hallowed ground to me. I put my hand to the concrete and close my eyes. How close I have come to losing this. How close I have come to losing my soul. This all I can think about until Ami breaks this reverie with:

"Neal, Neal -- we have to go."

"Coming."

We head into arrivals and have our passports stamped by the usual sour-pusses that deal with these things at the Kenyan end of any journey. We cannot care less. Fielding the usual ridiculous questions we soon find ourselves in the baggage claim area and have our bags onto trolleys in double-quick time. My dad signals us from the barrier outside and we grin back. And then surprise of surprises -- in the background is SV. I recall his words

"Why? Why leave?"

"A better future, a place for the kids to grow up, a safer place?"

"You don't believe that do you Neal?"

"I think I've come to believe it SV."

"You were the last person we'd have believed, any of us, that would leave Kenya. You were so --- at home --- here. Your forests, national parks, your peace in the wild places. What's that all going to come to? Will you find that in a developed country?"

Even as he had said it I'd felt in my core that I was doing something wrong -- I was rending my soul apart. I heard again that pitter patter of my childrens' feet in the house that they were born in and in which they spent all their early years -- their core years -- growing up. I heard the Boo Boos in the garden, the Fish Eagles and Augurs borne on the wind above the lake. In my mind I saw the Augur's halting, hesitating glide on the wind and I recalled one of my favourite poems by Ursula le Guin in Wizard of Earthsea:

Only in silence the word
Only in dark the light
Only in dying life
Bright the hawk's flight
On the empty sky

But I'd need silence to fully articulate myself. I'd need to shine light into the darkness that had found a home within me. I nearly died on that fateful night but I truly died when I left Africa and I needed that complete and total death to set my most inner being free. To learn what I was truly made of, who I really am and what I stand for. And then finally that I'd need fifteen --- 15 --- years in which to rest my weary head and heart a few of those years spent roaming the world looking for something better, a brighter future, a new place to call home. I'd need to go 8,500 miles as the crow flies to find that silence, light and death to rekindle the hawk's flight, that bright flight on the blue skies of Africa. And now here I was under those blue skies, home again finally! My wings spread I ready myself to leap; to leap into the skies of Africa, to once again live on her land, revel in her beauty, rejoice in her unspoiled sweeping vistas. On the ride home I revel in a drugged-like trance. I

know finally what it feels like to come to the very ground of my being, to feel my roots going down to the centre of the earth.

To come home

Coming home

"101 dad?"

"Yes of course."

101 Ol Donyo Sabuk Avenue: My dad's home. The home I had bought with my sisters -- a home for dad. The house we'd virtually torn down and rebuilt to suit mum and dad. The house to which we'd come at least every Friday and where we'd spent many a great time on a koroga, a high tea or just sitting talking by an open fire. We arrive there after a short drive to find mum readying her usual massive breakfast of sausages, eggs and fried tomatoes. Ah! Those Kenyan pork sausages, product of Farmer's Choice. How we'd missed these. I wolf down six and follow them with a cup of coffee which though instant still tastes so much different and better than what we'd been stomaching for so long now.

After brekkie I busy myself with sorting out my phone. A quick trip to the nearest Nakumatt supermarket and I have a new SIM card and am able to call our friend LM to let him know that we are back. I had let him know via email that we were returning as soon as we had got the freighting and plane tickets bought. He had not acknowledged my mail but I had a return receipt via my secure mailing service and knew that he had read it. I suspected that he would give us a hard time over vacating the house. Per our rental agreement of course a months notice was due and I had given him more than that.

As expected he begins to give me the hell I expect. Undaunted we head to my in-laws place borrowing dad's car for the purpose. We pick up Ami's brother visiting from the UK and head to the house my explicit purpose being to catch out any miscreant behaviour on LM's part. We arrive at the house to find a guard who only too readily opens the gate and admits us. Parked in our long-missed driveway we knock on the house door, ring the bell and wait. No one comes to let us in so we head into the garden. We confront our first shocker. Our previously lush forest which we had painstakingly grown over the five years we'd lived in the house before leaving for Oceania, has been reduced to a bunch of ten-foot high stumps. All the trees have been topped. I am furious and had I met LM at that moment I'd have done something unspeakable to him.

The door to our little wooden deck opens and an elderly couple walk out to find us just below the deck in a state of shock looking at our former forest. They are evidently very surprised to see us. I introduce myself and they seem even more shocked to learn that I am the owner of the house they are living in. Though they only speak French I am able to communicate with what little I remember from school days. Now comes our chance to sneak into OUR house. The house seems much as we had left it. We'd given it to LM fully furnished and that furniture seems fine. To check out the wing my aunt had lived in we have to knock on the door and wait for it to be opened. A young woman answers the knock and introduces herself. Apparently she works with LM and is civil enough when our status as owners is revealed to her. She allows us into the wing and we are met with a mattress on the floor a bedside lamp at the pillow end and four books in a staggered pile nearby. This looks too much like a boarder -- her things are laid on a seat, the mattress on the floor, the lamp on a stool. This is not someone that has come to visit not a wife or girlfriend. She calls LM and hands me her phone.

"Neal, you are back?"

"Yes, LM. You knew about this -- I gave you nearly two months notice. You should have vacated the house. You had the exact date I'd be returning." Hard hitting -- the only way I know how to deal with people especially those I anticipate will be recalcitrant.

His French accent laid on full he says, "I had no idea you were coming back."

"Oh, come on LM. You got a mail from me almost two months ago and you read it. I have a read receipt for it and not just that silly little thing that Outlook gives you. I have a legally admissible receipt and according to my mail tracking systems you've opened that mail several times and have then gone and referred to the mail in which I had attached the rental agreement."

"Spying on someone's computer is illegal Neal." Calm composed voice. So that's the tack he's going to take.

"Don't deflect LM. That is not the question here. Take up the legality or otherwise later. Right now -- you've read my mail, duly received more than the agreed upon one months notice. And what have you done to my trees?"

"I asked if I could trim the trees and that's what I did after you said I could." Beginning to sound a little defensive.

"I said trim a branch here and there especially where it comes over the house or encroaches on the neighbour properties. I did not authorise this carnage you've meted out on the trees we've been caring for for years."

Now in a clearly defensive voice, "We wanted a view of the lake Neal."

"So you've just admitted that you butchered my property without my permission. What is the situation with the electricity, water and estate bills?"

"They are all paid up."

"We'll see about that. I'm holding your deposit until I receive the cleared bills. And what about this massive dish antenna? You've drilled into my external walls to fit that. You do realise that you cannot remove such a fixture just as you cannot remove the lights I see you've fitted in the living room. Also you need to paint the house as per our agreement. Buy the paint and send it to the house, I will get the painting done and hold the bill until we work out our final settlement against the rental deposit."

"You can't just throw me out Neal."

"Actually LM I can. And I'm furious with you. Clearly you've also sublet the house. Who is this woman in here whose phone I am using?"

"She's my girlfriend Neal. She lives with me."

"And who are these two elderly people LM?"

"Those are my parents Neal."

"Ah, I see. Parents who think you own this house huh LM? And your girlfriend lives in a separate room and sleeps on the floor? You take me for a fool LM?"

Later that day LM calls me again to complain that I should not have barged in on his guests and parents and that even as landlord I had no right to just come barging into my house without letting him know I'd be coming. I am very tough with him -- this person with whom I'd worked very amicably building computer networks in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya -- he's let me down and left me with a wrecked home. More is to come though. The electricity bill had not been paid, a huge water bill had been allowed to accumulate, the estate bill had not been paid for an entire year and the house, on closer inspection had floor damage, water damage to one bathroom door and even mud stains going up one bathroom wall onto the ceiling! This one I have never managed to figure out. The two months rental deposit proves to be insufficient to cover the bills, the dish antenna disappears while I am away clearing bills, the lights are removed from the living room leaving the walls bare and no paint is ever delivered.

Ami and I have our work cut out for us but moving back in is the sweetest taste we've had in a long time. Those feelings swept away all the 'minor' things we have to do to get our home back together again.

I will encounter LM once more -- at Wilson Airport -- where he is now a student pilot and where I am quickly called back onto the Pegasus Flyers management board. Ah! A chance at sweet revenge: I spare no quarter warning the flying instructors and Kimutai, who is still there after all these years, about the poor paymaster and plain dishonest person they are dealing with. They inform me that LM has got in trouble over flying a paramotor illegally and below minimums in a National Park and is now trying to get a PPL to worm his way out of trouble with the authorities. Pegasus insists on pre-payment before any instruction and LM simply vanishes and drops out of our lives. We never see him again after that.

Killing the Buddha

I was very fortunate growing up that I was not indoctrinated into any belief system. My early school years were spent in Westlands Primary School which was heavily Catholic based. I sang the hymns everyone sang but I did not attend nor was I bullied into attending, neither by my parents nor any school teachers, any mass or ritual gathering. Our house was filled with Christmas cheer as December unfolded each year and to this day the end of the year, being also the time of my birthday, is a time when I reflect on the year just passed and put into place plans for the coming one. It is a time during which I feel most at ease. The four of us love to put up a Christmas tree and always have a few very special friends over for Christmas lunch. And

yet indoctrinated into the Christian faith I am not. Our Christmas lunch is usually spent with friends who are of diverse faiths and who therefore make the meal a very special, secular celebration that we've come to love and anticipate throughout the year.

My mother and my aunt (who lived with us at the time) being Catholic and the schooling system being aligned towards Christianity, my sisters leaned towards Catholicism. We, all three of us, attended Catholic run schools and were under much pressure from that faith. However many of my friends were and still are Hindu, some are Muslim, most are Atheist. I find it hard to reconcile that I have friends that, while professing their friendship, yet must think that I will burn in hell for not believing in their particular God. I find it frankly ridiculous that I cannot hope for a unanimous "yay" from my friends where every single one of them would find me acceptable. Instead I must live under the cloud that, though they claim friendship, yet among them there be one or more that MUST harbour an inevitable deep incompatibility with me at some level. And when I read of the one hundred thousand plus religions on this planet I find it easy to reconcile in my mind the truth that if one of them is false then, by extension, ALL of them MUST be false. And by further extension this then means that those of my friends that [secretly] harbour my inevitable roasting in hell fire can therefore not be held compatible with me and my thought processes and therefore our friendship cannot exist on any but the most superficial of levels. All this of course while they each believe that all the other religions, save for the one they hold to, are false.

Still there is hope for I remember clearly a friend who had to stop and think when I said to him, *"When you understand why you reject all other religions but the one you hold to as true then you will understand why I reject your religion too."* He came back to me a week later and asked me what I believe in and left with my leather bound copy of *The Origin of Species*. Now years later, having shared between us more than two hundred books on religion, philosophy and science and had countless hours on my deck or over a glass of wine in some remote corner of Kenya, I can say I have found a kindred soul in him.

Amid all this I yet grew up without allowing my surroundings to brainwash me in any way. I believe Riques, my adopted grandfather, played an extremely important part in this. I dug into science in school egged on by him. Math and Physics were always a draw for me but Biology I knew, would have to feature prominently because of the career path that had been chosen for me. In those days if you were a student with high grades, and I routinely had the highest in my cohort, you went on to medical school and emerged a doctor. If your grades were not that high you headed for Dental school and if lesser then Pharmacy or lower still Veterinary Medicine followed by an Engineering discipline. If you were too dense to make it into the 'Big 5' of higher education you headed for one of the business courses the easiest one to get into being Accountancy programmes. So, I studied my Biology topics carefully finding the subject easy. I can remember the exact moment, sitting in my study, when I opened my book to the chapter on evolution. As I read my ears heated up until they felt like they must be glowing at the tips. Feeling more and more light-headed as I progressed through the text the power of reason, the power of my own mind to grasp the concepts, the power of my thoughts to set me free of the shackles of ignorance, enveloped me. I could not stop. I finished the chapter in record time and rushed out to the library to find Charles Darwin's '*On The Origin of Species*.' I gobbled that up in

record time too. The Descent of Man and The Voyage of the Beagle I similarly dispatched post-haste. I just could not get enough of this. In this study I now found an answer to so many questions that I had had. More than this though I found a much broader answer to my questionings. That answer is: Education. It dawned on me within the space of about a year that the way out of bondage and mental shackles is to learn, to understand, to sweep away the cobwebs.

My paternal grandparents 'chickened out' of Kenya as the Idi Amin debacle unfolded across the border in Uganda in 1972. My dad however would not leave Kenya under any circumstances. My maternal grandfather, Dr Charles Raymond, passed away when I was just four years old so I did not have the benefit of a biological grand-someone. I did however have the benefit of a grandfather, of sorts. Actually he became much more than a grandfather. That a Roman Catholic priest who ran his own parish in Kisumu, the third largest city in our country, would come to mean the earth to me still makes me shake my head in wonder. We kids called him Riques and always knew him as such too elderly to be an uncle, but more like an uncle than a grandfather in all that he did with us. He taught me to fish, to hunt and to camp. He taught me to play chess and encouraged me in all that I tried to do, financing a number of my hair-brained ventures, buying me a top-of-the-line computer, sourcing me those hard-to-find books that I needed for the many esoteric subjects that I chose to pursue.

We went out on numerous trips together. From lighting a fire with only two sticks to shooting hippos that had wandered onto farms and were destroying them, I learned most of what I know of the outdoors from Riques. Priest and all that we was though, and in spite of spending many an hour with him setting up his altar for mass, playing the huge church organ, questioning his beliefs and learning what he deemed appropriate to teach me, I never did take up Catholicism and he never once pushed it onto me. When directly pressured he told me to believe what my brain told me was the truth not to take anyone's word for it. He taught me to use my mind to reason out my beliefs and to be willing to change my stance when my own mind told me that it was time to do that. I am truly blessed to have had Riques in my life.

It attests to his humanity and humility this refusal to brainwash me into a belief system. In 1997 as he died in my arms, the brain tumour taking him so swiftly we hardly had time to prepare to lose him, I coolly and collectedly exercised his final wishes through the Power of Attorney he had given me. As he breathed his last breath I reflected deeply on what he had taught me and paused to think that though his life had just then ended his legacy would go on in me to the end of my days. In refusing chemo- and radiotherapy on his behalf and letting him pass on with dignity I felt that I had truly learned, from this man, that which few have had the privilege of learning from any such a teacher. I learned what it means to love someone to such depth that you will first of all DO NO HARM as we doctors are fond of saying when we take the Hippocratic Oath, and to mean it and put it into practice for those that depend on our actions. I learned what it means to lose one that you love to your very core. I learned the pain of loss. I also learned that wishful thinking that he is out there somewhere only serves as a falsehood we are all only too aware of though we might try to tell ourselves otherwise. Riques in life taught me so much yet in dying and in death he taught me even more and in my own death throes my mind went

searching for and found him and in finding him found and came back into itself returning me to my family, my friends and my life.

Now back home in Kenya, the dark days of depression become all but a faint memory far, far away in the past. Cognitive lifeblood courses through my brain bringing me reflection on my experiences. In school as I attained the ripe old age of fourteen I came across a math teacher -- Mr Mistri -- who taught me the tenets of Buddhism. It made sense especially the four noble truths. The meaning of the first truth that life is suffering, reasoned out well and thoroughly digested, became fully internalised while I was still in my teens. But in my days of PTSD I sat on my driveway and struggled with the ideas of Buddhism. I wrestled with the koans and sayings, the parables and teachings. Buddhist master Lin Chi's "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" too cute by half, had embedded itself into my psyche imprinting the need to prevent myself turning the Buddha into a religious fetish but to instead grasp deeply the essence of what he had taught. After much deep thought, some of it in the mountains and forests of Kenya, I came to the realisation that though being a student of what Buddha taught, I must dispense with Buddhism. This was indeed a difficult lesson -- a kind of satori -- an awakening. With it came a letting go of Buddhism for understanding, a letting go of Buddhism for the Buddha. I awoke to the fact that all of life is explainable and can be explained and that the explanation resides only, only, within my own mind. To discover that and dispel myth and superstition then became the ground of my being. To this day I fight to overcome red herrings, blind alleys and blind faith to try instead to find logical, provable explanations for all that I face. That at the end of the day is what science is the seeking for answers. I guess that makes me a scientist through and through.

Though I came to feel that the Buddhist tradition, taken as a whole, represents the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced the naive, petitionary and superstitious ways in which it is practised in so many parts of the world rubbed me up the wrong way. I came to despise those that thought of Buddhism as just another religion. Similarly I came to loathe those that, instead of being liberated by the ideals of Buddhist thought, chose to search among the teachings for the rituals that make it more of a religion than a system of ideals. Much study of even the Dalai Lama's writings and teachings dug up religious dogmatism. Over time, and as I furthered my education, my mind opened to its full potential and was liberated from the nonsensical aspects that lurk within this philosophy too. I achieved my full enlightenment and release from the dogma of Buddhism, least as it is of all religions, one day as I read that Guru Rinpoche was born from a lotus. In a cascade of emotion that had me sobbing with the release of all the shackles my mind had been under, I broke free of dogma. The nonsense I'd been fed by my surroundings and the PTSD I'd endured and beaten left me, the depression lifted and my mind soared free. I staggered into the house and Ami read on my face that something had changed, some pieces of my mind had shifted, found their counterparts, slotted and locked into place and I had become whole. She smiled at me, and smiled, and smiled, and smiled. We both knew that I had been made whole once more.

Foxholes

As the thugs came in through the doorway I was in a totally shaken state. Shot twice my mind

adopted the surety that in a few minutes I would be dead. From my medical training I knew this to be a truth, an unavoidable truth given the way and speed with which I was bleeding out. I felt it to be a certainty: In my chest, right at the level of my heart there was a hole a full inch across. Out of it came a steady gush of blood. The blood ran down the front of my chest and trickled, thickly down my left leg. I did not know if there was an exit wound in my back. I had no way of knowing about this without someone taking a look and there was no time for that; I assumed there must be one. My right arm was bent over at an impossible angle; I could hold my right elbow with the fingers of my right arm. There was blood spraying out of a hole in the upper surface of that arm. The blood flew a distance of about a metre and splashed on the bedroom wall in front of me. There was blood on the ten-foot high ceiling of the room. I looked at it unable to comprehend how it got there. Then I saw it --- the severed artery spraying a misty jet that would emerge every few seconds and whip about like a water hose pipe let loose snaking this way and that as the water comes out at pressure.

I lay down on the ground with my back to a wardrobe. The pain was horrific but being highly pain tolerant I was able to push it to the back of my mind to focus on what was happening to my young family. Later, the kids and Ami taken away from the room, I lay there hearing a 'drip, drip, drip' and watching a black pool of blood spread out from behind my left shoulder. "That," I thought, must be from the exit of the bullet.

I have written earlier about my 'trip' as my brain lost its supply of blood. I KNEW beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would soon be dead. Fortunately for me I had, by this point in time, counselled many a dying patient at the Nairobi Hospice and in various settings that I'd taken them to -- home, office and even on camping trips. In each case people had said that what I told them had helped a great deal. With some people it would be deep philosophical discussions involving Spinoza's, Hume's, Popper's or Kuhn's writings. With others it might be the words of Elizabeth Kubler Ross, Jill Bolte Taylor or William Faulkner. With still others it might be Schermer, Dennet, Dawkins or Krauss's rationalist works. It all depended on where the patient wanted to take me; what mattered most to her at the moment of our discussion. With many it would simply be a frank discussion of the days to come, what to expect --- pain, mental degradation, loss of control of bodily function or other symptoms. Sometimes it focused on how to prepare to leave families in good stead after they were gone. At other times it would be about what to do when loved ones break down in their presence. In still other cases it would be financial preparation and I'd become so good at asset protection that I'd learned in my accountancy classes that many would ask me to set up trusts, bodies corporate or investment accounts for them to take care of their families after their passing. I became a one-stop shop for many and in return I learned a valuable lesson from each and every one of them. I found that the dying are extremely capable of handling their own death when they're given a chance to face the situation squarely and have at least a little time to prepare for it. I learned that the dying are most troubled and leave this world in turmoil when they are infused with superstition and surrounded by those that are also blinded by false belief systems. I therefore, very early on, decided not to allow myself to be steeped in ignorance but to keep away from me those that are wallowing in such.

Through all this I, of course, had been given tons of time to study, reflect and learn from what my 'patients' had taught me as they went down this final road. So as I lay there dying I had that rarest of chances --- the chance to reflect deeply on what I believed in my inner core while watching what was happening to me as a kind of once-removed observer of the scene. It's true, what people say, that your life flashes in front of you. It does indeed. Mine seemed to compress it's entire gamut of 39 years into a kind of video stream running as though I was holding down the fast forward button but like no fast forward I have ever seen on any VCR. As I've written at the start of this story --- I met people that have died before me, my friends and mentors. I saw scenes that have been highly meaningful to me and I returned from it all with the imagery fully intact. Was it different from a dream as we're told Out of Body (OBE) experiences are? It certainly did seem to be at the time. But in the clear light of day since then it has taken on more of a dream-like quality. Of course it was different from a dream --- one does not exsanguinate every night that one dreams. But a dream it was and I have since accepted that there is no way to know what an OBE is and as there is no repeatable, provable, testable explanation OBEs are probably just figments of our imagination. The most likely explanation for them is that they occur as the brain is starved of oxygen from blood loss. That an OBE can also occur in a person who is just sleeping -- is it the same kind of experience or is that one entirely different? Perhaps one day we'll have ready access to the science that is being done on this even as I write. I await that day with keenness. Once 'back in my body' and heading for the hospital all I could think of was keeping the [leaky] blood flow under control and saving my life. Then it was into the first of many surgeries as I repeatedly 'left the planet' under the influence of general anaesthesia.

Did I dream while under the influence? The swimming scenes --- far away places, Africa's gorgeous vistas, flying over a landscape, diving through the blue air my little aircraft giving it her all? Were those real people that came to me --- in the dozens? Were they my patients or did I just make up faces that I had never seen before? Did they speak to me telling me what I'd feel now that it was my turn to 'go'? Was I being given back some of my own medicine or was I being helped in the same way that I had helped so many?

I came to in my room after the first surgery as though through a thick fog. And I laughed; I laughed out loud. My family have remarked on this many a time, that I laughed like they've rarely heard me laugh in life. A thought that came to me as the fog cleared was "There are no atheists in foxholes." War Correspondent Ernie Pyle's words during the Battle of Bataan in 1942 echoed through my mind. I have been a war bug all my life and WWII has been my focus of study, leisure reading, movie watching and more. The foxhole aphorism meaning that all soldiers in combat are 'converted' especially at the 'last minute' is what had me laughing. That I might seek a divine power when faced with an extreme threat, when faced with my imminent death never entered my mind. Indeed it seems ludicrous even as I write these words. What a waste of time, what wishful thinking. Better to have done just what I did do and bring science and education to the fore and save one's life than grasp at useless straws. In any case it could not have entered my mind because I've never been indoctrinated into that kind of thinking and I've never needed any sort of mental crutch onto which to cling. So as the fog cleared it surprised me greatly that a study I'd read by Oxford University psychologists suggesting that faith in the explanatory and revealing power of science increases in the face of stress or anxiety

seemed to have been the last thing I was reading just before I woke up! Did this study have a bearing on my dreaming? Did it steer me towards adopting science based methods to save my life or was that autopilot from all the years of training? Yes, this study is countered by others which suggest that 21% more soldiers become religious after exposure to heavy combat. And yes it really did seem like I was arguing a debate just before I woke from that first bout of anaesthesia that I'd ever experienced. But no, a resounding NO! I was not and never would be counted in that 21% cohort.

THIS soldier certainly did not experience any last minute conversion. Indeed, to this day, I credit much of my strength and ability to recover from the massive physical and even bigger mental injuries, the five surgeries, the lack of support to frank abandonment, the stories apparently [designed] to make my blood curdle, the move to another country and so much more turmoil, that has been described earlier in this story, to my mental fortitude borne of not believing in superstition, hokus pokus and snake-oil salesmen. The breaks in my arm bones would not heal. I reasoned this out with my doctors, with Ami and in my own head. We combated infection with antibiotics. We dealt with bone malunion with bone grafts. Healing took place. Science and sane, rational minds triumphed. Had I attributed any of this to a deity that was punishing me for some wrong that I had done in this or a past life, whatever that might mean, I'd be carrying around an arm with two elbow joints today and life would be infinitely worse than it has been following this marvellous triumph of science over adversity that I have been privileged to be a part of.

It would be said, in due course, by the Buddhist community, that it was a good thing that I was burning my bad karma. This comment deeply annoyed me and does so to this day making me cringe. It makes me tremble on the keyboard as I write this. Untold suffering has been meted out by the pedlars of such nonsense. So many are living with illness and disability today because of this very kind of thinking. Following these people leads to giving up on the seeking of solutions -- that's all it gets you -- it makes not one difference to the imagined deity, ruler of all, invisible superhuman that supposedly watches over all that goes on around and inside us. Of course the snake-oil salesmen would hover about me smelling an opportunity to sell their wares to a vulnerable, susceptible customer. They misjudged me not reckoning on my recalcitrance. Nor did they reckon on my debating skills coming out to bite them at their most vulnerable of moments.

SD, a faith healer, was recommended to me by a friend whose office was just above hers in a high-rise building in Westlands. I went along on a day when I was particularly badly depressed. I don't know why I agreed to go; I have always fiercely resisted astrologers, faith healers, priests and witch doctors. Perhaps it was boredom with having to sit on my driveway day after day for so many months. Perhaps I saw a chance to vent my anger out on someone other than my family. Perhaps I succumbed, as I often have, to the challenge to debunk another fool. Whichever it was I found myself on her couch as she started with the suggestion that I allow her to do a past-life regression on me. Now I don't believe in any past lives or future ones. I believe in this life and I fight to live every minute I have now not believing for a second that I will get to live after I die in a better place or any place at all. Too many people live for dying by expecting

that they will live in a 'better place' after they die. I live for now, now when I am alive, not for after I die. So as I sat back in her couch within a few minutes I was asleep. The drone of her voice drove me to sleep. It was not hypnosis though many will say it was. To me it was indistinguishable from sleep so I simply call a spade a spade and name it sleep. I dreamed of a war plane -- a Supermarine Spitfire -- all decked out in her war dress, grey/green camouflaged fuselage, flying in cloudy skies. There is a painting of just such an aircraft hanging in the Aeroclub dining room. Perhaps this was the suggestive seed? I dreamed I was the pilot. Fire, smoke, loud bangs. I was 'hit.' I awoke with a start, babbling about my dream. SD kept prompting me, encouraging me to tell my story but like many dreams I immediately upon waking forgot nearly all of it. So you may ask -- how do I know that I was a fighter pilot in a spitfire in a war? I am no longer sure how I am supposed to 'know' this as 'she' and now so many who have heard this story are wont to ask me. I suspect though that it was SD that prompted me to tell her something, anything and that in the end it was my mind came up with this story. Or did I? Did she plant it into my head through her incessant probing, prompting and suggesting? We've all seen the cold reading ploys the snake-oilers use. How many of those techniques did she use on me? How many of those techniques brought her to a belief in what she had experienced through me? What does she now believe she is capable of doing --- apart from conning the gullible not knowing the [con-woman] role that she plays? I've never had this dream again but then even if I did have it over and over what does it prove? If one has a dream a thousand times it's still a dream; it does not somehow become more 'real.' Why do people say that a dream gains efficacy and points to something in life if one dreams it over and over? Dream interpretation? Bogus nonsense to me. I cannot understand these things that people so easily fall for. I do though have a strong suspicion that these are the kinds of weaknesses the charlatans out there, and there are literally thousands of them around these days, use to their advantage to deceive their victims.

I called SD out on her bluff reasoning with her until she broke down and admitted that I might be right all along. This gave me the reason to refuse to pay her the whopping three thousand shillings that she presented me the bill for though the clear implication at the outset had been for me to try out her methods to see if they'd help me in any way and that there would be no charge for this first visit. I pointed out that her techniques did not help and that she had agreed with my arguments. Then she let herself down by grasping, clutching at straws as it were to get at least some money out of me -- she suggested that I try studying Deepak Chopra's writings as they're closer to what I can believe in -- quantum physics -- being the "intellectual type that you are Neal."

I was ready to launch into a tirade based around 'a man that earns \$700 per public lecture and sells thousands of books to the gullible cannot be a puritan who only has the saving of your soul at heart.' Instead I asked her if she knew what a deepity is? The word deepity was coined by Daniel Dennett in a 2009 speech so I did not know it at the time but I was very clear about the concept and put it to her thus:

"SD do you know a statement that seems profound but actually asserts a triviality on one level and something meaningless on another?"

"Uh, no, not really."

"Well here's one for you -- The Theory of Evolution is only a theory."

"Yes it is."

"There -- you have just fallen for meaningless nonsense. In science the word theory is used for a well-established scientific explanation. A scientific theory is one that explains something and that has been tested time and again and has not been proven wrong yet. On another sense, the common day usage, the word 'theory' is used to mean a hypothesis or unsubstantiated guess. This is what is being exploited by the second reading. This is what the person saying it is implying -- that evolution is a hypothesis and is not real and that objects don't really experience it as a real phenomenon."

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you think that the theory of gravity is just a theory? If you do try jumping out of the window here from this sixth floor office. Do you imagine you might fall up?"

"No of course not."

"Then why is evolution just a theory and gravity is real? Get it?"

"But there really are cases of things that are just theories."

"Well, then give me one."

"Like the earth being billions of years old -- that is just a theory isn't it?"

The gullible cannot be swayed. Leave them be to go on their with their own bumbling ways. One of my favourite quotes by Robert Heinlein sums this up. It was all I could do to quote it to her.

"SD - Heinlein said this. Think about it."

Never try to teach a pig to sing;
It wastes your time and it annoys the pig.
verse

I left her office without paying; I wasn't going to part with a single penny. I kid you not when I say that I once, in Florida, came across a guy in a flea market who was selling Egyptian darkness in a bottle. Six dollars a pop -- and he was selling them! I leave you to figure that one out. I leave you to wonder at what an OBE is -- real? Imagined? You believe in astrology? Remember Mr

Heinlein the next time someone reads you your horoscope.

Mr Chairman

On the night of the shooting I was rushed away to hospital and only came to learn of the goings on back home on day 3, post-surgery 2.

RGsis, RGs sister-in-law had jumped into her car when we left for the hospital, at 2am or thereabouts, and had driven to our gate. Once there and not knowing what to do next she had parked outside our house, come out of her car and rung the bell on the nearest gate --- our neighbours -- MK and family. MK woken up she had told her what had happened. MK had pulled open the gate and headed to the house while RGsis had gone house to house ringing doorbells. She had woken up nearly the entire neighbourhood. The ones she had not rung awake were woken by phone calls from others.

MK meanwhile had come into the house and started to get things organised. She first pulled the open doors shut, then gathered my babies and my 70-year-old aunt to her in the living room. She'd found her way into our kitchen and started a big pot of water boiling. Finding the tea leaves in our pantry she'd dumped a load into the boiling water and not a minute too soon. Neighbours started pouring in. She said to me:

"Neal, you can't imagine what I felt when I went to your bedroom. On the floor there was something -- it looked like -- like a piece of sponge -- no it was more red, more meat-like. It looked like liver, yes that's it -- it looked like liver. It was about two kilos in size. Everywhere there was blood. On the walls, on the wardrobe -- even on the ceiling."

"Oh, that must have been the congealed blood MK."

"I just ran away like I'd seen a ghost but first I closed the door. But your door is funny -- there's no way to close it."

"Yes, I know. Those are deadlock doors. There's no metal bit to engage the frame side. You have to bolt the door on the inside or turn the key to keep it closed."

"I just ran away. I kept the neighbours downstairs and we waited to hear from Ami at the hospital."

On my return from hospital three days after my initial admission I braved the ride back in the car which Ami drove a little too fast. The bumps in the road seared my broken bones with every jolt. I groaned but Ami kept going and soon enough I was in my bed at home and listening to stories like MKs above.

That evening RG came home and amid my extended family members, carried out a small prayer and installed my wedding ring back onto my finger from where I had asked him to extract

it on the day of admission. He then produced a newspaper -- the Daily Nation. On the back page a large headline splashed "Dr Neal Aggarwal Murdered In Nyari Estate, Nairobi." I was livid and he saw this quickly adding, "We're calling an Extraordinary General Meeting to escalate the measures we've put in place to date. Will you be willing to attend?"

"I certainly will RG."

An EGM was called and I attended on a Saturday afternoon. It was held at RGs house and as I looked over our lake towards my own home I heard RG saying, "Welcome to this EGM. As you know we have had a very serious robbery and we're lucky that no one has been killed. Before I go any further I'd like to give Dr Aggarwal the opportunity to address all of you. He has been at the centre of this event and has been pushing all of us to take our security more seriously. Here he is."

There was some clapping as I headed towards the mike handed out to me from RGs hand. Grasping it I turned to face the crowd. On their faces I saw all manner of expressions. Some looked pained, others were curious. Still others were blank while a few had that smile borne of confusion or lack of confidence in themselves were they asked to speak in public and now living their fears through me. I have never had that fear of speaking in public, have been captain of tennis and golf teams in school, chairman of The Astronomy Society at Uni and more, much more. I've played in a jazz band and even sung on stage.

I grasped the mike firmly and holding it a few inches from my mouth I said, "Ladies and gentleman -- as you can see the rumours of my death have been very greatly exaggerated."

Amid laughter I watched as the tension in the crowd eased.

"Mr Chairman here has been such a shoulder to lean on," I said briefly turning towards RG. "I don't have much to say just to point out, once again, that it is of paramount importance that we get our act together, put into place a more complete security system, add that radio network that I've been calling for for so long now and do all that we can do to make this estate as safe as we can. Now it's me in this cast with a broken arm and a bullet in my chest, tomorrow it may be you. Let's stop beating about the bush and get those little funds together so we can buy the equipment we need and hire the guards to keep all of us safe and let's do it NOW, not tomorrow and certainly not next week. Thank you."

There was some clapping as I handed the mike to RG and returned to my place in the crowd. He carried the meeting forward explaining what we wanted to do. I lurked in the background but soon headed into the house and sat in the living room settee. Ami joined me and after a short while announced that she was taking me home. A flurry of handshakes and good wishes and soon we were back at home again.

On the day I returned from New Zealand, in an episode reminiscent of that evening that I returned from the hospital, RG again popped in to our home and over his cup of tea toyed with

the question that was obviously sitting heavy on his mind.

"Neal, I've been Chairman of Nyari now for five years."

"I know RG and what a job you've done."

"Thanks. But I can't continue with this. I've had enough. I need a break. I'm going to step down."

"Who will stand in your place RG?"

"That's the problem -- if I step down DrRP is going to step in and you know we don't want him in that position. I don't think he can handle the workload."

"You're absolutely right. He can't."

"Look, you've been in charge of environment from the very start and for the past three terms that I've been chair you've been my vice chair. You've chaired enough meetings to know how it's done."

"Stop right there RG. I see what you're after."

"Not AFTER anything Neal. Just asking for a little help. Just asking for a break. I'm going through a tough time. If you'd just take over from me as Chairman for the next one year, just one year and then I'll come back again. You know that if you stand DrRP will drop his candidature and you'll step into the post with no effort at all. And with your experience in all that you've done you'll have no problem. It's just twelve meetings."

We chatted on and on for quite a while. I lost track and sometime along fell asleep. I dreamed dreams of my favourite place on earth -- The Aberdare National Park. I dreamed of lush hagenia cloud forests the mists blowing this way and that. I felt the condensation on my cheeks and smelled the damp earth underfoot. I watched a big old bull elephant come out of the mists towards my car stopping at the navi's window. He looked at me through an old souls eye. I reached out to touch him knowing full well that I'd spook him and perhaps even provoke an attack. Just as my fingers reached his coarse skin he disappeared into a puff of mist and my eyes fluttered open to see Ami's face smiling at me. I reached out to touch that face that I've known so well and realised that for the first time I was waking to a good, no great mood not the depressed, sad feeling that I'd had in the days of PTSD. And I smiled back at her. Her grin widened as she said

"You're really recovered aren't you? I can see it in your eyes."

An X-ray to beat all X-rays

That was a hectic year Nyari Welfare Society meetings held on the second Tuesday of the

month most meetings taking place in my living room. It was an intrusion but it was also fun. The twelve committee members would begin arriving at 7pm and Ami would have some samosas, cocktail sausages and some drinks ready to go. We'd spend a good hour and a half together. Ami had taken over my Environment office so she sat with us on our committee. Demi, my aunt, would keep the kids busy and they'd usually drop off before we'd finished our work. Meeting minutes I'd prepare myself as I can type much faster than anyone I know. I'd have them circulated before the next lunchtime rolled around. We grew the guards numbers from the 16 we started that year with to 34 by the time I handed the estate management back to RG. Radios went from just 4 to 16 and, though it bugged the sleep out of me each night it was nice to be able to bring my flight radiotelephony qualifications to bear and design a radio call system for Nyari giving each barrier, radio user and the police our own call signs. By the end of the year I had developed a Standard Operating Procedures manual that governed all our actions and that would be used for years to come.

I used the year to get back on my feet the work helping to keep me busy, skills intact and more practised by the day. I designed a new logo, checked meeting minutes, coordinated the development of the radio network and even mapped the entire estate on foot handheld GPS receiver carried on my long walks with Ami. I attended meetings of KARA -- The Kenya Association of Resident Associations -- the blanket association for all of us, and established Nyari's presence on that body, depth sounded the lake and added another 10,000 black bass and tilapia fingerlings. Dad joined in and planted a row of Nandi Flame trees on one of the entry roads to the estate leading to our house saying as he did so, "One day you'll look lovingly at these trees." Ami and I went for a walk with Sheila in the UNEP complex and while there pulled little Gaia out of her stroller and piled croton seeds into it raising out of those seeds more than six hundred trees that we planted along the roads in the estate. I grew Nyari taking on three more sub-estates that wanted to become a part of the greater Nyari -- Upper Nyari, Good News and Nyari West increasing the membership to two hundred houses. We renamed 'our' part of Nyari to Nyari-Central. Ami developed an accounting system based on a software system that we built in our offices running on our beloved Ubuntu and a world famous, free and open source database -- MySQL.

The x-rays we had taken before we left for New Zealand had shown good callous formation in the broken bone ends in my arm. Now it was a long time since those images and we decided to head to SVs office. SV sent me to the x-ray techs and they did the necessary, taking the two views of my arm on their machine that still smelled like a new toy just unwrapped. I headed to SVs office to join Ami and him there. After a short chat the films arrived. As SV opened the envelope they were in I cringed a little inwardly. What would we find?

Popping them up on the light box he said, "Ah! Look at this here. The callous is all gone and there is no break in either radius or ulna any more!" A big smile slowly spread on his face as he looked at me.

"So that's it huh? Finally. Healed, cured." Now I was grinning from ear to ear.

"Go celebrate Neal. It's all over -- you're fully healed. Your range of motion might be 95% but that little 5% doesn't bother you does it?"

"Not at all. In fact my arm is now stronger than before the breaks. I'm curling 24 Kg in each arm in the gym."

"Don't overdo it Neal."

"Coming from the guy who says -- Do you know what I do when I feel like exercising? I lie down until the feeling goes away."

He laughs hard at that. "True, true. And I guess I'd be a mess if I were in your boat through this ordeal."

"Well, the gym is just a couple of minutes away from the hospital -- and we're all there to help beat the hell out of you whenever you like."

"I'll remember that but don't hold your breath. Go celebrate instead."

Ami and I headed out of the main wing of the hospital and to the cafeteria not a word uttered between us. When we had coffees in front of us she turned to me and said, "Why did you choose to come to this cafe? It's a little crappy isn't it?"

"It's absolute shit Ams but somehow it brings full circle and closure to me. I started here as a doctor, left to start a business, left Kenya for a western country, came back and now I'm here pronounced fully cured. Full circle."

"I remember those days, that room upstairs, the one with the single bed we'd share whenever you were on call."

"Remember the five days and four nights without sleep and then how I collapsed on the last night after that caesarian section on SBs sister?"

"Yes and the letter that got KS fired, your work with the CEO and the security team, that work that got you interested in IT and then in hospital management and then the accounting studies, the MCSE -- wow so far we've come!"

"Tell me about it."

Teaching pigs to fly

The saying goes:

*Never try to teach a pig to fly;
It wastes your time and it annoys the pig.*

I paraphrase the singing part to flying as this topic is much more serious than mere song and because I'm a flyer of course. This is the kind of thing that has done untold damage to our families, our friendships and our entire lives. Like 'chup' many who have listened to the nonsense that is dealt out by friends and family has led them to fall prey to it to sacrifice the best of their years chasing a false hope, giving up the garden of Eden for the concrete jungles of the so-called developed world. Their children committed to relationships, second rate jobs and huge student loans, a sub-standard way of living and governments that rob them blind. Oftentimes it becomes well nigh impossible to move back to where life is really to be led by the horns, kicking and screaming where one feels every fibre of one's being every second of one's living.

It took a while to dawn on me that I was finally cured and past the physical trauma, PTSD and the stupid migration away from my home. But sink in it did and life started to take on meanings far richer than anything I'd ever had. I guess in that way my flippant remark that NZ had been my second PhD held some truth about it; we had learned so much. Never again would we think that there is anything that 'the west' can give us that exceeds what we have right here in Kenya. Never again would anyone be able to look down upon us and tell us what we were missing by living in Africa. No one would be able to tell us that our childrens' and our own futures would be far better if we lived in America, the UK, or Australia. We had seen and done that and far more and we had come back to our roots. We had acquired the concrete background and experience the school of hard knocks had so relentlessly rammed down our throats hence the 'PhD' that we said New Zealand and by proxy 'the West' had given us.

This had been a problem in the past -- people, especially relatives looking down on us mere Africans and asking why we were not looking for the 'better life' that is to be had in the developed countries that they came from. On visits to the UK especially, our relatives would look at us and say, "So when are you moving here?" Initially this had taken me aback, today I have the answers and come out hitting hard. One uncle, on a visit twenty years after he had chickened out with the rest and left following Idi Amin's throwing out of the Asians from Uganda, ran me down in a very bad way. I've been left with a bad taste since then. I had pointed out that there is a life we lead here in Kenya that we cannot find elsewhere outside Africa. But my skills at fending off the verbal bully were not what they are now.

"Uncle," I had said, "where in the western world will we find the national parks that we have here?" My epistemological skills not sufficiently developed to deal with the kind of onslaught I was about to face that day I whimpered along. I went on the defensive, triggered his ego and generally conducted myself as a thoroughly unworthy opponent.

"What nonsense. Of what use is a national park?"

Here I made a mistake -- I went for a logical, convincing, reasoning response. It turned only too readily into a defensive posture. I console myself that I was too young to do any better. In

encounters of this kind after we came back from our HND trip (humility and discipline trip) I handled myself quite differently as you will see further below.

"The national park is a metaphor uncle. A metaphor for much more than animals on a plain. It's about being in nature, about who I am."

"Who you are? Who you are? Look at what you and your dad are doing to your family. You have none of the things we have in the UK."

"Like what?" Pandering to the enemy instead of trying to develop an understanding of his game to then turn it against him and to make him play my game. Instead of adopting the classic ghost versus CEO approach -- ghost -- just ignore the arrows that uncle is firing -- they can't hurt a ghost --- or CEO -- smile politely and refuse to allocate any time for the drivel or a third option: adopt a 'give the bully a taste of his own medicine' tactic. But I did not yet have these skills down pat, not the ghost/CEO duo nor the much more difficult but more hard-hitting 'medicine' one.

"Look at this country. It's finished. There are potholes everywhere, beggars on the street. There's so much crime." This was before I was shot. Imagine the field day he'd have had if it had been after.

Still pandering to the bully: "Uncle, I love to spend my time in nature. I have peace here. Yes, there is crime and the roads are not so good but I like living here."

"More nonsense. We have a much better life in the UK. We're never short of anything, we have free education, free medical, police who come to our help not like the useless monkeys you have here. We can achieve our full potential in the UK. We're appreciated for what we can do not just left wallowing in this shit-hole."

"That's unfair. We do have a life here and might not be what you have but at least we're happy."

"Happy? You're just kidding yourselves. You are missing out on real life. Worse -- you're putting your children through the same nonsense that you are willing to put up with."

It went on like this for quite a while. Finally, thoroughly beaten into my corner I gave the bully what he wanted.

"I guess you're right uncle. Perhaps we have made a mistake and"

and he fired his final arrow not allowing me to finish my sentence: "Damn right. Bad mistakes that have ruined your family's future. No way back now. You are all finished by living here." Then in a slightly more conciliatory tone empty-skulled though the bully still typically was, "We can still help you move to the UK. Talk to your dad and decide to come. Just sell up here and move. We'll help you get settled in the UK."

And now here's the same encounter with the very same idiot after my return from NZ. He'd come a-visiting no doubt to sate his appetite for big game fishing and gambling in our casinos -- casinos that we thought, being run by mere Africans would lose their money to him.

"You guys came back?"

"Yep."

"What a stupid move, what a mistake."

Ghost tactic -- slight smile, no verbal response.

He's into the fray again: "How could you make such a mistake?" and makes his attack more sophisticated by employing what looks like considered reasoning but is really a bait-and-switch tactic, "you and Ami are such level-headed and sensible people how could you come back to this shit-hole."

Sticking with the ghost protocol is quickly wearing thin but I still ignore the onslaught and look to the others in the group for an opening that will allow me to divert the conversation to another topic. But anger has already started to well up in me, that same old post-shooting anger, and my silent counting to ten is not the kind of thing that will hold me in check for long. I steel myself and enter an information-gathering mode. It's almost as though I have a list taker online, up and running and ready to gather points that I can use to fight against the verbal bully. I try to ignore him a little longer but he's coming after me and that will necessitate a response, a well-seasoned now, sharp, cutting response.

"So when are you moving to the UK?"

"Uncle?" baiting him.

"Sell all this stuff here and move to the UK. We'll organise a great place to live and you can find jobs that will be real job-satisfaction for you."

"Uncle?"

"Why do you sound confused? You can just move to the UK, set up in Council Housing for a while and do some job-hunting and soon you'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams."

"Uncle? Rich? Riches are what? What you have?"

"I'm very well off in London Neal." Is that a little tremor I sense? Did the edifice just suffer the beginnings of a crumble? Best not to get complacent though: 'Build the chess position carefully' Riques would have said.

"You're very well off?" Concentrating the power onto the centre of the chess board baiting the trap and waiting for him to fall into it, and fall into it he does.

"We have fantastic houses, good cars, jobs where we're appreciated for what we do."

"Let me see," Ha! Dissection time. "Fantastic houses? Like this five thousand square foot designer home that I live in Uncle? You Londoners cannot afford eighteen-inch thick concrete walls -- no, no you guys live in cardboard boxes. And gardens -- all of twenty feet by ten if you're lucky. Good cars -- I guess you think your Japanese import is different from ours? And that four-wheel-drive that I have parked in my driveway British though it is, let's see, a world war two pile of crap? To us it's a family member. A friend that has shown us far more than you can ever hope to see in the UK. Shown us LIFE. Life that you have not and will never see. You're welcome to your concrete jungles uncle. I've been there and seen that. From the office to the mall to home -- all concrete, artificial jungle. Our jungles are real, our challenges are real and in return for battling them what do we get? We get to live every minute, no, no, every second of our lives. And let's not forget the other, let's see what did you bring up? Job satisfaction? Uncle, perhaps you have not heard of that thing called the internet. Perhaps you have not heard about the flattening of the earth. Those jobs that you are so proud of touting -- they're all headed our way! It's called the 'leapfrog' phenomenon. Oh! I guess you've not heard of Land Rover becoming an Indian company, nor about MPESA being a Kenyan invention. I guess it would be too much stress for you to take on to learn that Ushahidi -- used in disasters like the Haiti and Fukushima earthquakes -- is another Kenyan product."

"Now you're getting rude Neal. I'm just trying to help." ... Crumble, crumble.

Smiling an obviously fake one, "I am ALIVE uncle," whoops shouted that alive. "I wake up every morning to the sound of my garden teeming with life and I soar with blood coursing my veins even before my feet hit the ground. Were it London that I lived in just after my shooting I'd be dead now -- not from the bullet injuries, not from the alleged better medical care or the superbugs roaming your hospital corridors but from the living death you guys live through each waking minute. The air deathly still day and night, the weather totally unpredictable, totally crap, the people to be avoided at all costs. The people who don't come to visit even their next-door neighbours. Hell, I'll hazard you yourself don't even know who lives right next door to you -- I experienced that on my visit to you last. I've been to your neck of the jungle uncle -- I've seen it all. Nothing to live for as you claim. And you want me to give up this GARDEN OF EDEN for what? For council housing? You want me to give up my exalted position, my Chair of Nyari Estate, my neighbours -- all 280 of whom came running to my aid on that night? You want me to give up the work I do? -- work no one else can do here. Work that means something, that changes a child's or patient's life each time I sit down to put in the effort? You want me to become what? A lone bee in a colony that is slowly but surely suffering colony death syndrome?"

"Well, if that's what you think you have. I can't help you. But there's no need to be rude."

Whimper, whimper.

In for the kill: "I don't have to think it uncle. I've said to you before, Africa is not for the faint-hearted. Being one of those faint-hearted ones uncle, you'd not last here. We're frontiersmen and frontierswomen here. We fend off bandits, drive four-wheel-drive cars that are chosen for the job they can accomplish not for carrying the wife in that fake style that you guys employ when you head out to dinner at the corner restaurant. Yes, we have burglar bars, dogs, security companies. And you think that the cops will come to your aid when a burglar breaks into your house? Ha! Think again! I was in Kingston at Ami's cousin's house when a burglar broke into the kitchen. We called the cops and they said they'd be over 'shortly'. That shortly turned into an hour. I don't blame them actually -- it's a long way from the cop shop that house. That's reality uncle. At least here we have the means and the permission to take care of ourselves. Next time you hear a noise 'downstairs' you give a thought to what you're going to do. And do spare a moment to think on what might have happened if you had walked in on those thugs that were cleaning out your house on the day of that wedding reception. I doubt the cops would have been of any use then. Actually -- the cops were not of any use even after if I recall. And let's not forget that we have fabulous schools where we don't check our kids for knives on their way in each morning. We don't avoid walking home in the evenings past parks and hedgerows in case a serial killer chooses to have a few days of excruciating fun with us. And our National Parks -- I know you'll never understand that one because you've never experienced what real living is all about, what it means to be present in the now, in touch with nature, your roots going down to the centre of the earth. Uncle your brain cells are now withered away and pole sana (Kiswahili for sorry) you're not going to be able to revive them. The UK, the developed world has robbed you of that which you can never get back -- your humanity. Thanks for the offer but I won't be taking it up now --- or ever. You go back and live in the UK. Please do stay there. Please don't move back here -- there's not enough room in Eden for all of us -- and anyway -- we need you guys to keep us supplied with new technologies so we can take them, improve them and leapfrog you guys. Still using copper wire for internet access you guys from what I've heard. Here we have something called fibre -- oof -- that's below the belt, you guys have fibre too -- at least some of you do. As for costs for what you get -- don't pretend telling me that you get free medical and free schooling. Last I checked you guys work for your government -- you pay more than half of all you earn in taxes -- and the rest in loan interest -- so don't tell me you get free schooling. As for medical. Don't give me that crap. Your National Health Service is a broken, bankrupted machine that even killed Uncle Brij as he waited for his bypass surgery. I guess that's why you guys all run to India for treatment and were entirely responsible for the term 'medical tourism.' Please, please do stay where you are and enjoy your lives there -- as much of life as you can get through that skinny straw through which you sip. Leave us in the place not for the faint-hearted, gagging on the firehose from which we drink our lives each and every waking moment."

Vinod comes to visit

A simple phone call. That's all it took and we were scrambling to get ready a room, the car, tents, laying out an itinerary, shopping for odds and ends. Vinod arrived on a Saturday morning

via the usual red-eye from Bombay. We went straight home settling down into the plush leather sofas we'd brought back with us from NZ. Vinod was blown away by the forest we'd created and though a well-traveled man himself and having studied in NZ, he continually compared our home with the dearth of vegetation in his native India. We let him sleep to shrug off the very little jet-lag that one suffers on a return from India only two and half hours ahead of us in Kenya. The very next morning we headed off to Lake Nakuru National Park, paid the high foreigner rates for him convincing ourselves that the large amount of money would eventually find its way into the ecosystem that we love so much in Nakuru. That first day we spent along the southern part of the lake having shown Vinod the mouth of the Njoro River with its thousands of flamingos and then baboon cliffs. On the way there we came across a puff adder on the road and I jumped out to grab it pinning it to the ground so Vinod could have a close look without the danger of a strike. The strange orange colour of the puff adders in this part of the world I explained to him and then let the critical-to-our-environment reptile slink back into the grass shoos him along lest he get crushed by a following tourist vehicle. We discussed nature and the environment in depth and in the lazy hours of the day -- the period from just after lunch to about 4pm -- we lazed on our green tarpaulin with a view many would kill for. We had stopped at the place where the film crew of Out of Africa had filmed Dennis Fincham's biplane flying over the Rift Valley.

"Neal, what a place."

"It's almost unbelievable isn't it Vinod?"

"I can't believe it. I just can't -- that such a place exists."

"Like no one has damaged it. I always feel like I'm the only human around."

"Yes that's the feeling but unfortunately not true."

"Yes, and who knows if this will last."

"That fence line you showed me from the top of Baboon Cliffs -- that's scary. It's like a thin line keeping the hordes at bay. Just give an inch, slacken your vigilance for just a minute and they'll invade the park and ruin it forever."

"It scares me too Vinod. I have lived through the raping of the hot springs at Hell's Gate. I wish we had more time -- I'd take you to see that."

"What's there?"

"Hell's Gate is now a National Park but in spite of that there was this big push by the British Government to give Kenya geothermal power and Hell's Gate had all these hot springs. The Brits proposed capping them and directing the steam to turbines. We protested and even lay ourselves down on the ground to stop the bulldozers." This has become a familiar refrain of the environmental movement but at the time it was pretty novel.

"What happened? Don't tell me they succeeded."

"Yes they did and they completely destroyed that part of the park. The beautiful hot springs, the geysers, boiling mud. All gone now."

"The park still exists though?"

"Yes it does and there are a lot of animals captive between very high cliffs. It's a nice, small park with lovely rock formations. But they destroyed a part of it that was the highlight. And all for what? Twenty megawatts of power. You can get that from ten wind turbines."

"Or you could do what you did with your home and go off-grid. If you did that with enough houses you'd easily generate more than twenty wouldn't you?"

"You don't even have to go all the way to off-grid like I did Vinod. All you have to do is put one single solar panel on each roof and generate some D/C putting it through a tiny little inverter, cigarette packet sized, on the back of the panel. Take the two twenty A/C volts and plug it into a socket in the house and you ease the electric load on that dwelling by whatever the panel can generate -- say one hundred watts."

"Do ten houses and you have a kilowatt. Do ten thousand and you have a megawatt. I think I'm figuring it right. Right?"

"Yes, absolutely. No environmental damage. No unsightly plant and machinery in the middle of a national park. But that's not going to happen is it? Man is corrupt and he's going to line his pockets and we have no say in the matter."

"Tell me about it."

As night fell we headed to the southern end of the park and it was already dark when we rolled into Soysambu Special Campsite. In those days one did not have to make a special booking of special campsites but could just ask at the gate and the wardens would let you go camp there. We had done this and now we rolled into the camp. It was already dark but we had no worries about that being experienced campers. We put the roof of the camper up and while I set up the bedding 'upstairs' Ami and the kids got the gas stove out and heated up some corned beef cooking it with onions and green chillies. Some noodles steamed on a mess tin and soon we were sitting on the camp chairs I'd pulled off the roof. It was pitch dark and a hyena shattered the dark with his whoops. Vinod jumped but seeing us so relaxed he settled down too and was able to marvel at the African night that we so often take for granted.

"It's like there's a war going on out there Ami."

"It's true Vinod. We sometimes forget about that," Ami said.

"Not after NZ though," I joined in the conversation.

"I guess. Must have been deathly quiet there huh?"

"It was stone cold silent Vinod."

"You know Vinod, something funny happened to us there. We arrived towards the end of summer and bought a car. Then through the first seven or so months that we lived there we felt alienated from our environment. Everyone talks about NZ being so green and all but we felt very weird though we could not put a finger on it."

"I can guess where you're going with this."

"Summer rolled around and it got hot, really hot. Being the environmentalists that we are we did not want to run A/C in the car and anyway we wanted to roll the windows down to really feel the outside."

Ami joined in. "And when we did that we discovered one of the sources of our feeling so cut-off from nature. The sounds."

"Yes, as soon as the windows were down the drive to school became so much better. The house with the deck doors thrown open also -- what a difference."

"Though it was not this."

"Ami, no place on earth is this. As Pollack said in the making of Out of Africa -- Streep had come to The Garden of Eden."

"I didn't realize that you are a fan of the movie Vinod," I said.

"Very much Neal. Very much. My favourite."

"Then we'll have to watch it together when we get back. I have a copy, I also have the soundtrack."

"Hey guys -- listen to the sounds. Listen to the living Earth. Listen to life! We missed you life -- we missed you when we lived down under."

Lions in the night

We stayed up late talking about all manner of things from medical school in Kenya and the UK, where Vinod studied, to New Zealand and our experiences there. Vinod spun yarns about his

years in Auckland studying knee replacement surgery. All around us the sounds of the African night exploded in a rhythmical beat. Pauses in our conversation would be filled with a cacophony of sound that would pull us up short forcing us to take a break in our conversation to listen awhile. Around us trees were picked out in the dancing firelight suddenly appearing here and then disappearing to appear again a little way off. It was magical. Every now and then the hoot of a wood owl or the whistling trill of a nightjar would echo, bouncing off the trees the bordered the edges of the campsite. Vinod would put on a new piece of wood and stir the embers as they died. Sparks would fly up into the African night. We'd look up on the myriad of stars and the amazing clear lanes of the milky way. And the conversation rolled on and on until we were too tired to notice that we were falling asleep from time to time our murmuring voices gone quiet. Sometime about 1am I woke to the sound of something. Not quite sure what I had heard I lay there in my deck chair nursing the crick in my neck. The air had gone cold and bit around my neck. I drew my collars up against it and then heard, distantly, the roar of lion. That halting grunt, grunt, grunt that petered off into the night.

"What's that?" I left my head where it was not wanting to move my neck instead rotating my eyeballs to see Vinod looking at me from his seat.

"That, my friend," I whispered, "is lions."

He was up out of his seat and standing by the dying embers too fast for me to catch the steps in his ascent. Looking at me he said, "Are you guys nuts?"

"Why?"

"There are lions in this park. They're wild lions yes?"

"No Vinod - they're the ones from the Bombay Zoo."

"There are no lions in the Bombay Zoo," he hissed.

Speaking with an even tone I said getting out of my seat and stretching, "Don't worry mate. These lions know me. We've come to an arrangement -- I won't bother them and they won't piss me off."

"Be serious man. Lions kill people. I read that book you know."

"Oh, brother. Which book?"

"Maneaters of Tsavo."

"That's just a story Vinod and probably untrue. And that took place many miles from here and was a pair of lions that had tasted meat, if it really did happen at all. Don't judge all lions by those two thugs."

"This is scary stuff man. This is Africa. I can hardly believe I'm in Africa for real and now there are lions just there."

"Just there Vinod is more like ten kilometres. That roar carries a long distance especially through the African night."

"OK. If you say so. But I think we should sleep in the car now don't you."

"Cars all set up. Why don't you get into the upper bunk and I'll join you in a bit."

We roused Ami and they both got into the car Ami tucking herself in between the girls. Vinod got his lanky frame up into the roof indicating his warmth in the four seasons sleeping bag after a few minutes. Soon he was snoring softly in time with Ami's snores. I lay back in my deck chair and, as I've done so many times before in national parks across East Africa, I was soon asleep again.

I woke to the sound of the roars much louder than before. The fire had all but gone out. Lying stock still in my seat I opened my eyes and tried to peer through the dark but the pitch black of night closed in on my eyes leaving me devoid of all sight. A branch seemed to crack somewhere near the edge of the camp. Was I being stalked? I slid out of my seat and put some small sticks onto the glowing red coals. The thick smoke they quickly emitted went straight up in the still air. I added some more, thicker pieces of acacia tree a thorn pricking me as I selected the wood. The prick almost forced out an expletive but cognisant of the lions that might be very close I stifled the utterance and edged back to the open sliding door of the camper. My hand closed on our long mag light and I swung it round feeling for the button on top. As I swung the light round, still off but ready to light it with a button press, the smoking sticks burst into light. The light caught me off guard and I stared into the fire my dark adaptation all but shot. And then I saw them. At the very edge of the dancing firelight eyes, very many of them, in pairs. Some winked on and others off. My finger instinctively hit the mag light button and there they were. Several lions -- lionesses actually -- and then, as I raked the light to the right -- a huge, black-maned king of the jungle, peering straight at me. I quickly turned the light off. There was nothing to do but sit on the car floor at the open sliding door my legs outside like I was on some sort of bench.

"Vinod, Vinod," I hissed.

After what seemed an age, "What?"

"Lions. Wait. Ami."

"I'm awake. Where are they."

"Right here on our doorstep. Watch. Over the fire. Watch. I'm turning on the light."

We counted twenty two lions in all. They were in no hurry, not afraid, not shy. They milled about at the very edge of the firelight intensely curious about us.

"Shouldn't you get into the car Neal?"

"They won't do anything Vinod. If they were hunting I'd be dead meat already."

"Nice to know. I guess I'd be in somebody's stomach too."

"Enjoy this man. Very few people get to see such a sight."

We watched them until the sun rose. The kids woke and watched with us. The lions eventually tired of milling about seemingly waiting for us to do something exciting. They began to collapse onto the ground and sleep. In the east there came a lightening, an ever-so-slight bleaching of the black that soon spread to a grey dawn. The overcast skies lent some warmth to the otherwise cold plains of Nakuru National Park. The lions woke, stretched and ambled off.

"Off to their morning hunt," I said.

"You guys are nuts." Vinod said.

Buffalo waterhole

We took our time. Those lions didn't look like they'd be hunting any time soon. Chatting about them we poured out the muesli we'd made the week before we left for the park and Ami put the water on to boil. The roar of the gas cooker, that always annoys me so much, drowned out the morning sounds and I hastened to get some water heated in our Kelly Kettle that Don had brought for us from the UK. Vinod was amazed by the contraption that used a water jacket and some sticks to very rapidly boil up two litres of water that I dumped into the pot on the stove. This allowed me to turn off the gas that much quicker. We enjoyed our brekkie in silence after that.

Packing up camp is a very simple affair when one has a roof tent -- what our camper had. In a matter of a few minutes the car was ready to head out to a game drive. The dishes took longer than getting the camp struck. We headed out towards one of the main park roads when we were greeted by a wobbling steering wheel. I looked out of the drivers window to find a flat tyre gyrating about oddly below me. I stopped bang in the middle of the road and we all poured out and pulled the lower level bed out and fished out the jack and wheel spanner. The spare wheel in it's well below the front seats was down easily enough and Vinod and Ami had the car on the jack the punctured wheel lying on the road when I rolled the spare up to them. Suddenly

"Stop, stop. Look!" She exclaimed.

I turned just in time to make out a ghost in the grass. A spotted ghost that slunk away like an

apparition I had only imagined.

"He had been there watching all along."

"Was that a leopard?" Vinod asked.

"Do you know how lucky you are you lucky bugger. Very few of us get to see leopards and WE live here!"

"He walked across the road right behind you!"

My back had been turned in that direction as I rolled the spare towards them. The leopard had nimbly jumped from the grass onto the left edge of the road and ambling across had stopped to look in our direction and then calmly walked into the grass on the right side and was gone. But Vinod had seen him and that was all we could ask for for our guest.

The tyre was quickly fitted and we were rolling on our merry way. We left the Soysambu camp area and headed for the mouth of the Nderit River. On the way we stopped to look at a Martial Eagle in a tree. I spotted a large herd of buffalo about a mile off in the grass. A track led in their direction to a water trough. I have always been able to predict where animals are going to head and to make it into that spot and shut down the car to wait for them. Maybe it's luck - it certainly had been to have those lions in the campsite and the leopard? Clearly that was a happy coincidence. This time though was no exception. We parked by the water trough and within a half hour were surrounded by a herd of more than two hundred huge hulks. Another highlight of our trip unfolded as they jostled the car a few times their strong smell filling our nostrils. Vinod was wide-eyed through it all as we'd convinced him, before their arrival, that buffaloes are the most dangerous animal in Africa and will roll a vehicle with ease. The ruse worked and we laughed till our sides ached from the faces that Vinod presented to us.

Beware the pundit

While I was away in New Zealand mum and dad had over to stay with them for a little over a month, a 'pundit' from India. It came as a surprise to me to walk into mum's kitchen one day and go through this conversation:

"Hi mum."

"Hi Neal. How's my golden?" Golden was mum's nickname for me until she totally forgot who I am. She now has no name for me and the most she says to me is 'Shut up!' It is usually the first thing she says on seeing me as she reaches out to pinch me with her hard bony fingers. Her wrinkled face is completely devoid of emotion, her thinning white hair impossibly wispy. Her brief hour or so of lucid thinking every six months has disappeared completely replaced by an alert gaze out of blue eyes that, to me, hide a knowing behind a veil she can't penetrate to tell us what she's going through. She's been like this for six years now having previously been what

Ami called 'a butterfly' for her rushing this way and that getting all sorts of things done -- gardens at Intel College and Parklands Sports Club, meals for us, korogas, our own home garden, her grandkids numerous needs, from taking them to school up the road from her house, to shopping for their school uniforms. We're now six years into this terrible disease -- Alzheimer's Dementia -- and I blame it all on the pundit and the ideas he germed into both mum's and dad's minds while I was away.

"I'm fine mum and how are you?"

"OK. Frying some bhajias for lunch. Dad is in the garden with his jiko." Jiko is Kiswahili for brazier --- the charcoal braziers that we use for our korogas.

Dad stirs up his chicken curry and sips on his Tusker beer, "Shall we put some more chilli into this Neal?"

"Up to you dad. You always get it just right. You think it needs more chilli?"

"Yes. Oy! Vincent, kuja hapa (Kiswahili for 'come here.')." Dad was always very rough, too rough, with the hired help. "Go to mama and bring some more pili pili (chilli)."

Anita, Sheila, Sean, Mazi and Cuyuni eventually join us and the conversation is lively and animated. Sean drops his usual jokes, Sheila glares at him when the jokes approach a sexual boundary, dad's eyes gleam, Anita sits aloof but laughing and adding her own salt and pepper as needed! The curry ready we grab our plates and help ourselves heaping chicken into our dishes adding some of the salad and a couple of chapatis over it all.

"Mum, aren't you going to have some chicken?" I ask noticing that she isn't taking any.

"Not for me Neal."

"Why not? Here," I say grabbing a plate and selecting some choice pieces for her.

Reaching out and grabbing the plate, "No, Neal not for me. I'll have some of the brinjal bhajias."

"You can't live on only that mum. You need the protein too. Let go off the plate. Let me get some chicken. I'll choose the best pieces for you."

She grabs the plate and will not let go. She gets her bhajias and sits eating them. I let her be but notice that dad too is not eating any chicken --- the chicken that he had cooked so long for all of us. Later that Sunday afternoon mum brings out some desert and wolfs down a big helping.

"Mum -- you should eat less of that and more of the chicken."

"Neal -- mum and dad are now vegetarians." Sheila says throwing me a quizzical, mischievous

grin.

"Nonsense. How can that be after they've eaten meat all their lives?"

"We had a guy here -- an Indian guy -- who stayed with them for a while. He taught them a lot of new things about health."

"First I'm hearing of this. When was this?"

"While you guys were away in New Zealand."

"Is this true dad?"

"Yes, and he's a very good man. He lived with us for a month and we took him around to temples, peoples homes, even the club. He taught us a lot and we feel so much better now following his teachings."

"What did he teach you?" This was very worrying news for me.

"We learned a lot of yoga and how to look after our diets."

"What about diet dad?"

I have always been highly sceptical about these yogic, pundit types and now I fear the worst.

"We've given up meat Neal. It's not good for us -- it stays in the gut for weeks and just rots there."

"Dad -- you know that's complete nonsense don't you? A little experiment will do to convince you if not. I can go get a little acid of the same concentration as our stomachs and put a piece of beef in it and in another beaker with the same amount of acid I'll put some broccoli. I don't actually need to do the experiment in front of you dad -- just do it in your mind. What do you think will happen to the beef and the broccoli?"

He pauses and looks a little puzzled.

"Dad -- for hundreds of thousands of years humans have been hunters and gathered just a few nuts and berries when they could find them. It's wrong to go against evolution -- you'll only make yourself sick. Have you forgotten that paper I wrote on the Maasai diet after that year of work I did while in Med school?"

"That was just theory Neal."

"No dad, not much theory, it was nearly all observation, all of it. I watched them while living with them and you remember don't you? They hardly eat any vegetables at all and in the past they ate none at all. Just meat, blood and milk. And remember what I wrote -- that they keep the fattest pieces for themselves and give us mzungu (white people) the red meat as that is what we want. And secretly they're laughing all along."

"But we feel much better Neal, on this diet."

"Dad could you be telling yourself you are feeling better? Remember you are looking for a result, you are looking for that feel-better feeling. We call it confirmation bias in statistics and science."

"Maybe you're right but we're going to try this for a few months and see how we do."

I keep fighting; I have a very bad feeling about this. "Dad, mum we humans are not made for vegetarian diets. We have a gut that is made for meat digestion and fat is the ideal source of energy. I know what you've been told but why don't you read some of my research. Cows have a rumen -- a second stomach -- we don't have that. We literally cannot digest green stuff."

"Neal, thousands of people in India are vegetarians and they're fine."

"Are they? Look at how much diabetes there is in India. Even here now in the hospitals here we say 'if the patient is brown-skinned the diagnosis is diabetes until proven otherwise -- no matter what symptoms they present with. What about the iron deficiency anaemias and the B12 injections they need every week? And what about the dementias we're now seeing all around us?"

No matter what I bring up -- our teeth structure not being the grinding molars that herbivores have, the gas our guts produce on a veggie diet, the pot bellies that come from eating carbohydrates which they'll have to eat if they give up meat for how else will they get their energy? But they just won't listen and eventually I give up and head home worried acutely aware that I'm facing a brainwashing that is religious zealotry in its every appearance. I know I cannot battle this with any cognitive tools that I might put in front of them. Frustration pervades every corner of my mind as I head home but there's nothing to do about it; they'll just have to learn the hard way.

About three months later Acacia has a school sports day and we've invited mum and dad to join us. We head to their home to pick them up and head to the school.

"Hi mum, Golden is here. Let's go -- can I help with the picnic basket?"

"Hi Neal, yes it's here."

The basket is behind her at her kitchen pantry door. She's busy filling a thermos with tea. "Ah!

Train station tea I see." This is a standing joke with us -- the tea that we carry in thermoses always makes us think of the kind of tea one gets at Indian train stations -- not that we've frequented Indian trains and I don't really know where this has come from but it's stuck and she laughs as I say it. I grab the thermos and turn to get the basket. At that moment she steps backward and trips falling over the picnic hamper onto her behind just beyond it. She cries out in pain as she crumbles onto the floor. I drop the thermos barely conscious of the popping sound as the vacuum flask within shatters explosively inside its plastic housing.

"Mum, mum. Stay there. Don't move." I say as I reach her. The grimace on her face spells lots of pain. "I'm going to get some panadol. Stay there."

Panadol is not going to handle this one. The pain persists and when I try to get her up she cries out in agony. The odd angle of her upper leg crushes me -- that I can tell from the angle is a fracture of the neck of the femur. With Ami's, the gardener's and dad's help I get her into my car and head off to the hospital every bump in the road jarring my nerves more and more with each whimper she emits. Thankfully the MP Shah hospital is not too far away but the diagnosis via my friends and former colleagues is nothing to ease up about. Yes, the neck of the femur is fractured and a hip replacement will need to be done. Our orthopaedist friend does the job and mum spends a week in a private room. But butterfly is quick to get back on her feet and with crutches thrown away in five weeks she's again rushing about.

"Neal, can you come quickly." Dad sounds panicked.

"What's happened dad?"

"It's mum. She's fallen again. I think she might have damaged the new hip."

I'm at their house in under five minutes having brought all my rally driving skills to bear worried that there might be more wrong than dad is aware of and there is. She fell on the steps just outside her kitchen landing on her butt again and we're off to the the hospital in a bizarre deja vu enactment of the skit we lived through only a few weeks back.

The news is worse this time though. The OTHER hip is fractured. Another hip replacement and a battery of tests.

The tests reveal osteoporosis.

Mum is dejected.

I push the 'I told you so' opportunity pointing out that the diet she's been following has led to this. How could butterfly with all her running about have suffered this fate? She's downcast did I push to far?

I try to repair her state of mind but I just can't seem to revive my injured butterfly her wings

broken beyond repair now. I'm furious. If I could find that pundit I'd wring his neck with my own two hands. No amount of pacing about, burying my face in my hands, grinding my teeth is going to reverse the damage already done. These vegetarians and their bloody nonsensical superstitious beliefs. I'm all for people being free to believe whatever they want to believe but I draw the line when it comes to damaging others. My butterfly lies irreparably broken.

This time she's in the hospital for two full weeks and then in bed at home for two months. After that she hobbles around the house for months on end and won't even go outside in the garden that was her pride and joy. The life seems to go completely out of her. And yet she still insists on her now effectively vegan diet and no matter what any of us try she won't deviate from that.

Dad too begins to suffer but after several sessions of 'counselling' from me he changes his diet and adds some chicken and fish. His sunken cheeks begin to fill out again even as mums recede further. Mum begins to complain of frequent visits to the bathroom in the night. With great trepidation I get my glucometer out of its hiding place in my medical bag and read off the 12 millimolar reading confirming type 2 diabetes. We take her to another doctor friend and start her on oral drugs. A year goes by, blood sugar control is eventually perfected, the dose of her drugs suitably titrated but she begins to forget things. Dad takes her to the coast for a holiday. Anita, Sheila, Sean and the kids, including ours, join the folks at the Sun 'n Sand Hotel. Ami and I stay back in Nairobi to keep work moving along. The stories when they get back are not good. Mum seems to have problems with Sean once even threatening to pull off his pool towel to give it to Acacia. I am also told about how she will suddenly repeat entire sentences or stop midway and not be able to continue talking for a full minute or so. She does not seem as bothered by this as I am. Watching a couple of these episodes enacted right in front of me is depressing and leaves me with a helplessness that portends more of the same in the days, months and years to come. I somehow drum up the courage to broach the subject with my siblings.

"Mum is developing a dementia. It looks like early Alzheimer's."

"Neal, don't say such things. It's bad luck."

"Anita -- luck has little to do with this. Let's not go all superstitious OK? That is my medical opinion and if you can't face it perhaps ST will throw some light onto the situation. Why don't you take her to him?"

ST confirms this and the futile saga of drugs, diet and exercise is lived through but the dementia progresses surprisingly fast. Within a year of the diagnosis mum is lying in the sofa in the living room not responding to anyone. Years later I watch her thinking about Type 3 diabetes that we did not know anything about at the time she contracted this terrible disease. Coconut oil, cutting out all carbohydrates and all the other measures that we now know work so well against this are still not mainstream. I may have links to thousands of peer-reviewed research papers on my websites but it's to no avail. When people, especially caregivers, are rigid in their thinking one might just as well be banging one's head against a brick wall. I visit her time and again and each time we act out the same skit

"Mum."

"Hi Mum."

"MUM -- it's me,"

"It's me your Golden."

"SHUT UP!"

My Veganism, vegetarianism and other neuroses rant

In 2005 I was asked to watch and critique 'Earthlings' a documentary about the mistreatment of animals starring Joaquin Phoenix as narrator and directed by Shaun Monson. This fitted in perfectly with my seething, boiling state of mind that still roams the edges of my psyche whenever I head out to sit with mum for a few minutes. This critique rings true to this day. It came easily to me while this health issue rages around us so close.

Earthlings is a pretty horrific docudrama that pulls together some of the worst clips of animal treatment that can be found on the internet. What hit me most strongly was the treatment of cows in India. The part of the video that graphically shows this starts at approximately 46 minutes into the film. The irony of this 'standard of care' for an animal an entire nation reveres cuts deep into my psyche.

As the narrator states the prohibition of the killing of cows as governed by the tenets of the Hindu religion has led to the 'accumulation' of thousands of cows that have to be disposed off in some way or other. Many even as seen in the video are old, decrepit, their skin barely hanging onto their bones. All are obviously sick. One only has to travel across India to see this in action for oneself. In mine and my family's travels across the state of Gujarat we have often come across cows in the street jostled by tuk-tuks and lorries, eating human excrement and plastic bags and lying on the ground in the most appalling conditions. The just and devout step around them barely sparing the time to wince at the smelly creatures so mistreated that it beggars belief they may be as revered as claimed. The smug holier-than-thou quips from the righteous as they proclaim the virtues of their faith ring hollow in my ears even as I write this critique. The treatment as claimed in the documentary of sixty thousand cows a day legs tied together, metal shoes nailed to their hoofs, crammed into lorries or force-marched hundreds, nay thousands of kilometres to slaughter houses outside the 'protection zone' does not surprise me at all. The ironies of India -- a world class producer of leather -- of slaughter houses for their sacred animal -- of appalling treatment of their supposedly God-like creature can only make me shake my head in [knowing] wonder. 1.4 billion mouths and growing. What else could we expect? And yet there is worse to come and we all know it though we chose to ignore the impending crash.

One can watch this film and be horrified by the acts of violence meted out on the animals in it or

one can look for deeper meaning and think about working towards possible solutions. I prefer to look at how we humans got to this point in time and in so doing begin to think about how we'd go about turning the clock back if that is at all possible. It's easy enough to see that we weren't always like this. We weren't always so crammed onto this planet that we have no room for it's other inhabitants. Within my own lifetime I can document, through my personal photography especially, how my neighbourhood has changed, how the plains teeming with game have been reduced to concrete jungle, how our pathetic attempts to save some land for conservation have worked and caused us to rejoice in the apparent [false] huge strides forward that we have made. Can this problem ever be solved? It has to be or nature is going to solve it for herself by removing from the equation four billion souls in a quick dissection and lopping off of the offending, infected limb. Nature is unsympathetic in that way; she will not hesitate to repair herself. Indeed if one knows anything about mathematically chaotic systems one can see that this is the unfolding just waiting to happen.

It wasn't always that we had to feed seven BILLION individuals of our own species. It wasn't always that we had so many humans that the rest of the planet pales in comparison. How did we become so numerous? How did we manage to blow up our population out of all proportion and set the stage for the future prediction of twenty five billion by the year 2150? That this figure is unsustainable and will not be reached but that we will instead witness a total collapse of the planet well before then behoves us to look at this problem more closely.

For two million years of our existence here we were hunter-gatherers. Only in the last ten thousand years have we had agriculture. From the earliest plantings of a few seedlings to the invention of the plough we continue to evolve our agricultural technology. I posit that the plough is the worst invention humans have ever come up with. Were it not for this contraption we'd have never been able to feed all these mouths. In a terrible twist of fate we've become the victims of a Parkinsonesque Law and expanded the number of mouths to fill the available agricultural output that the plough has given us. Had we remained hunter-gatherers we'd have never been able to raise that many humans and the food constraint would have limited our numbers. To anyone that has worked with indigenous hunter-gatherer tribes (I worked with the Masai of Kenya for a number of years on just such a project) this is only too evident. So too is evident the growth in their numbers as they urbanise with their slow but inexorable movement into the cities. They live our evolutionary pathway right before our very eyes that we keep tightly shut lest we see something we'd rather not have.

Imagine then for a moment, if you will, having no wheat fields, no bread in the isles of the grocery store, no car to take you to that store but instead having to run through the forests of Africa, to set traps and snares to capture that antelope that will feed your entire family for a few days before you have to do it all again. Think back too to the accounts of the explorers. Accounts attesting to how the plains were crowded with animals right up to what today amount to our doorsteps. Put yourself in the shoes of those explorers and look out across the African plain to the predators feeding off the numerous game. Then come back and look towards the Mwea Tebere rice fields, the North American prairie or the fishing grounds the Japanese hunt. What do you see? Food technology. It began with the plough, progressed to an abandonment of

our evolutionary roadmap branching into agriculture and has culminated in overcrowding, cruelty to animals and so much that the movie only too ably brings across. Death of the oceans, warming of our climate, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, drought. Can we truly say that the death and destruction wrought by these evils is not of our own doing?

And it has resulted in numerous neuroses: Religion as we appeased imaginary Gods that starved us with droughts due to our digressions from good behaviour; vegetarianism ever tightening up to veganism as we abandoned what we were evolved for to follow an ever narrower pathway if we were to succeed in feeding the growing number of mouths. The Gods were the only answer our ancient backward thinking could find to explain the apparent unhappiness our planet has and continues to show us. The vegetarianism had to progress to ever tighter veganism to keep up with the number of mouths; whither now? We're on a tightrope how do we feed the ever-growing number of mouths what's next supercrops? Genetic modification? What unintended consequences await us? Parkinson's Law again and it shows no sign of abating. We're running headlong into a wall and few of us seem able to see it coming. We're going to force the planet to produce the crops we need if it means clearing every last scrap of natural, unadulterated land that we can find. We're going to rip the forest and it's rich floor, the savannah and it's grasses. We continue to pump the soil full of chemicals for it can no longer do it the 'natural' way. And now we're even looking into engineering the plants to produce ever higher yields with no thought to what it is doing to the creatures that live in a system that is so finely tuned we can hardly understand the most basic parts of it.

Much though the documentary makes about the rights of other inhabitants of this planet I see underlying it the system that this planet has evolved into over millions of years. A finely tuned system as any that exists. Taking on that system look one can easily see that the entire ecosystem has it's every niche filled with organisms that make the whole run as a finely tuned, smoothly oiled machine. But we're altering that tuning at an ever increasing pace. And we don't seem to understand the Law of Unintended Consequences many of its effects though we have seen in the past. Something must give; something must break. Any system can only be bent so far and ours is 'that' far already.

So we continue along our merry way convincing ourselves that we are in control of this complex system we find ourselves a part off. We tell each other that we are better off if we give up meat and become vegetarian even as we are faced with the obvious fact that that very thinking started us on this path in the first place. We ignore our evolutionary roots, our lack of cow-like grinding molars, our single stomach compared to a cows four, our intestinal milieu that lacks the fermentation vat that breaks down cellulose that a herbivore ingests. When we can't figure out how our systems work we adopt the ultimate cop-out and say 'God did it.' Faced with our own imminent self-inflicted destruction we retort 'God would never let it happen.' And so we rent the system apart putting ourselves smugly to bed each night whispering in our minds that He would never let us destroy the planet. Will we look back when it's gone and wake up to what we have done. I think not --- we're too smug for that.

There is a saying in aviation concerning twin-engined aircraft flight:

'The second engine flies you to the scene of the crash.'

We're already flying on the second engine; the first failed a long time back. That we're yet to acknowledge that fact is a pathetic indictment of our lot. It's sad that we are content to run single-engined when we are so capable we could add many more engines to the mix if only we didn't cop out with all these excuses of divine intervention and misaligned dietary neuroses. We let viruses take over our minds and head towards the crash site oblivious of the ground rushing up to meet us. Is it our neuroses that are preventing us seeing it coming? Is it not time instead to give up these luxuries and face the situation head on applying our brains and technologies towards finding a solution? Isn't it time to call a spade a spade; a failed system a failed system and instead turn the misdirected intellectual heat away from the nonsense but rather towards the problem? Indeed many of us already do and therein lies the hope and what keeps me waking up in the morning.

Bubble!

We settle back into our lives in Kenya but the trials and tribulations are not over yet. Before we wound up our affairs in New Plymouth we sought out a rental property management company and handed over the renting of our home on Heta Road. About two years after our return George Street is completed and we manage to rent out the apartments fairly quickly. The rent pays our 12% 1.8 million dollar loan but we've opted to delay payment of the principal for three years so we're only too aware that we're walking on thin ice here. We're only just able to make the loan repayments and our Loan to Value Ratio (LVR) is at the maximum allowed by our second-tier financier at 80%. Between the Body Corporate fee in Auckland (a kind of management fee for the apartment block) and the Council Rates we're dishing out close to \$23,000 annually which means we get nothing at all to take out of the properties to use as living expenses in Kenya. Still it all seems OK given the equity growth of 15% that has been the norm to this point in time in the New Zealand property markets and we're looking forward to close to 2 million dollars that we'll be able to pull out of the properties if we sell up in 5 years time.

2007: We've been back 4 years and news begins to trickle in that all is not well in the property markets in the US. I'm not too concerned -- the US is a very different kettle of fish from NZ and I don't think that their problems will affect the countries down under in any significant way. So it comes as a very big surprise when I receive a letter, from my lender, telling me that since property values in New Zealand have fallen my LVR is now much higher than the 80% they normally allow. The letter reads that I'll have to inject \$200,000 as soon as possible and certainly before the passage of 2 weeks. I look at the post mark and notice that we're already past the 2 week deadline. I rush home and call New Zealand asking my lawyer what to do about this. He calls me back a while later to give me the grim news that there is not much he can do as the terms of the loan state that LVR must be maintained at or below 80% at all times. The only option is to auction off one of the properties to pay off the loan to the point where we've brought the LVR to under 80%. He agrees to find me an agent who will arrange the auction for me.

An agent calls me in a few days to tell me that for \$32,000 he'll do all the listing and other advertising and auction off 11 George Street for us. I agree to pay him his fee and on the day he calls me up on my phone while the auction is in progress. We're all crestfallen when the auction fails to net even the reserve price of 1.8 million. Hanging up I walk around shell-shocked facing the fact that we've basically lost George Street and 1.8 million dollars and worse that there is a shortfall that we'll have to make up somehow. Later in the day I get a call from the lawyer telling me that one of the prospective buyers at the auction called up my lender and offered them 1.1 million and they agreed so I had indeed lost George Street lock, stock and barrel and someone had bought it for a song. Worse news was to follow. The lawyer tells me that the lender is seeking the shortfall on the loan of \$700,000 and since our Heta Road house is not worth that much they will seek the remainder from me personally. I lose my temper and hang up. For weeks thereafter the lender calls me up asking that I make up the \$120,000 shortfall that has resulted from the auction of #40 Heta Road. I finally tire of this and inform them that I have no other New Zealand assets pointing out that the loans I have taken out were secured on the two properties and that if they had been a little patient they would have got their money as the markets recovered. I threaten them with legal action if they do not leave me alone. The calls stop coming.

For a while Ami and I lie in bed nights holding tight on to each other wondering what to do next and then one morning

"What are we doing Ams?"

"We're panicked. Never been in this situation before. Don't even have enough money for school fees for the girls next term."

"What can we do?"

"Borrow money against our home?"

"And what if things continue to go south and we get another revaluation and another repossession here on this home?"

In spite of the very tough time we face we are in our home on the lake edge in the land we love so much and it feels each and every day that we can take it all and even more than we are facing. And then it suddenly hits me.

"Hey, Ami. I know so much finance stuff now. Do you think I could start a financial service for paying customers?"

"I know you. All you have to do is unleash that 'dog with the bone' and you'll be up and running."

"But where to start?"

Back to the internet looking at as many financial products as I can and in an incredibly short time I have mastered a lot of arcane stuff from stocks and bonds to futures, derivatives and more. High school calculus revived I swim daily in Black-Scholes formulae, derivative pricing, hedging methodologies and more. In a deja vu all over again we hold a seminar wherein I explain algorithmic trading and show some code live on a laptop trading automagically and making money for me. No one knows that the account I am showing them is merely a practice account the 100,000 dollars in there just paper money. I nett four investors from that seminar and they put in a total of 250k which I trade using all my skills getting them a return of 100% in the first year they were trusting me with their money. For my efforts I obtain 6% per annum in management fees and 30% of the profits at the end of each year. This amount of money allows me to live again, breathe again, put food on the table and keep the kids in school.

And then came Lehman Brothers!

I have been watching this bank for a while and have been picking up on various cues and news items. As Ami had envisaged, my dog-with-a-bone comes out as I dig deep into EDGAR records, final accounts filings, earnings announcements, audited books and more. I get onto websites and study CAPM -- the Capital Pricing Asset Model -- applying it to Lehman. I discover Green Light Capital and David Einhorn's book Fooling Some of the People All of the Time. It becomes a favourite of mine and I delve deep between the lines. Like Einhorn I begin to smell a rat in the entire world banking system. I write polemics about banks and bankers and learn about the tool used to 'punish' such nefarious dealers -- the short sale. I start to make small short trades risking just a couple thousand dollars on a trade. I learn through the school of hard knocks losing nearly half my personal capital through this learning mode phase. I discover put options and learn about the protection they can give me. I come across Nassim Taleb's book The Black Swan. I am totally taken by this text. I start calling myself The Black Swan Hedge Fund and create a website on which I publish daily writings and rantings. I parcel up my entire nest-egg into ten pieces and put a piece into a short-dated put option. It costs pennies per contract of one hundred shares. It promises to pay out big time if Lehman should collapse but I am only too aware of the confirmation bias that I am now deeply mired in. The first contract expires worthless as does the second. When the third goes the way of the first two I begin to worry about losing my entire savings. I read up books on behavioural psychology. Tversky and Kahneman, nobel prize winners in Economic Sciences educate me through their books, websites, blogs and videos. I become even more aware of my behaviour and where it's taking me. I'm not ready to give up on my philosophy, beliefs and gut instinct though. I've done tons of research by now on this system, this banking system and the rat is stinking to high heaven. I hold on.

I keep letting put options expire worthless and purchase a new contract each time valued at \$1.08 a share with an expiry only 3 months into the future. The options are well out of the money and the risk considerable. I fully expect to lose the entire premium on these options but I buy them as 'suicide puts' the kind of instrument you buy when you think the world is going to go to hell in a short time. I put about 10% of my portfolio into those puts each time I buy one. It

is a gamble that I'll repeat again and again and succeed from again and again but at the time I have this very strong conviction that I will be proven right and will end up discovering a tool that will keep me and my family's fortune safe for years to come.

I wake one morning to news that Lehman is filing bankruptcy protection. My Ami and the kids can't understand the elation I feel. I take them out to dinner counting my chickens before they hatch. Lehman stock crashes. My shorts double in value in short order: my puts --- they go up close to 1000% percent. I quickly sell to close the contracts remembering only too painfully from NZ what folly it is to hold onto an asset that has already gained more than you ever expected it to. I recover my loss in New Zealand adding to it TEN TIMES what I'd lost! Once more I put my funds in autopark letting them manage themselves but now with my full knowledge brought to bear to create a well balanced portfolio that over the years I repeat very many times for a bunch of well-healed friends that develop a liking for my Artificially Intelligent financial systems and take advantage of my willingness to help them grow their savings too.

Life anew

And so one thing leads to another and from Chairmanship of Nyari I move into acting as the Treasurer of the flying training arm of the Aero Club of East Africa -- Pegasus Flyers -- buy a trike of my own, travel the country to the tune of more than 230,000Km and revel in nature in all of my endeavours. It will take me fifteen years to rebuild my set of stolen cameras but I'll end up with a state-of-the-art Nikon professional setup that I use to capture scenes of the world that I live in. I manage to find and purchase a Land Rover Defender that once again becomes, much like the one we had given up in our move to New Zealand, the fifth member of our family. With her we travel to every remote corner of the country and spend countless hours focused like laser beams on what is going on around us. As before with our earlier Landy this one detracts not a bit from the 'real life' out there. No DVD player, no air conditioning, no creature comforts --- just a tractor that gets us into and out of any place we want to visit. She denies us nothing. Having no A/C means keeping the windows open letting all of life into the car and giving us full immersion in the sounds and sights of nature. Her incredible traction means nothing is out of reach. No rock, crag or outcrop, no hill, no rough road, no track however rough or inaccessible. Not having fancy carpeting and seating means that rivers flowing through her as we ford a deep means little and the occasional spilled drink or food becomes a non-event. But most of all her versatility fits us like a glove. From low spare parts costs to the ability to find parts nearly anywhere in any small bush village to her engine burning straight vegetable oil when there's no diesel to be found all have stood us in good stead time and again.

As I settle into my second life my very deep knowledge of computers, especially through the operating systems knowledge I have built up via my work on Linux, I start to think about thinking. Ray Kurzweil's book 'The Singularity is Near' is instrumental here. It literally blows my mind. Every page points to conclusions I cannot find myself disagreeing with one single bit. Every graph, every chart, every page of discussion has me hanging onto each word with trembling fingers and tumbling mind, leaving me with the feeling that I must jump up out of my

seat head to my workshop and build a circuit right there and then. Kurzweil's is a belief, a belief born not out of dogma or superstition but out of clear thought, reasoning intelligence and based on the tenets of science. Here is a set of beliefs that I can test, research on the internet and confirm for myself. Exponential growth --- yes. The Law of Accelerating Returns --- to me it belongs up there with Newton's Laws of Motion. Six epochs of evolution --- a resounding --- YES!

One thing leads to another and I create the Kenya Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence and within it the Kenya School of Artificial Intelligence. Without any staff, just on my own, I teach more than 600 students as I've taught in the past, but now fully on-line and more focused on the task at hand than ever before. I teach on the development of a true thinking machine. I teach speed reading. I teach superpower memory secrets. I awaken minds to the possibilities that one opens oneself to when one let's go off superstition, religion and mumbo jumbo. I teach rational thinking --- how to look at the world, make sense of it and take advantage of the mind that evolution has given us the only way we know for sure that we can survive as the human race.

My students first wake up to how fast they can read with training that progresses them from the run-of-the-mill 150 words per minute (wpm) to the more accomplished 2500 wpm. Next I apply my discovery that I can remember the names of every single person in a room full of 250 people, to these students and take them from 'dunce' to 'genius' most of them recalling from memory ream upon ream of software code, textbook and manual. Then I wake them up to what potential lurks within them and how far they can go in life if only they will allow their minds to roam free coming up with ideas that they can then turn into income and benefits for their fellow [wo]man.

I struggle hard and continue to fight against the naysayers, the superstitious and the dogmatic that try every day to derail this process. We cannot deny our next evolutionary step any more than we could have denied that agriculture would replace the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Kurzweil pointed to the six epochs of evolution and I can see only too clearly that we are already advancing past Epoch 5 into Epoch 6. The universe is going to wake up and we're going to be the ones that wake it up. I, for one, want to be here to see that happen and to experience my own integration of my mind and being into that machine. I long for the next evolutionary step and wake up each and every day ready to do battle with the forces of ignorance to hasten that next evolutionary step.

So, now finally at the end of this long story that still continues to unfold for me in the real universe 'out here' I leave you with Irving John Good's "Speculations Concerning the First Ultraintelligent Machine" written way back in 1965 and a goal I am still heading towards with ever increasing speed. Good's words point to the coming singularity, a goal which is now my stated life ambition and what I want my life to have stood for when I'm gone (if ever!).

Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual

activities, an ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an "intelligence explosion," and the intelligence of man would be left far behind. Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make.
verse

I strive to be that man; that last man. I strive to create that intelligence.

Epilogue

As I sit down to write these final thoughts about a phase of my life as I've described it in the book above I realise that I don't want to simply summarise or rehash what I've said in the more than 500 pages above but instead want to add a sprinkle of spice to the foregoing. I realise that there's another book in these words here and perhaps one day I'll get down to writing it but here it is in summary form or perhaps as a teaser?

THE spice, nay the love of my life lies by my side even as I type this on my laptop and has lain here each and every night for more than 30 years. In the mornings I awake to the assurance that she is there for me, that when the chips were down she picked up all my messed up pieces and put me together again. But for her I'd not be here today putting this down in words. The least of my worries would be that I'd have no dominant arm with which to type all this out; the worst -- that I'd have missed out on so much of life -- so much that I have only had because she has been a part of it all. I dread the day that I'll be without her and I work towards the methuselarity with that thought being the primary force driving me forward. Could I spend eternity with her here on this planet, in the flesh and blood that I currently inhabit? If not in that state then uploaded to a computer? Wishful? Perhaps not especially given the work that I dedicate myself to each and every day and the progress that I can palpably feel every moment that I'm working on it. A quick Google search should amply convince you that "we ain't seen nothin' yet" with regard to the technological advancements that lie around the corner rapidly being discovered by those of us not steeped in the dogma that we see all around us. Ami and I met when we joined Jamhuri High School to undertake our Advanced Level studies. On that first day, that registration day, she caught my eye and I hers. Yes we had had chance encounters at age eight that are difficult to explain though given my rational mind I put it down to simply that --- chance encounters! We dated and after six long years were married. The road to our marriage -- those six years -- are a saga in themselves meriting the book I hint at above.

We were very clear from the beginning that we had a chance of setting up a successful life given the kind of thinking that we both exhibited, the teamsmanship we felt from the outset of our relationship and our willingness to sacrifice and delay gratification for the bigger things in life. We knew that we'd be happy together for a long time. Love of course came before all this rational thought and we fell hopelessly in love at the tender age of 17 under a full African moon lying on her lazy back as we walked across a field to a school party. But there were forces that would try to trip us up. Her mum, tyrant that she was to the very end and now it emerges even beyond the end of her life, would have Ami jump out of 3rd floor buildings on three attempts to

have her forcibly vaccinated to get her out of the country so that she would no longer be able to see me. That Ami did not break a limb or worse is miracle enough for us. The forced vaccinations never did happen each time Ami running away from home the two of us scrambling to get her housed somewhere at a loss as to what to do next. We were too young to marry, had no careers and no income and I was a full time medical student suffering through the trials and tribulations of that subject so mired in politics and so ridiculously, badly taught to all of us at the Kenyatta National Hospital. One time Ami stayed at a hotel for six days another time at the YWCA. Payment was difficult and I emptied out my meagre savings, we both sold treasured stuff and suffered other privations to get her through these periods. Each time Ami succumbed to promises from her parents after her pleading to stop this nonsensical behaviour to let her get on with her life. Each time the promises petered out her father unable to and too weak to keep to his promises instead listening to voices of his relatives surrounding him. The promises we made to the 'powers that controlled our lives' died slow deaths culminating with another atrocity sometimes another leap out of a building. Six years of this mistreatment took place.

They locked her behind bars, disabled phones so she could not call me and even had me beaten up so badly that I spent several days in bed after my professors put me together again counselling me for hours on end with regard to the obvious lack of sanity I exhibited in continuing to pursue my own happiness in this manner. Using highly reliable sources we ferreted out who had done this to me and watch for his comeuppance to this day. That he now suffers an intolerable terminal mental illness seems recompense to some degree. On the day I was beaten up some of my friends got together and armed with 9mm semi-automatics nearly went on a rampage heading out to the head perpetrators home me in tow. With me fighting and kicking to thwart their intentions they then dragged me to Ami's own house in Westlands and there in the darkness in the garden, having scaled the gate, they plotted their revenge in my name. It was all I could do to prevent the revenge murder on the cards and the ensuing termination of my relationship with Ami that would have surely followed. It all sounds so unreal, so melodramatic when I put it down in words these three decades later but it did happen. As they say 'You had to be there' and I was!

Eventually we arrived at a time when drugging Ami to get her out of the country seemed imminent. We learned about this from a 'mole' within her father's own ranks and it scared the daylights out of me when that mole came home to tell me and my family that an imminent 'kidnapping' was in the offing and that I'd never see her again. This person being a close friend of my father's feared for the fate that I'd suffer if this event came to pass. He explained to my dad that I'd never be the same again and would likely spend my entire life looking for Ami and she for me separated by an ocean and the sea of people that litter the subcontinent of India.

Ami and I decided that we now had to take things into our own hands or suffer a separation caused by her parents from which we might never recover. So we eloped. I snuck her out of her office at the Nairobi Hospital rushed her to a marriage registrars office giving my parents and siblings little time to decide if they'd want to be at the wedding (they did and were). We were married at the Marriage Registrars office in Nairobi on the 22nd of June, 1983 having NOT posted the Bans fearing that her parents or uncles might find out what was in the offing and step

up their efforts to 'disappear' her. It is a cute testament and oft-joked about one that our marriage certificate carries the names Neal Aggarwal marrying Amita Aggarwal, witnesses Neil Athayde and Anita Aggarwal. My dad called hers informing him that we'd headed north when in reality we had headed south to a wonderful peace-filled honeymoon. After that week-long honeymoon we headed up-country to two weeks of blissful camping and the discovery that we have more in common than even we suspected through our six year courtship. It took three years before I'd even talk to her folks let alone visit them at all regularly. It would later come to pass that they'd adore their grandkids and would dote on them both and help Ami and I out in numerous ways. And yet --- there would be that double standard surfacing it's ugly head time and again. We'd hear and witness broken relationships, forced-arranged marriages and more and oftentimes her mum or dad were directly implicated in these atrocities'.

I fight these nonsensical behaviour patterns that I still come across every now and then. From forced, arranged marriages to the bowing down of women to touch mens' feet I fight, fight, fight little good though it may do. I teach my own girls not to give in one iota to this nonsense and they in turn fight to end this discrimination. It goes on around me nearly every day. I write these words now in my epilogue to this book because this is what my life has been about all along. Fighting -- fighting against injustices, against crime, against irrationality. I trust that in these pages you have found something that has got you thinking about the things that go on in your life too perhaps silently. Have my words given you the strength to fight like I've fought? Have you woken up and realised that you too can have the life that you want and have you come to understand that to get what you want out of your life is a struggle and a fight against the forces that seem to exist solely to stop you getting that life? Have you read my story and found the strength to fight like I have for the good things, the wonderful things life has to offer. If so then my efforts to put down these words have been all worthwhile and I leave my keyboards alone now to take a rest before perhaps I dive in once more to see if I can drag some more thoughts out of my mind onto paper.

Lessons Learned

May 25, 2015

This chapter is an in-depth discussion chapter in which I bring together all that I have learned from the immediate aftermath of my shooting and the surgeries to what could have been done better in terms of preparation, training and securing ourselves in an increasingly violent world. I am linking to various articles and websites on the web from these pages and elsewhere in this book. Do visit those links. You only have to click on them with your mouse and you'll be taken there in your preferred browser to read up more and substantiate what I am writing about here. Knowledge is EVERYTHING folks; build yours as you've now seen me do mine in these pages.

This is by far the most useful part of the book while at the same time being the most valuable. This is the part that is worth its weight in gold especially if you have someone or indeed are someone that is going through what I went through. In here you might find answers to your own trials and tribulations, to what you should be looking to in preparation for a future force majeure

as the insurance industry likes to call it. In here you might find fodder for questions that you want to ask me so I can help you with your own preparations.

These then are my commandments, my rules to live by. Unlike those other [ten] written by bronze age, fearful, incapable-of-thinking brutes these are borne off the school of hard knocks. I trust you will find these to be of immediate use and that they can be put to work immediately you read and understand any one of them. If you have not already, read this book through from the very first page so you can prove to yourself where I am coming from and why it is I write these commandments. They are not just some ramblings of an old man.

Find something you love to do

The worst thing you can do is passing the days in your life doing something you don't really have a passion for. As I lay on the floor dying I can honestly say that I was happy to go, ready to let go, unburdened by any 'grasping' and hanging-onto life. I attribute this attitude to the fact that I've been fortunate to live my life out doing what I really, really WANT to do each and every day. I once found myself in the medical profession and the politics was killing: I had the presence of mind but not the financial wherewithal to quit. But quit I did and though at the time it seemed like the craziest thing I'd ever done it became the step that I HAD to take in order to discover the rest that I have become. Had I continued in my medical profession I'd still be there today with no broader horizons than what lies between the ears of a medical man.

Hobbies, hobbies, hobbies -- get 1 or 20

I watch in dismay as I write this as my father-in-law sits around at age 80 bored to death having nothing to do, no interests, no hobbies. I, on the other hand, have no time in my life even to sit back and 'chill out' as my kids like to say to me. From building airplanes and drones to crafting computer circuitry, to writing software and researching fancy algorithms. From growing a bamboo plant to creating a rocket stove out of a chiminea I've taught myself literally hundreds of things. Tomorrow if I lose my right arm I'll have several interests that I still can pursue. More prosaically, should I develop geriatric arthritis that necessitates hanging around my home I'll be able to do that too and not find myself bored with life at all. Alzheimer's and other dementias have been shown to be held at bay by minds that are active. Google it, use the internet, figure it out for yourself, prove it to yourself -- that in itself should prove to be a hobby you can keep for life revelling in the knowledge that we now all have at our fingertips.

I talk in these sections here about reading but don't forget music.

It is CRITICALLY IMPORTANT that you learn to listen to different genres of music. From classical to jazz to country to rock there's tons of great music out there. You don't have to learn to play an instrument though that is of tremendous value too but just learning to listen and developing a liking for various kinds of music is important. It staves off boredom and has been shown to have benefits of very many kinds.

So, go out there, find a hobby - it can be anything but find something that you think you could be passionate about. Pursue it for a day or a year. Still find passion in it? Then keep it going.

Learn, learn, learn. Try out things. Build things. Keep busy. When the day comes that something happens to you that prevents you following one of your hobbies switch to another that you've been developing all along. Don't get mired in a funk; it could kill you faster than a bullet.

Be in nature -- really [BE] there

I've written about my enlightenment in these pages and I've taught my girls my outlook on this. They've learned to practice this with and through me and have in turn caught me out when I stray too far from this beaten track. Being in nature is central to that outlook. When I am in nature I see the rocks, the insects, the plants, the animals, the sky. I smell the wet earth and the flying dust, I hear the twitter of sunbirds, the whoosh of wings the coo-cooing of the ring-necked dove. Behind me on my bookshelf sit field guides to the birds of the world, tracks that animals make in sand, guides to trees and plants, books on the weather, sailing, flying and more. All relate to nature in one way or another. When I have a tough day and things are not going my way nature is my saviour. I can head out onto my deck just ten metres from where I sit typing this text and I am at once salved, becalmed, brought back to my core and [re]-focused. Get into the 'habit of nature.' Like me it will stand you in good stead for the rainy days ahead.

Get a tractor (a landy will sub)

It does not have to be a landy nor does it have to be a car at all. What I mean is -- get the attitude firmly stuck between your ears that you need to see the wood for the trees in the forest. Our landy is the epitome of that thinking. She has no frills -- no DVD player, no air-conditioning, no plus leather seats. And yet she is out friend, our family member our 'person' that makes things happen. We all need to get clear in our heads what each part of our lives is for. Our vehicles are for taking us places. Yes some vehicles have to get us there while at the same time insulating us from the outside world. I certainly don't want to have to sit in Nairobi traffic for hours on end my nerves on edge as the engines sounds blare around me the smoke choking my lungs. So for that I have a little Toyota Corolla with A/C and an nice stereo system. She has an automatic gearbox that makes life bearable in the city. But for travel into nature I have a vehicle that brings in RAW nature to every fibre of my being. She is a purpose built machine. I can count on her to get me out to the 'playing fields' of my mind and to bring me back intact at the end of 'the game.' Most of all I can count on her to 'get out of my way' even as I sit in her and marvel at all that lies around me.

Develop a reading diet

I can speed read. I read at 4500 words per minute on average. That means a 400 page novel takes me about 20 minutes to get through. I have so much pleasure reading in this manner; the book flows like a movie. And of course the more you read the more words you have with which to formulate thoughts. I used to teach this to others and, in that phase of my life, I taught more than 600 students to read at this pace and even faster. Sadly I no longer have time to teach this. Though even if you plod along at the average university graduates reading speed of 250 words per minute it is important to develop a habit of reading regularly. This becomes a means of transporting yourself to other places, enriches your mind with stories, gets you brain to mould itself to new thinking modes and much, much, more. I say you need to develop a diet because I

truly believe that you have to treat reading like eating your daily diet of food. It nourishes your mind and keeps dementias at bay. Google this and you'll see how much research has been done and how often this is being proved by study after study. Join my book club on Facebook where we read a new book each and every year, comment on it, share thoughts and engage in ways you have not dreamed of... yet.

Develop a rational mind

So many of us are plagued by irrational, dogmatic thought processes that is robbing us of much of our potential. I learned through this journey of mine that my mind, like that of so many others, even though mine is so finely honed, is itself prone to grasp at straws when placed in extremis. I recovered from PTSD only because I was able to rationally dissect out what was happening to me and deal with that inside my own thought processes. Had I been unable to break free of the shackles of the flim flam like 'chup' that the world throws constantly at me I'd have taken my own life a long time ago. Unfortunately I have a key friend, one who made a profound difference in my life in my younger days, who did just this. He was unable to separate the *wheat from the chaff* and succumbed to his own thinking processes taking his life in the chaos engendered. He's now gone to us and the world is a worse place for it. Today I dedicate at least 30 minutes a day to teaching myself to break free of charlatans, astrology, the Bermuda Triangle, 'Big Foot,' the Lochness Monster, Aliens, ESP, auras, telepathy, ghosts, telekinesis, water dousing, remote viewing, bleeding statues, milk drinking idols and even the nonsense about 13 being an unlucky number. After the Westgate debacle my lack of faith in any religion (forgive the pun) has me holding the same attitude towards all religions. With 41,000 known and documented religions out there as I write this each of them calling themselves 'the one true religion' I'm sure you can see through the smoke screen too.

This process of looking for evidence for anything and everything that comes my way has stood me in good stead for a number of years and my knowledge of how the world really works keeps growing, keeps me sane, keeps me coming back for more and more. I keep, each day, my eyes wide open, my excitement at the start of the day hard to contain and visible to all and sundry around me. As soon as you can jump onto this wagon too and educate yourself. As you go through life and especially as you get older this skill will stand you in good stead too.

Eat a healthy diet

As I've written before on my blog and on so many others websites --- we've been cheated folks. The sixty year experiment on unsuspecting humans has gone terribly wrong. Today more than 100 million humans are morbidly obese. It all stems from the Nurses Study started in 1976 and from Ancel Keys work which he presented in 1956 to the American Heart Association in which he said a diet high in butter, lard, eggs and beef would lead to coronary disease. Learn some statistics and internalise the scientific method. As I said above having a non-rational mind can lead you to follow the advice given by those people that will lead you straight into the current state of affairs. Read my sections on vegetarianism and how that has led to so many people that I personally know who live a terribly substandard life. Remember -- you cannot deny what you evolved from -- a hunter gatherer. To deny that is to subject your body to untold suffering

the pinnacle of which is Type II diabetes and what we now increasingly understand and call Type III diabetes mellitus.

Go to a gym & walk your way to health

I walk 5km each and every day. It's the easiest exercise to carry out, involves no special equipment and can start at my front door and end back there 45 minutes later. In an average year I walk more than 1500 Km! It all adds up and together with my high fat, very, very, low carbohydrate diet keeps me trim. I also have my own resistance training machine on which I work out each and every day one body part at a time. Resistance training has been shown to be more effective in health generation than even aerobic movement. Read in the book above how my weight changed and what happened to me after I became a sedentary, slouching, couch potato, lost all my muscle mass and then took 15 years to get it back. Follow me on Twitter, Facebook and Telegram (links at end of this book) to see how many I am helping overcome their silly biases and find the road to health.

Gym -- it's not good enough to stay trim. There's the very real danger that you are a TOFI - Thin Outside Fat Inside -- type of person. That's going to lead to Type II diabetes and then to Type III with its attendant dementias, cancers and more. Look at how many people today have hypertension, CVD - cardiovascular disease and then progress to dementias, Parkinson and finally to the dreaded 'c' world - CANCER. All this can be prevented folks. What are you doing about it? Follow the links I've placed in this section and read up my blogs and the more than 1000 research papers and websites that I've linked to.

Learn to defend yourself

I put both my girls through many years of taekwondo after my experiences at the hands of these thugs. I myself learned to handle various weapons from guns to knives and continue to learn Krav Maga the Israeli Defence Forces combat system. Self defence is not easy and yet it's not that difficult either. Simply sitting by and whimpering is not an appropriate option. Being too afraid to do anything about an imminent attack on your person is silly beyond belief. Ami's folks were robbed in their home some years back. In spite of having several remote switches connected to alarm systems that would summon a security company within minutes they all failed to press their buttons as they were afraid that they'll be killed if the SILENT alarm went off. Ami's brother was so deeply traumatised by the incident that he left the country and has ended up living in the UK subjecting himself to the inner psychological turmoil that I'm sure lurks there if only to surface at a later date at an 'Uncle Brij' moment as I've described in the book above.

Defending yourself also means knowing how to save your life in the event of an incident like the one I describe above. If I had not been able to stem the bleeding from my twin bullet injuries I'd have died within minutes. So take some first aid courses and focus on how to deal with injuries from muggings especially those that might be meted on you using guns or knives.

Get house-help

When I was leaving for New Zealand a friend of mine said he'd never live in a country where

there was no hired help possible or where it was too expensive to use hired help. I scoffed at this comment thinking to myself that it can't be much effort to put dishes in a dishwasher and to dump my daily clothes washing into the washing machine. I was to learn differently. The upkeep of a house, two cars, a kitchen, a large garage, a garden, a driveway and all the other mundane jobs in life that we just micromanage, dishing out to our house help here kept us so busy that we coined the term HND -- Humility And Discipline -- to describe them. While we lived in Australia and New Zealand we had no time to engage in pursuits like building aircraft, tinkering with our robotics and electronics gear and so on to say nothing about writing a book like this. Friends have, over several years, voiced similar utterances to mine. They have said that they don't use hired help here because they don't want to be spoiled if and when they have to return to 'the West.' In the meantime I have had the time to develop a robotics company, write this book and begin two others, write a technical manual on python programming, develop two programming languages, rediscover and engage in a long lost hobby -- photography -- and much, much more. Ami has been able to rekindle her Yorkshire Terrier breeding program (she's the only Yorkie registered breeder in the region) and works with me on the robotics. Both our girls have been able to learn from me the art of keeping a landy going learning about engines, gearboxes and more. Acacia and Gaia have also been able to keep their studies going, hone their taekwondo skills and take on new study programs while developing new hobbies. Acacia is able to take two bachelors programs on at the same time working from our high speed internet link and Gaia joins her in the same on-line learning modality in a few months time. None of this would have been possible if we had been charging around HND'ing our way through life. If you live where you can have the benefit of hired help take full advantage of it. We are.

Never EVER get a driver

If you have not yet learned to drive don't sit on your butt one minute more. Get out there and learn to drive NOW! There is no excuse for not knowing how to drive today. It's tantamount to saying you don't know how to read. And if you have been driving all your life try to keep driving as long as you possibly can. I've seen it too often now: Stop a person driving and they deteriorate right before your eyes. This is what happened to my aunt. One day she came home after a pretty bad crash. She had veered off the road into a ditch and hit a culvert. Although the car was damaged luckily no one else had been involved in the crash. We did some tests and confirmed that she had developed epilepsy. I put her on the necessary drugs and informed her that she'd have to stop driving. From that day on she became dependant on me. She lived with me at the time but the reliance on me to take her shopping and other places was a stress only to visible to all of us. She went downhill rapidly ending up with Alzheimer's like dementia within just a few months. Is this anecdotal? Maybe. But 'n' is definitely not equal to 1. I've myself seen this exact same plot play out too often to not believe there's a link between a sedentary persona and dementia.

We've dropped our kids to school every morning. At the present time it's only Gaia that goes to a school about ten kilometres away. It's a quality time for us that we get to spend with her. We talk about how school is going, what her plans and aspirations are and about how she's getting along with her friends and teachers. Relegate this time to a driver in a car and we'd not go to school with her most days -- even if we told ourselves that we'd try to ride with her and the driver

as often as possible. A kind of 'separation of lives' would develop. We'd soon find that we're not part of Gaia's life ... think about it. Isn't it only too clear that this would happen?

Camping trips are something we try to do as often as possible. For this we have two Land Rover Defender four wheel drive vehicles. It's a joy to drive them through easy as well as difficult terrain, to rejoice in what they can do for us, to be in nature with them as our steeds. Put a driver in the driver's seat and we'd be robbed off so much I simply cannot do justice to the description here. Take it from me the day you get a driver you lose far, far more than you gain and the downward slide of your life begins. DON'T DO IT!

Learn something tough - sit an exam, build something

Taking on the MCSE -- Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer -- program helped me recover from the trauma of my incident. Over the years I have put hundreds, literally hundreds, of students through very many programs. I am a firm believer in 'hands-on' learning and for that reason I put control back where control should be ... in the students hands. Today I can teach via the internet which means my reach is that much greater. I run classes in which I can have one hundred, one thousand or more students. My average attendance is seventy students at a time. I can handle that much support load on my own. Udacity, Coursera, EdX, Khan Academy and as I write this more than 200 major universities provide courses on the internet many of them for free. So, there's no reason for not following a course, in your free time, to expand your thinking. Like going to the gym to take care of your body it's just as important to visit the 'brain gym' every day to take care of your mind. There is a well worn adage that we all know is true --- 'use it or lose it' --- and it applies nowhere more aptly than in the brain gym arena.

Care about something -- become an activist

What do you care about? Alleviating poverty? The environment? Perhaps a study of the geology of our planet. Or maybe you are worried about the move to irrational thinking that is so prevalent across our planet at this point in time. "Whatever floats your boat," as I like to say. Find something you're passionate about and pursue it. I am passionate about nature, about the wild places, about those places where I find a kind of peace that is lacking in every concrete jungle I've ever lived in. Having something like this to care about has proved to be another arrow in my quiver, another arrow to fling at those things that *get my goat*. And having such a 'weapon' against the injustices of the world means that I am part of the solution instead of sitting on my butt being part of the problem. Go out and get a passionate something you care about. Make a difference in the world and it will make a difference in your life too.

Secure yourself

You hear a crashing noise and then some scraping metal-on-metal. You realise that someone is trying to get into your home. A worse scenario: You wake in the night to a sound and realise that there already are people in your home. Even if they are outside and trying to break in there is no time to call the police or to summon a security company for which you are carrying a remote alarm that you have on your bedside table. Remember that most robberies, the world over, take place in under 3 minutes from start to finish. Don't believe me? Have a look on YouTube -- there

are tons of examples there for you to see. And remember also that in today's world most, if not all, thugs are equipped with guns. Living in Australia, New Zealand or the UK and think that guns are not legal there so no one has them? Remember this adage then -- WHEN GUNS ARE OUTLAWED, ONLY OUTLAWS HAVE GUNS. Read my text in this book and you'll see that I encountered guns in thugs hands right there in my neighbourhood in New Zealand. Again: Google it! Here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BncmQEESeK>) is a YouTube video where an expert, Robert Sciciliano, who's book, The Safety Minute I wholeheartedly recommend talks about crime today.

So what is one to do? First learn some self defence. Learn in particular how to defend yourself against a knife attack. Second learn what guns are. Go to a range and handle a bunch of guns. Fire them. Take them apart, put them together again. Don't get caught in a situation where a gun takes on a larger-than-life image in your mind. I have watched family members wet their pants when confronted with a threatening, gun waving thug. Those family members have suffered a kind of permanent PTSD. They're still in the throes of it and don't know it. Finally, if you can get legally licensed get a gun, learn how to look after it, learn how to use it, go to regular classes, get certified and keep up that certification by firing at least 200 rounds out of your gun each and every year. Whether you carry the gun on your person all the time or you keep it in your home by your bedside is up to you. In my case if I had had a gun this book would not have been written and you would not now be reading these words. Want to rave and rant about guns and how they should be banned?

Please don't tell me those concerns. First read my story from the beginning and then tell me what you think a gun could have done for me.

Dogs, Alarms, Guards, CCTV and Robots

Dogs: The smaller the better is what we have learned. Terriers -- the lap dog kind -- are best. No dog is going to protect you from a determined robber. Dogs are only too easily poisoned, snared or shot. What they are is an early warning device. For that to work your dog HAS TO live INSIDE your home. If it's locked up in a kennel outside you might as well not have a dog. What kind of dog can live in your house, be a fun companion and not a bull-in-a-china-shop? A little one. Think about it.

Guards: I've found these to be more trouble than of value. Too often it's the guards, even the ones from large security companies, that bring the thugs home to you. Recently we had a neighbour robbed by four thugs who were brought to his home by his expensive security company guards. I got rid of my security company a long time ago, once the chup stopped coming a-tormenting me. I've never been happier. Of course here in Nyari we have a security team comprising 34 guards day and night, a radio network and an app I built for our members where they just have to tap their smartphones and their SOS appears in our control room clearly showing the house number and playing back all sounds that the phone is capturing. You too can build systems to secure yourself. All it takes is thought, deep thought.

CCTV: I use Amazon's Blink system. It's really easy to set up as it's wireless and stores it's

video in the cloud so no threatening me to hand over my DVR recording device. I also run machine code, computer vision stuff on my cameras but you don't need that. What you need is something that alerts you to prowlers around your property when you not there or are asleep. Blink is perfect for that sending me alert on my phone when anything moves in their vicinity.

Robots: A fast approaching reality. I have my own that I built that patrols the driveway outside my home. It's equipped with a webcam that I can watch on my phone. I'm not going to say more than that as I don't want to give the game away. I'll just add that a drone that takes off and patrols the house perimeter from time to time probably has the thugs wetting their pants before they contemplate visiting me once more.

Medical Insurance, Snake oil and Politics

I had no medical insurance on the day I was shot. Would I have benefited from having it? Yes, I'm sure I would have. GK would have not left my arm in the state I found it in one month after the shooting. He'd have done the work necessary because he'd have known that he could slaughter the insurance company for his fees and more. You see the problem here folks: Doctors EXPECT patients to have medical insurance so that they, the doctors, don't have to worry about how much to charge. I had begun to see this when I worked in a hospital. We were even told to charge a certain amount when the patient had insurance versus much less when not. This is a problem waiting in the wings, already ready to blow up in our faces. It reminds me of my sister falling on a tennis court in Florida, being rushed to hospital with a sprained ankle and that ankle being packed with ice and she sent home on Tylenol. The bill (to the university insurance scheme)? US\$ 5,700. Yes, folks. This is coming to a hospital near you real soon now.

I eventually found myself in India after a two million shilling bill in Kenya. There I had four surgeons, two surgeries and underwent a bone graft in a four hour operation and spent a week in the most expensive room in the hospital. My total bill including the surgeons charges, anaesthetic gases, operating room, drugs -- everything -- Indian Rupees sixty seven thousand -- yes folks -- Rs 67,000. In Kenya shilling terms at that time it equated to KShs. 103,000 or US\$ 1,860. Today this is still the picture though medical tourism is spoiling the image slowly but surely. Insurance in Kenya -- no that's not for me. I now put enough aside that I can fly to India at a moments notice. I keep my vaccinations current and have a multiple entry Indian Visa current at all times too. I have my contacts in several hospitals set up and invite them over to the 'Garden of Eden' from time to time. If I needed them they'd even be ready to fly here to sort me out in our local operating theatres.

Snake oil: *Wikipedia: Snake oil is an expression that originally referred to fraudulent health products or unproven medicine but has come to refer to any product with questionable or unverifiable quality or benefit.*

Beware the snake oil salesman.

The list of pseudoscientific claims is long. I was surrounded by snake oil sales people throughout my ordeal. From relatives to cops everyone had something to peddle to me. I'm a highly rational guy and anything and everything that I face has to come with an empirical basis.

No evidence and it does not exist for me. So, this continual barrage of nonsense really rubbed me up the wrong way. Beware of this if you are ever in a similar situation to mine. Remember that these characters, well-meaning though many of them will be, come out of the woodwork and trouble you in no uncertain manner. Remember too that in the early stages of PTSD you can complicate your own recovery by listening to these people. Stay away from them, chup and all the other stories out there.

The Moving Trap

I discovered that there is no better place for me than right here in my home Kenya. This is my Garden of Eden. This is where the roots of my soul go down to the centre of the Earth. This is where I want to live out my life and when the final curtain is lowered to have my ashes spread to fly free on the African wind. So many fall for the trap that there is a better life 'out there' somewhere. I found out that there isn't. It's just a different life and you end up having to start again when you get there in order to build a life for yourself all over again. As to there being a better and brighter future for our children? Where is it better for them to be -- away from us fending for themselves, fighting through life's trials and tribulations or to have us near ready to lend a helping hand whenever possible? I know what I chose for me and mine and how we continue to benefit from this. Face life and live it; don't let life live you!

PTSD

This is a huge topic that deserves an entire book all of its own. Perhaps one day I will write that book. For now I strive to help others that find themselves in my predicament. This book here is one of the tools that I use in trying to help others deal with their PTSD. It is a part and parcel of the reasoning process that I employ. I've managed to short-circuit the recovery process for several dozen people their PTSD coming from a diverse set of causes from falling off a house roof, to an attempt to take one's own life to having a bullet fired through one of my friends necks. PTSD is a whole spectrum of things and is not well recognized even by the medical profession. You've already read about how I was abandoned after everyone thought I was over the worst of it and was now going to heal from the bullet injuries. Little did they know that the real trauma was yet to come and would manifest weeks and months after the bullet wounds had completely closed over. In these pages is my hope that you have read something that will trigger your compassion when you come across a person suffering silently from trauma few can see and that you will take steps to help this person. If I can be of assistance to you and 'the victim' in this endeavour then I stand here ready to help.

Colophon

This is the LaTeX version of the book you can find summarised on my website at <http://nealaggarwal.wordpress.com>. This entire book has been written using EMACS and typeset using LaTeX. The version you are holding has a date stamp on the front page. Please confirm that you are reading the most current version of the book.

I am writing this book piece-by-piece as a series of blog posts and then aggregating them into

this document. The blog posts will end up with less content than the eBook. In particular this eBook will end up with some extra chapters and a stream of thoughts that will be a deeper discussion of what I've been uploading to the internet. Updated versions of the ebook are available, for now, as and when I compile them through LaTeX and can be obtained from the website above. You can learn about using these tools by doing a Google search or by asking ME! I am and always have been a teacher at heart. You can follow my development of this book as it occurs including the eBook LaTeX version. If you'd like to learn how to do exactly what I have done here please contact me and we can work something out with regard to a structure to follow in terms of time, a series of books that you should read and the order in which you should read them and more. My contact information is available on my website or you can reach me at Mobile phone number: +254 733 788 501 OR +254 796 212021 or at e-mail address: dr.neal.aggarwal@gmail.com.

Happy Reading!

Please support this work

This what Wikipedia as to say about PTSD:

Wikipedia:

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that may develop after a person is exposed to one or more traumatic events, such as sexual assault, serious injury or the threat of death. The diagnosis may be given when a group of symptoms such as disturbing recurring flashbacks, avoidance or numbing of memories of the event, and hyper arousal (high levels of anxiety) continue for more than a month after the traumatic event.

Please support my efforts as I continue to pour pour hours of work into this book and helping others with PTSD. Please support me with a small donation. I'm asking that you support this book through donations as it feels better to me that way. I feel that if I asked for a fixed sum it would be like I just wrote this book in order to make some money. That I did not do folks. I wrote this book primarily to help others. Many people have described a scenario they've been through that is much like what I've been through in these pages. Many of those people have not had the support that you'll see I lacked too in these pages. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is not recognised in most places. As a result of this many, many people are going through a very difficult time without support that could make their lives that much easier to live. PTSD is a disease. As such it can be treated and victims of this disease can recover from it. In this book I describe what I went through and offer to help you overcome this affliction if you have it. Do you have it? Read what I went through and judge for yourself but do remember -- you don't have to experience the whole gamut of what I went through -- even a much lesser stressful event can trigger the same disease process and the depths to which you descend are very variable and peculiar to each case.

It's up to you how much you want to donate -- \$1 if you can't afford any more but want to send me a token of your appreciation, \$10 (the usual price for a book this size) if that is a good figure for you, \$20 if you can spare a little more cash, \$200 or more if you think that you'd like to support my efforts to help others suffering from PTSD. I never turn anyone down who comes to me for help. I never ask for any money; it is up to the individual to decide if what I have done for them is of value and therefore worth supporting through a small financial donation. My computers cost money to buy and to run. My time that could have been spent on my other pursuits -- like my research into Artificial Intelligence or developing machine learning algorithms to ferret out the best nutritional program for humans -- is instead spent here on this book, on talking to victims of PTSD and on fighting the sort of crime you read about in these pages. There is no one in the East African region who provides the kind of counselling that I provide in these pages and in person. If you feel that this work that I do is worth some financial incentive to keep me doing it then please do consider a small donation. Your donations will also encourage me to write about my other adventures like the time I was lost in the Loitokitok area for 26 days as part of the Outdoor Leadership course that I took, or the multiple rescues on Mt. Kenya that I took part in when I was part of a privately organised and funded Mountain Rescue Team. On one of those trips I fell in almost 'free fall' from the winch cable of a rescue helicopter. I dropped nearly 100 feet to the ground landing on my back. There is a valuable book here on my experiences while learning to fly, to rally drive and how all these brought me to mountain rescue. I guess it's another 'character arc' that would be valuable to a young person just starting out in life and wondering what she can achieve if she guides her life onto the right path.

And if you don't know anything about bitcoin do go to <https://blockchain.info> and download a free wallet and then send me a dollar or two and I'll send you back a dollar or two and you can learn about cryptocurrencies that way and open up a whole new chapter in your life. You never thought a book - a memoir at that - would do that for you now did you?

Thank you for supporting this work



I would love it if you'd send me some Bitcoin or Ether at:



Bitcoin: 14XnKJy8UXrempqGR1wC51ndgypxBmP5A4



Ether: 0x1b8294bc375198dAE36E0aB4da616387940863Dc

But if you're cryptocurrency challenged then these olde world payments schemes will also put a smile on my face: a donation via PayPal (dr.neal.aggarwal@gmail.com) or buy me a coffee and palm some cash my way. You can also use Airtel Money to send money to my phone account at +254 733 788501 or MPESA on +254 796 212021 or send me a money order.

I thank you in advance for your help and encouragement.

Nairobi, 8th-Jan-2014

These are notes I wrote as I started writing this book on 8th January 2014 almost 15 years after the events described in here began to unfold. I have since moved the book to its own site off my main website. You can find the book here -- <http://nealaggarwal.wordpress.com>

Folks I've decided to rewrite this page turning it into a book about my journey to the brink of death and back. I used to have a page on my website onto which I threw bits of text that formed a summary of what happened to me. This was unsatisfactory and over the years many of my readers, my two daughters being my heroes among them, kept asking me to do a proper write-up. This is that write-up. I'll try to write 250 words a day (about a page of copy) and keep the story flowing each and every day. I've got a lot to say and perhaps one day all these posts will add up to a book that I can have published for my family and friends to keep to remember the things that I said long after I have returned my atoms to the bright matter of the universe (perhaps to the dark matter too?)

Please bear with me while I develop these pages. They'll sometimes look weird as I write, develop software, browse the web, write emails. The weirdness comes from my use of EMACS Org Mode (my development tool for the last 25 years and what I've used to develop this entire site). I 'live' inside EMACS all day long and use that environment (Operating System?) for everything I do in my daily life. From surfing the web, to reading emails, to writing this book and software EMACS is my home and makes my life bearable. It does however do some things that only a EMACS user would understand and that is where you might find some weirdness creeping in. Org mode gives me the perfect tool for writing long and short articles. You too could benefit from this tool. I'm also using it right now to develop my AI (Artificial Intelligence) business as well as to write a thesis and a larger book about my life (some of the pages of which you are seeing here). As I write this book I'll provide a lot of links to the things that I have learned. I trust you'll find this a unique book because of those links.

I will tag these posts BrinkAndBack and put them into a category of the same name on the website. If you click on the posts tags on this or any page on this blog you'll get a chronological listing of all posts in the book. You'll get the same by clicking on the category title. (Since that time I have added a navigation page that you can get to via the main menu on the website.) Do let me have some feedback by way of comments to the posts here:

- Telegram (my preferred contact method) – <https://t.me/drnealaggarwal>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/dr.neal.aggarwal>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/drnealaggarwal>
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/drnealaggarwal/>

Closing Remarks

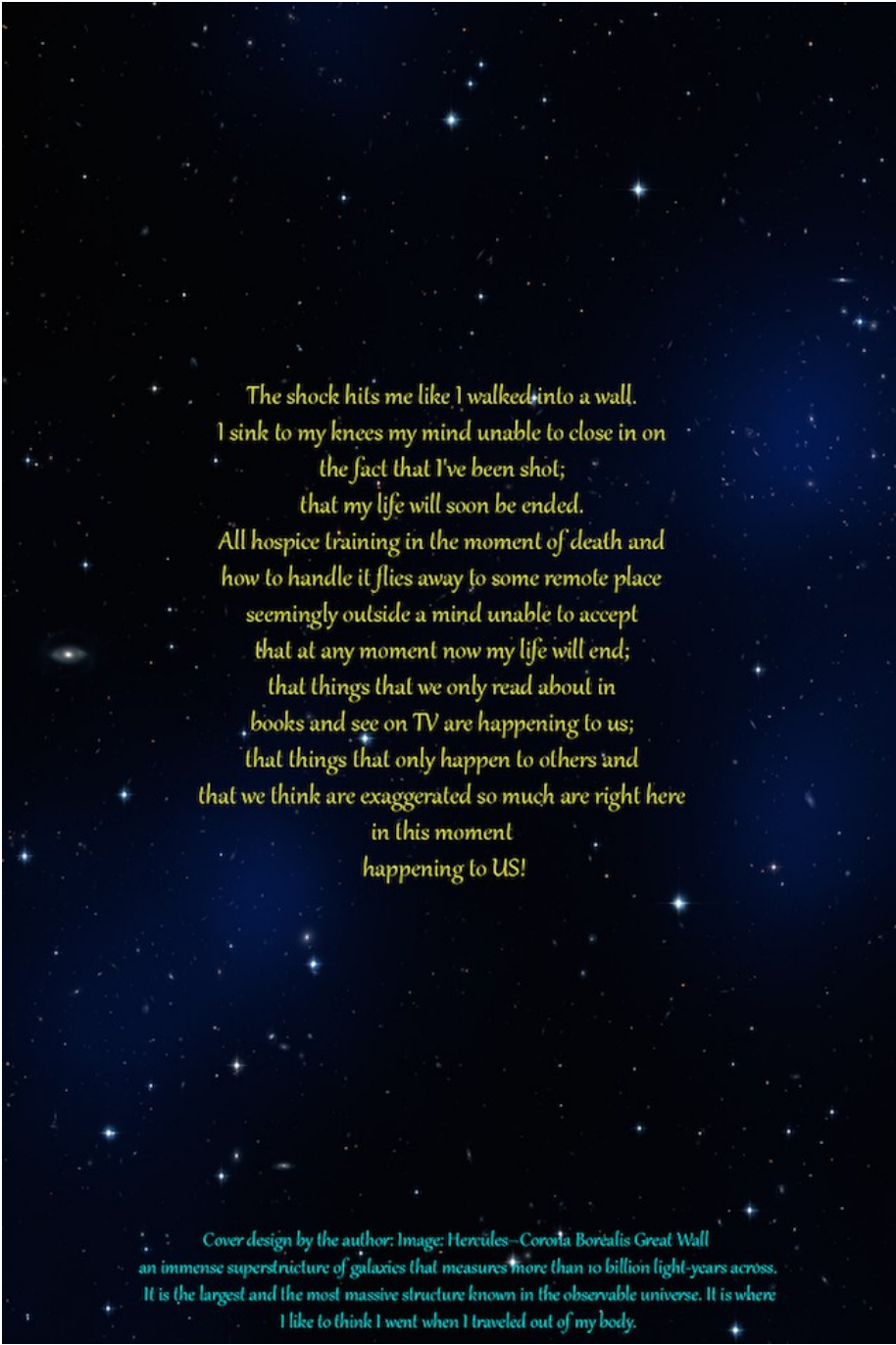
Today is Wednesday the 19th of November, 2014. It's been just over 11 months that I've been

hunkering down and writing this book. It's been a wonderful journey that has brought back to the fore a lot of the thoughts of this journey that I've undergone. Writing has also helped me deal with a lot of issues that no other mode of expression could have helped me with. As I write this closing note it's drizzling outside on a cool November day in Nairobi. Our short rains are here. Everything looks washed and verdant green carpets my life and outlook. I have a bunch of friends and a whole lot of people that are benefiting from my writings and from my personal face-to-face attention that I give them when I can manage that.

Thanks for reading. I hope you'll get as much out of reading this book as I've got writing it. Keep in touch with me through my various web presences. I look forward to our future discussions.

27th April, 2020:

As I write this note we are in the grips of the Coronavirus pandemic. Over 380,000 people have downloaded this book. A few have donated the small amounts - a dollar or so - that I've requested. Little did they suspect that the donation was not simply the giving of a small amount of money for my efforts but also a *hook* to get them interested in bitcoin. A whole bunch have begun to ask me questions about bitcoin especially as they begin to think about the death of the US Dollar and its removal as the world's reserve currency. The number of emails, instant messaging chats and phone calls that I now have to field are a workload that is threatening to overwhelm me. But, I persevere through it all and even if I don't become rich from this work I have a warm fuzzy feeling that I've helped so many in so many ways that most will only guess about as the changes in their lives unfold years after the encounter with this book, my work and me!



The shock hits me like I walked into a wall.
I sink to my knees my mind unable to close in on
the fact that I've been shot;
that my life will soon be ended.
All hospice training in the moment of death and
how to handle it flies away to some remote place
seemingly outside a mind unable to accept
that at any moment now my life will end;
that things that we only read about in
books and see on TV are happening to us;
that things that only happen to others and
that we think are exaggerated so much are right here
in this moment
happening to US!

Cover design by the author. Image: Hercules–Corona Borealis Great Wall
an immense superstructure of galaxies that measures more than 10 billion light-years across.
It is the largest and the most massive structure known in the observable universe. It is where
I like to think I went when I traveled out of my body.