

Kill Me Quick
Meja Mwangi

Darkness fell fast. Clutching his rags against the cold, Meja walked back down the road the bus had come. The bus would not be travelling back to the city before morning, but that was not his problem. Without fare back, he had no choice but to start walking.

It was a cloudless night. The sky was wide, and the stars were many. A light wind blew from the hills, a cold and dry wind, and there was no hiding from it. It was twelve miles of darkness back to the highway. From there he could head north into the unknown, or head south back to the slightly familiar; the city and all its trials.

He had made a bad mistake thinking he could go home and pick up where he had left off. Now there was nothing to do but go as far away from home and from his past as he could.

He walked through the night, and it was still dark when he reached the highway. He was tired and hungry, and sad and bitter. He found a hidden place in a ditch, lay down just out of reach of the freezing wind, and tried to sleep. It was not easy falling asleep. Down the road, where the road crossed a swampy river, the frogs were having a croaking party. Around him, the crickets chattered all night long.

He woke up to the rumble of a heavy lorry heading to the city. It was still dark, and he was stiff from the cold. He dragged himself out of the ditch. His leg was stiff and, when he tried to stretch it, pain shot up through his entire body. He massaged it gently back to life, then did the same for the hand, slowly stretching the fingers one at a time until the cramps dissolved in a warm ache and he could use both limbs. Then he started walking.

He had walked about a mile, when the next vehicle appeared, charging down the road at high speed. He braced himself, stepped out into the glare of the headlights and waved it down. The lorry sped past him, so fast he had to leap off the road to save his life. He walked for about an hour then sat down on the embankment to rest. Getting back to the city was not going to be easy. He was tempted to walk back home, to go face his shame and end the suffering. He thought a long time about it. Then he rose and continued walking, slowly at first but with greater determination with every succeeding step.

He covered four miles more before again stopping to rest. The next three vehicles all did not stop. After resting for a while, he resumed walking. More lorries passed him, as the sun rose over the hills, and then came buses and cars. He let the buses go by, as he had no money for the ride, and he waved down the cars and the truck. He had almost given up, when a construction lorry stopped for him.

"Where are you going?" the driver asked.

"To the city."

"Thirty," the driver held out his hand.

"I have no money," Meja said.

"Then why do you stop me?"

"I am going to look for a job."

The driver hesitated, looked him up and down.

"How much do you have?"

"Nothing."

The driver looked him up and down, shook his head.

"I am not going all the way," he said, "but I will take you as far as I go. Get in."

The front was full. Meja limped to the back of the truck. It was a high lorry. He hopped up, grabbed the top of the tailgate and started hauling himself upward using the good hand.

"Ready?" the driver called out.

Then the lorry lurched forward, dragging his lame foot on the ground. Meja cried out and let go of the tailgate. As he started to fall someone yelled, and a hand grabbed his arm from above, and hauled him on board.

"Sit over here," said the man who helped him aboard.

They crawled under a tarpaulin to hide from the wind, and sat coughing and sneezing from the dust, as the lorry sped towards the city. They could not talk, even if they wanted to. The truck rattled and rocked and tossed them about under the tarpaulin as it swept round bends at high speed.

After what seemed like an all day, the lorry jolted to a stop. They lingered under the tarpaulin. They heard the driver's door open and shut. There was the sound of movement on gravel, then the driver banged on the side of the truck.

"Step down," he said. "You have arrived."

The lorry was inside a stone quarry, surrounded by mounds of rocks and gravel. The sides of the quarry were a hundred feet high and stretched for yards all round. The rock crusher was set against the rock face, on a structure made of wood and iron sheets. There were people all over the place, some ending their shift and others starting. Meja saw all that from the top of the lorry as he readied to jump down.

“This is as far as we go,” his traveling companion called from the ground.

Meja had been so awed by the place he had not seen the others disembark. He hopped down and stood next to the man who had saved him from a nasty fall.

“The city is over that way,” the man said. “Come, I will show you a short.”

It was still early; the sun was yet to reach inside the quarry and it was cold still. The man led him round the mounds of gravel, and along a path that went up the cliff and out of the quarry. They were panting when they came to the top. The city was visible in the distance, rising above mist and the smog. While they watched, the streetlights started going out one by one.

“Follow this path,” said the man. “It will take you back to the main road to the city. You cannot get lost. Good luck with your search.”

Meja hesitated. Now that he was back in the city, he did not know what to do, or where to begin looking of a job. The crippling fears that had assailed him the first time he came to the city were again upon him. The fear of the tall buildings, and of the heavy traffic, and of strangers and mobs in the streets.

“Are you all right?” the man asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

“Go well then.”

Meja made to start off, then stopped. He looked at the man, looked at the distant city, and hesitated.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the man asked him.

“No,” he said. “I am fine.”

Summoning his last bit of courage, he started walking. He stopped after a few paces, thought for about it, and limped on. The man saw him walk slower and slower until he finally stopped. The man shook his head and walked back down in the quarry. Meja turned around, ready to admit to his fears and ask for help, but the man was gone.

Gripped by panic, he ran back the way they had come. He rushed down the path at a dangerous pace. The man was halfway down the rock face, rushing to get back to his job. He heard gravel roll after him and span round startled. Then he saw who it was and waited.

“I need a job,” Meja said to him.

“Here?” the man asked. “In the quarry?”

Then he saw the desperation on Meja’s face.

“It is demanding work,” he said.

“I can work hard,” Meja said.

“Very hard work,” said the man.

“I can do it,” said Meja.

The man considered.

“When I say hard, I mean very hard, impossibly challenging work.”

“I can,” said Meja.

The man saw the determination, shrugged, and started walking.

“I will take you to the foreman,” he said over his shoulder.

Other workers were lining up at the site office to have their cards stamped. Big, boisterous men with muscular bodies. Meja and his newfound friend silently joined the line and waited. All around them, lorries came and left filling the air with dust and diesel smoke. The workers called out greetings, and foremen yelled at them to move faster. Then the crusher came to life with a thunderous roar that drowned all other sounds. The workers had to shout at one another.

“Ngigi!” yelled the foreman from his cubbyhole.

“Boss,” Meja’s friend shouted back, handing in his work card.

“Has your wife delivered yet?”

“Not yet?”

“What is she waiting for?”

“She heard that I would be rich one day.”

“Mine gave up waiting and now I have six.”

“You are a foreman; you can afford six children.”

“Wait until you get one,” said the foreman.
He punched Ngigi’s card, then noticed Meja.

“Who is he?”

“He wants to work,” Ngigi said.

“Here?” the foreman studied Meja.

Meja nodded. The foreman turned to Ngigi. He shrugged. The foreman unlocked the door of his cubicle.

“Let me out,” he said.

Ngigi stepped aside. The metal door of the foreman’s box opened to let out a giant, with bulging chest and huge arms crisscrossed with veins. He took a better look at Meja.

“Is this a joke?” he asked them.

Ngigi shook his head. Meja also shook his head.

“He worked in a quarry before,” Ngigi said.

Meja was so startled he almost give it away with the look on his face.

“Where?” The foreman did not believe it.

“Nanyuki,” said Meja.

“I know Nanyuki,” said the foreman. “Where in Nanyuki?”

“Batian Construction,” Meja said.

It was the only quarry in Nanyuki, just up the road from his high school he went to. He left out the part about going to school there and getting top marks in every subject. School certificates were as irrelevant here as in the offices he had visited in the city.

“I worked for Batian,” said the foreman. “A good Indian man. But that was before you were born. What did you do there, clerical?”

“Everything,” Meja said.

“Everything?” Ngigi asked. “Was that how you got the limp?”

Meja nodded. The whole truth was another way not to get a job, any job, even this one. The man looked him up and down and shook his head.

“This is arduous work,” he said, “very hard work. You see the picks they are carrying? One of them is as heavy as you are.”

“Water bucket?” asked Ngigi.

“We have Ouma,” said the foreman. “I would fire him to give your friend his job, but Ouma is related to my wife and you know how wives are.”

“Probation?” Ngigi asked.

“What is the point?” said the foreman. “He will fail, and not be paid for it, and then I will feel bad about it.”

He turned to Meja.

“There is no point” he said. “Go find a job somewhere else.”

“I will not fail,” Meja said. “Try me.”

“Tell him what probation is about,” the foreman said to Ngigi.

Ngigi explained that everyone had to pass the probation to get a job at the quarry. Failure meant no job. It also meant he would not be paid for the day.

“I can do it,” Meja said.

“Let him try,” Ngigi said.

The foreman scratched his chin.

“Take a pick and hammer,” he said pointing. “Ngigi will get you the rest of the tools.”

Ngigi hastened to find the tools. Meja tried to lift the pick and hammer. Watching him struggle to lift the tools to his shoulder, the foreman shook his head again. He was feeling bad for him already.

“You see this pit her?” he said. “This pit was dug by hard core prisoners. By desperate men who had no choice.”

Meja had the pick on his left shoulder. He tried to lift the hammer to his right shoulder. The hammer stayed on the ground with the handle leaning on his thigh.

“To pass the test, you must burrow six feet into that rock face,” said the foreman. “We call it the poor man’s grave. When they finish digging it, most men are ready to be buried in it. A few have been carried out on a stretcher.”

Ngigi came back with a bag of wedges.

“Go with him,” the foreman said. “He will show you what to do.”

Ngigi walked off in the dust and the smoke, the bag of wedges clicking over his shoulder. Meja dragged the hammer on the ground, while others were carrying their picks and hammers as though they were made of wood. Few paid any attention to the man dragging his tools along the ground.

Ngigi stopped a couple of times to wait for him. Then, realizing it might take them all day to get to where they were going, he took Meja's hammer on his shoulder and led the way along the bottom of the rock face.

All along the cliff were men at work with their picks and their hammers. Some sang as they worked, while others worked silently, growling, and grunting with every swing of the pick and every blow of the hammer. The sound of steel on steel was everywhere, as the roar of the crusher fell behind.

Ngigi took Meja to the farthest end of the pit, where the walls narrowed into a ravine and there were no men working there.

"They would make fun of you," he said, tossing the hammer on the ground, and setting aside the bag of wedges. "You are alone here."

Meja dropped the pick, looked around. He was so far away from the others that the sound of the crusher, and the singing reached him only when the wind changed directions. The cliff wall was so high the sky was like a glass ceiling.

"There is no formula to digging six feet grave out of this rock," Ngigi turned to leave. "How you do it is unimportant. Good luck,"

"Don't you measure it for me?" Meja asked.

"It is pointless," said Ngigi. "I will come back after you get going."

He walked away and Meja was suddenly alone with his first real job, a man's job. He spat in the palms of his hands and hoisted the hammer high over his head. It took so much to raise he had no strength left to swing the hammer. He let it fall back to the ground, and it bounced off the floor and nearly landed on his foot. He rested for a moment then lifted it a second time with the same results.

Ngigi had stopped some paces away to watch. He came back and came running and looking worried.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Meja confirmed he was all right. Ngigi took the hammer from him.

"You hold it this way," he said.

He spat in his hands and gripped the handle firmly with both hands. Then he slid his left hand down the shaft to the neck of the handle, just below the head of the hammer, while the left hand held the handle near the end.

"Then you ... whip it back over your head and bring it down hard like this."

Sparks and fragments flew in all directions. He lifted the hammer again and struck the rock a second time. More gravel fell from the rock face. With the third blow, he had enough chips at his feet to fill a wheelbarrow.

"Rock is hard," he said, pausing for breath, "but it is not as hard as a hard-headed man like you are."

He swung at it two more times and again stopped to rest.

"Ten years ago, this pit was under black cotton soil," he said. "Barren wasteland not good for anything. Then men came and dug out the soil and excavated and now it is a quarry. You meet strength with strength. Strike it hard repeatedly and, eventually, it will give way. Try it."

He gave back the hammer.

"No, hold it this way," he said. "Give me your hand."

Then he saw Meja's hand and was speechless. Meja saw on his face the same horror he had seen on his sister's face.

"An accident," he explained.

He had managed to conceal the worst of it from everyone, including the foreman, for fear they would not give him a job because of it. Now Ngigi was staring at the hand almost afraid to touch it.

"It is all right," Meja said flexing his fingers to show they worked. "It does not hurt."

But, in his head, he heard the sound he would never forget, the panting of a bloodthirsty mob, and the shouts of "thief, thief, kill, kill!", then the car horn and the screeching breaks. He spun round instinctively. There was nothing behind him, but the rock.

Ngigi regarded him with growing uneasiness.

"I am all right," he said again. "I can do it."

"Well then," Ngigi backed away from him. "As I said, no formula."

He walked away, and this time did not stop, or look back.

Meja waited for the shivers that racked his body to stop, before turned his attention back to the rock. He stared at it like at an enemy, one that he knew was fierce and stronger, and could annihilate him with a single blow. But he had the hammer, he was the man, and a man was smarter than rock.

“I can do it,” he said to the rock.

He spat on his palms and rubbed them together.

“I can do it,” he said.

He gripped the hammer as his friend had shown him.

“I can do it!”

The scream rang through the pit, and was picked up, and magnified by the walls, and hurled back at him so loud the rock seemed to mock him.

“I can do it!”

He hurled himself at the rock enraged, wielding the hammer in a wild frenzy and ignoring the numbing pain that shot from his scarred fingers and up the scarred muscles into his arm. Growling like an enraged beast, he flung his whole being, his mind, his body, and his hammer at the rock until sparks flew. Swinging it up and down, and up and down, he struck the rock with the hammer until his hands blistered, and bled, and his body was one hot ache. Sweat ran from every pore in his body, and down his face into his mouth, but he neither felt it nor tasted it. Not even the sound of the crusher could penetrate his senses.

The sun rose higher and got hotter, so hot the rock was hot to the touch, but he hammered on, unfeeling and unthinking and only vaguely aware of his looming failure. Ouma, the water carrier, came to offer him a cup of water, but Meja neither saw nor heard him. He went away worried by what he saw in Meja’s eyes.

After an hour of enraged hammering, he dropped the hammer and staggered back away from the rock to catch his breath. He was hot and raw, and his entire body was on fire, but the rock was intact. He collapsed in a heap next the hammer. He was certain he could not lift it anymore. He buried his head in his hands in despair, leaned his back on the rock and closed his eyes. As he drifted to sleep, he thought he heard the rock laugh at him.

Ngigi woke him up some time later. It was lunch break. The miners were filing back to the quarry head for lunch leaving the tools where they lay. Ngigi and Meja followed them. The crusher was turned off and the dust had settled. The miners lined up to buy food, served in plastic bags and sold for a uniform price regardless of the contents. The moment realised the food was for sale, Meja tried to step out of the line. Ngigi dragged him back in line.

“They give credit,” Ngigi said to him. “I have it.”

They received their food, found a quiet, shaded place under an idle truck and sat to eat. There was little talk among the miners while they ate. Afterwards, they lay in the shade to rest, and Ngigi offered him a cigarette. He shook his head. Ngigi lit his cigarette, took a couple of puffs, and turned to Meja.

“What now?”

Meja looked up startled. His only friend seemed to have written him off as a failure.

“I have not failed,” he said.

“Of course, not,” said Ngigi. “You have the whole afternoon and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. You do not fail until you give up. You can hammer on the rock until you die, and no one will try to stop you. But you do not get paid for it, that is all.”

“I will not fail,” Meja said.

They were silent for a while after that. It seemed there was nothing else to say. Then Ngigi pointed.

“See that man there?” he said. “They call him Bulldozer. He was not even a one-stroke lawn mower when he first came here. Just a small bag of bones and see how big and awesome he is now. He breaks more rock in a day than many of us do in a week. There is still a lot of day left to today.”

He crawled deeper under the shade of the truck and closed his eyes.

“Why don’t you measure it for me?” Meja asked him.

“You will know when you have dug a fool’s grave.”

Meja crawled from under the lorry, rose.

“It is lunchtime,” Ngigi said.

Ngigi opened one eye, regarded him seriously.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Meja.”

“Listen, friend Meja,” he said. “That is rock. Anger or determination does not impress rocks. You cannot wear it down with persistence or hurt its feelings with insults. You find a way inside it instead, a weakness you can exploit to bring it down.”

Meja walked away. He returned to his work place charged, certain that, somehow, he would dig the fool’s grave, if it was the last thing he ever did.

He picked up his hammer and swung it to his shoulder. His arms and legs trembled with the strain of holding up that hammer. Then he turned to the rock and focused his energy on one spot.

“I am harder than you,” he said to the rock. “You cannot defeat me.”

Then he let fly with the hammer. It missed the target, bounced off the rock and slammed into the bag of steel wedges barely an inch from his foot. He was about to lift it again then stopped and picked up the bag of wedges. He took one out and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand.

Then he got down on one knee and studied the rock face. He scratched it with the wedge, blew away the dust, and scratched again. He wiped stinging sweat from his face, with the back of his hand, and went on searching and searching. His search was rewarded with the discovery of two hairline cracks crossing at right angles and running the length and breadth of the rock.

He took a sharper wedge from the bag, he placed it over one of the cracks and hammered it in with the other. It bit into the crack and stuck. He stepped back and studied it. Then he positioned himself, planted his feet firmly in the ground and lifted the hammer. He swung it at the wedge. The wedge slipped into the rock slightly, and this time the hammer did not fly out of his control as before. The second wedge needed one blow to sink in the widening crack.

Suddenly excited by a sense of progress, he spat into his palms and rubbed them together.

“Follow the line of weakness,” he said to himself.

Way off in the quarry, the crusher resumed its roar. Lunchtime was officially over. It was time for the miners to go back to work. Then came the clang of steel on steel, the sound rising and falling in the wind, and it might have been in another land, so far was it from Meja’s mind.

Taking the pick, which up to now had seemed useless, he swung it over his head and buried the tip in the crack he had opened with the wedges. With a twist, the crack opened outwards and upwards along the face of the rock.

His hands were slippery with sweat and blood. They were also excruciatingly painful from the dust working its way in the blisters. But it hardly mattered. He dug his heels into the ground, grabbed the pick handle with both hands and gave a mighty twist. The handle slipped from his hands, and his own weight threw him backward, so that he tripped on the bag of pegs and fell on his back. He lay dazed, with gravel digging in his back, and thought it was time to admit that the rock was mightier. Then he heard a crack, followed by a roar like thunder, and suddenly the whole cliff came tumbling down.

Meja leaped to his feet and ran pursued by the sound of falling rock and a cloud of thick white dust. When he stopped running and looked back, the end of the quarry where he had been working was a mountain of broken rock. His tools and his shirt were buried under it.

He was in a panic. Not certain how much of the rock face it was right to bring down at one time, he feared he might have done something wrong. Then someone exclaimed behind him and he turned to see other miners coming toward him all excited.

“What have you done?” yelled the foreman.

Meja started to apologise. The foreman patted him on the back.

“It is all right to bring down the whole mountain,” he said. “Just do not do it in one day or we shall all be out of a work.”

“I won?” Meja asked.

“For now,” said the foreman. “For now.”

The miners laughed and congratulated Meja.

“I do not know how well you do from here on,” foreman said, “but I have to let you work.”

Other workers expressed their doubts too.

“It seems you have worked three days on your first day,” Ngigi said to him. “You may have to take two days off.”

“You will get your card tomorrow morning,” said the foreman.

He gave Meja another doubtful look and walked away.