

Value of Life

The Value of Life

The bright red scar running down the middle of my knee is the only reminder of my narrow escape from the prospect of a life without skiing and tennis but now, thanks to the ACL surgery, I'll soon be as good as new.

I monitor the progress of a ten story apartment going up as I pass it everyday. They're now painting the towering concrete structure, itself an anomaly in our area where nothing rises above two stories except the tops of palms or the spiked hair branches of the ancient baobab trees. I watch in awe as an eighth-floor painter climbs up on the narrow cement balustrade that encloses the balcony - untethered, completely unattached - and bends his body backwards until he can paint the ceiling overhead. The tingle in the pit of my stomach makes me wonder what sensations he must feel, and then for next two days I keep returning to the image of the man, an image stuck so powerfully in my mind that I can't even think of it without that tingling feeling coming back.

I was sailing with Alfred the other day, a Mombassa native who has spent his life at sea, and he told about a man he'd rescued from this exact spot the previous day. He said he'd almost missed the bobbing sailor who was too tired to lift his arms above the waves. Alfred told me that when he'd finally managed to pull the man aboard, the man had told him that he'd fallen off a fishing boat and that - though he'd watched his boat mates struggle - the high winds had thwarted their efforts to get the dhow about. Not a strong swimmer to begin with, his fate was sealed by his decision to put on all the clothes he owned to keep warm when the wind picked up. He was wearing two jean jackets and two pairs of jeans when he'd fallen in the sea. He never explained why he hadn't tried to remove the clothes, he'd simply sighed and let his hands fall to his lap. "I knew it was over," he said. "Two more minutes I'd have been dead."

The Butterfly Man sings as he climbs the palm, a machete in his belt and his arms, stretched and straining like braided rope, encircling the tree. I call the picture "75 feet X 2 feet", intending for the first number to reflect the height - and the second his mode of ascending - the huge coconut tree. Butterfly Man is at a minimum at least my age, (50 until last month), but he has to keep on climbing and climbing because, as he said, there isn't much of a pension plan when you climb coconut trees. At some point, I imagine, the odds begin to turn on you, though I don't exactly what age that might be.

The boys stand up in the backs of flatbed pickup trucks, hands held rigidly at their sides, in a game they play as the trucks race all through town. Other kids pick up extra quarters for lying like bungee cords on the tops of over-stuffed lorries where they act as "human tarps". Some of these guys may get lucky and get their quarters

but they are just as likely to end up as flotsam, scattered along the road. But they'll take their chances and try to make it look like fun while it lasts, and if it's over - I figure they must figure, that's life, what the hell?

And as far as it goes for me, the really good news is that I'll be back on the tennis court soon - I mean, I've got my new ACL - but then that would fall under the category of 'quality of life' rather than the 'value of life'. And those two things seem so far apart that I have to continually remind myself that we are all created equal. But being equal clearly has nothing to do with getting a square deal, because brother I can tell you, just about everyone I run into is one hell of a long way from getting one of those.