



BLURRY LINES

with **Tony Natif**

TonyNatif@gmail.com

Do it for Daniel

Bugiboni is a town council nestled up in the hills of Mt Elgon. Last year, on a cold, dreary, rainy September morning, Bugiboni served as the starting point of a trek up Mt Elgon; one of the most fascinating and most beautiful places in East Africa. It was to be my fifth such trip but perhaps this was to be the most memorable because of deeply personal reasons. No, I am not delving into those. You all can keep guessing.

I wandered underneath canopies formed by towering ancient Elgon teak trees covered in dew, the mist in the distance only briefly breaking to allow for long views of expansive greenery stretching from Bugisu to Kapchorwa. Passing waterfalls with extremely cold, stunningly clear water. And that is before you get into a zone with trails of occasional poachers and cattle rustlers. No human voices are heard here. It is just you, the Hugh flying birds and your mind; trekking through wild flower gardens that

would put the best landscape artists to shame.

As a Mugisu from the foothills of this mountain, getting lost in Elgon is like a religious experience. To me, Elgon is a lot more than a nature lover's paradise. But that is not why I penned this piece. I penned it to highlight the story of a mountain guide called Daniel.

Daniel is from Kasese, on the Kilembe side of the Rwenzoris. He moves back and forth between trekking up Elgon and the Rwenzoris; essentially walking the paths of two groups of Ugandans on opposite sides of the country but with a lot more in common than their immediate neighbours.

Daniel is one of many unsung heroes who make the outdoor experience worthwhile. He has five children. His eldest is 15 and in Senior One at Kilembe Secondary School, where he is on the school cricket team. When he turns 18, Daniel hopes to take his son up the mountains as a por-

ter so he can earn some pocket money and support his siblings. It is an all too common dream in these mountain communities. They are one with the earth and they live off of it for generations.

Daniel's other name is Nguru, a twin name. His younger twin passed away in 2024. They found him dumped in the river. They tried to involve police but the family was told the water had swept away all the fingerprints, so forensics could not establish cause of death, outside drowning. Daniel now supports two of his brother's seven children. The rest were shared out by his aunt and the widow.

His twin worked part time with Daniel in the mountains but his interest was in mining and farming. So they saved up money to help him buy land. He bought this land but as is common in those overly populated parts of the country, the land had some wrangles and Daniel suspects it is these wrangles that led to his brother's death. He is determined to ensure his brother's children achieve the highest form of education. That is why he shuffles from one end of the country to the other to walk folks up the mountains.

Daniel has done this for nine

years. Previously, he worked as a mechanic in a garage in Kasese. He left the garage after all their tools were stolen and they had no money to replace them. His relative, Enoch, then invited him to be a porter and later guide. Enoch is the chief guide of the largest trekking company in Uganda. He calls him "uncle".

At the end of a particularly gruelling hike, on Day Two of our trip, we arrived at the camp just as the sun made way for grey clouds and eventual rain. Daniel had to dash down to a network point to check in on his mum who had been hospitalised in a hypertensive crisis. The next day as we made our way to Wagagai, the highest point of Elgon, Daniel tells me she has been discharged. I reached out for a hug.

It was a tight one. With the backs of our messy hands, we wiped away our tears from the corners of our eyes, hoisted our heavy backpacks onto our shoulders and off we went. Happy. It was a beautiful summit. The way out of the park had me thinking about why we climb. It is hard to explain without occasionally coming off as a silly, wasteful, self-indulgent person. But perhaps we should climb more; for people like Daniel.