



# THE WANTING

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## MAKENA ONJERIKA

### THE VICTIM

The pickpocket had probably thought him a tourist. And he might as well have been one. He'd last been in the central business district seven months before, at night, attending a performance by a Malian Afrofusion artist at the Alliance Française, located at the very edge of the CBD, so that even then, he had not really come into the city. He strived to contain his life in the more affluent parts of Nairobi. He avoided the CBD's cracked, concrete pavements, its electronics shops blaring gospel music, the long queues that were standard at government offices, and the ubiquitous parking men who took it upon themselves to teach him how to park and then proffered sweaty hands for payment.

But his college friend had come in from the US and a visit to the Saturday Maasai market was number 6 on her list of "Must-Do Activities in Nairobi." And so he had driven into the city and dealt with the street kids who came around in traffic and polished his car with dirty rags and mimed putting food in their mouths, to which gesture he gave a firm shake of his head.

"It's just that giving them money keeps them coming back to the streets," he said to his college friend, with whom he'd smoked a joint one night, long ago, under a lamppost at the back of that distant college campus in Massachusetts. Spring was murmuring useless tidbits among the broad leaves of the newly awakened trees along that stretch marking the edge of campus. Dark leaves, trees elongated in shadow and the soft, yet ceaseless ring of cicadas that strangely brought to mind deep, bottomless silence as he sat on a bench. His friend, high on the weed and a mixture of drinks, twirled round and round the lamppost, laughing soundlessly so that her body shook. He'd felt trapped in the whorl of her movement and was under the pressure of knotted emotion, but just as he opened his mouth to tell her that he loved her, she bent over and vomited on the lamppost. He'd hidden the memory of that night away until now as she sat beside him, seeing him as a man without compassion.

And although she kept her thoughts about the street kids hidden behind her large sunglasses, he felt judged. The one-kilometre walk from his parked car on Kenyatta Avenue to the market on City Hall Way was marked with restrained politeness on his part. What did she know about living in Nairobi. "No need, no need," he said, waving away the brokers who unstuck from the walls near the market's gate like disturbed insects and fell in stride with them, offering paintings, wood carvings, jewellery, and Kisii soapstone.

The hour they spent in the market only annoyed him more. The brokers buzzed about them, pushing things into her hands, and no sooner had he rid them of one than another appeared, peskier and more smooth-talking than the last.

“Mimi ni mkenyan,” he said, waving his citizenship about when eye-watering tourist prices were mentioned.

The brokers laughed and slapped his back. “You know how it is, boss. Everyone has to survive,” they said, growing as intimate as sweat now that his Swahili had confounded their judgements of his skin color.



*All That You Can't Leave Behind (still) ~ Ufuoma Essi*

But she was the most infuriating of all. She pointed at pieces, fingered them, asked for more, worked her way through every single stall in the market and bought nothing at all.

“It’s quite amazing,” she said as they left, and he noted in her manner something he had come to associate with whiteness since leaving college: a certain, unquestioned ability to wear foreign countries like clothes. He boiled but reminded himself that it was he who’d asked her to stop over in Nairobi on her way to a two-year stint with a development organization in Tanzania.

“Let’s do lunch in Westlands. I know a nice place,” he said and patiently carried a headache past rubbish bins he could not remember ever seeing emptied and clean before. He suddenly recognized the city as changed. He’d missed the new skyscraper abutting the

KCB bank building and never before seen the green and white minaret of Jamia mosque from this angle.

When his iPhone left his hand, he did not at first understand what was happening. He saw a man sprinting away from him and thought of Eliud Kipchoge, legend of the sub-two-hour marathon, and felt a wave of Kenyan pride.

"Mwizi," someone shouted. "Mwizi, mwizi."

"Huyo, huyo," the chorus picked up.

He realized in a clap of a moment that he had just been turned into a victim of petty robbery. But he never would have wanted that young man's head on the tarmac under a booted foot. Or the hollow sounds of the young man's body folding into itself the impact of justice meted out swiftly. No one asked him, the victim, what he wanted.

"You didn't want your phone back, Nileshe?" asked his college friend, hours later.

He tried explaining himself. The phone was insured and easily replaceable. What he really wanted back was his solidity, for his heart never to have clogged his throat in panic. For Nairobi not to have betrayed him, othered him.

They sat across a coffee-stained table, food cooling on their plates because he could not stop trying to explain what he wanted.

"It was just a phone. He died over a phone," he said.

"He chose to die over a phone," she said.

"How can you say that?"

"It's not your fault you have more. You didn't rob anyone."

His emotions were the vibrations in his drink as he tapped his knee involuntarily against the table's leg.

"Let's not talk about it anymore," she snapped, then recovered and smiled from behind her sunglasses.

What he wanted, what he really really wanted, was to not have her hand on his on the table.

## THE HAND OF JUSTICE

Yes. I killed him. I threw the stone that broke his head. So what? He was a thief. And tomorrow, I will go to church and thank Jesus that there is one less of them. God can give mercy if He likes, but me, Mildred, I have no mercy left. Tell the police to come arrest me.

Let me tell you something: to be Kenyan is to suffer. Who has not taken a good shit on this country? Even the Chinese come here and cane us like children, on the buttocks. Unemployment, what? Are jobs manna falling from heaven? Who is not suffering in this Kenya?

Let me tell you something: at the end of every month, my salary is only 8K. Now because I am a housegirl, you will say that is very good. Of course, you can't imagine that a housegirl has things she wants to do with her life. My bosses talk about the food I eat in that house and how much the servant quarter they have given me costs because they live in posh-posh Kileleshwa. Why don't they give me that money instead so I can decide what I want to eat and rent a room in Kawangware for 3K and save the rest?

Let me tell you something: three years ago, I wanted to buy a cow and build a shed for it at my mother's farm. That way she would sell the milk, and I would stop sending her half my money every month. I saved every coin like a dog hiding bones and even managed to sweet-talk my bosses into a December bonus.

Before I left for Busia, I went to Eastleigh and shopped for my son and my mother and even my brothers' children. What didn't I buy because it was Christmas and I am father Christmas to my family? But my bosses would not let me go before four p.m. on the 24th. They needed me, they said. Needed my hands and my feet and my work that is just slavery if we say the truth. So, there I was, rushing to catch a night bus to Busia. I wanted to be home on Christmas Day and make my people happy. Do you understand?

But what did I know? Fear is when six men with knives surround you on River Road. Fear is when you, a fully grown woman, urinate on yourself without noticing. It wasn't even dark. And Nairobians just kept walking by, seeing nothing, saying nothing, and thinking nothing. No one is your mother in this city.

And do you think those thugs stopped with just the shopping and the cash I had on me? Don't make me laugh at you. No, they started calling every number I had saved on my phone and told people that they were County Council askaris and that I was under arrest for alighting the bus at the wrong place. My friends, my bosses, my brothers, my mother, everyone sent money. 80K, to get me released.

And did they stop there? Mercy, what? They told me they would slaughter me right there, like a goat, if I did not give them my PIN. They went into my phone, into MShwari, and borrowed a loan of 10K and then another one for 20K from KCB Mpesa. I am still paying those mobile money loans even today. My son in Busia ate no Christmas that year.

So, let me repeat what I told you before: go tell the police to come arrest me. Yes. I killed him and I hope the devil is burning him like charcoal in hell.

## THE BEREAVED

The mother told anyone who made time to sit with her in her grief that she had raised him with her sweat and blood. Her effort became a tangible thing, muddy and pungent, when she spoke, her voice hoarse. Her listeners almost saw blood dripping from her forehead as though she were the thorn-pierced, crucified Christ. The image came easily from her act of opening her arms wide and giving up all her pain and hope, and then, in the same instant, taking it all back in and accepting it and sitting quietly with what was her burden alone, her hands uselessly on her lap. She was a meek, flightless bird then.

"I did everything," she said to Mama Mercy, her neighbour.

And all she had to show for her labour was a son, dead, on a cold slab at City Mortuary, deposited there by the police.

The news of his death had come from his friend, a young man with a too-small, pinched mouth. She'd warned her son against this friend many times before, but her son had long stopped having ears for anything she said.

“Mama, they have killed him,” said the friend, after hardly a greeting and standing at the entrance of the compound, so that he could leap and run if she decided to fling something at him.

She did not. What she had in her hands, a makuti winnow of nyayo beans, was too precious to throw.

“How?” she asked.

“They said he was a thief.”

And how strange it was that just then she tasted tamarind on her tongue, the bitter sweetness was a flood in her mouth, although it had been decades since she had tasted tamarind, since she had abandoned her parents in Kongowea to catch a night bus to Nairobi in the company of a useless man.

Had her friends not flocked to the house and lifted her from the stool and taken away the winnow, she might have remained there for the rest of her life, slowly calcifying. Her toes were already numb when they led her inside.

“You cannot run away, Keziah,” one of them said. “You are still tethered to this world.” The friend gestured at her two grandsons, her daughter’s sons, crouched in a corner of the dark room. She hated them so much at that moment, she could have cursed them. Her son was dead.

The women laid her in her bed, fully clothed. On the thin mattress, she felt she was encased in the skeleton of a large animal, having been eaten but remained undigested for years through to the creature’s death and decay. Yet, she was no freer.

The women sat with her, talking as she slept, and as she rose to consciousness and drowned in oblivion again, she vaguely registered that she was surrounded by suffering, loss, confusion, anger, and even hatred. She grew afraid in her prison of sleep and at last woke with a yelp.

It was day again. The door of her single room was wide open and outside, in the compound with bad soil that refused to yield even sukuma wiki, her grandsons were laughing—as cruel and as ignorant as children always are. Her son was still dead.

“What I did wrong was leave his father,” she said to her neighbour.

Mama Mercy, tired of this grief, said nothing. The boy had been useless. When had he brought his mother even a packet of sugar? When had he not been trouble?

“God forgive me. He needed a father,” said the mother, spilling tears.

For seven nights, the women came to her and brought along their own grief. The fire they lit at the center of her compound cast remembrance on her walls. The women examined each other’s hands; they counted the wrinkles on each other’s faces and their white hairs; they drew maps of each other’s losses. Then they cried in each other’s arms and whispered to each other that they had done all they could and it was all up to God now. Inshallah!

## THE DREAMER

Long before you sprint that 200 metre stretch down Kenyatta Avenue and meet your end, you are fourteen years old, in a second-hand T-shirt printed with the word D.A.R.E. across

the chest, and you are chewing a blade of grass, crouching at the rim of a crater. Kevin, your partner-in-crime, has walked almost ten kilometres with you to see the biggest hole ever dug in Nairobi.

The yellow Caterpillars below eat the earth with their large spoons. The soil is a bright, wet maroon that makes you thirsty. Your mother will cane you good when you get back home to her single room, but what is life if a boy cannot dare dangerous adventures?

You may not even go back today. On the way to the construction site, you and Kevin pretended to be orphans and begged money off some fools to buy yourselves chips and sausages at a roadside kibanda. Your stomach is uncomfortably full.

"Imagine standing a hundred floors in the air," you say around the smoke of a cigarette stub you picked off the street.

Kevin raises his arm and through one squinted eye tries to gauge how high a hundred floors can go, then shrugs. "Up there. Down here. It is all the same. We all die."

He has become melancholic since his father died last year. You feel already that he is growing in a different trajectory from you, and a year from now, you will no longer be friends. You wish your own absentee father would die.

You shake your head. "When you are up there, no one can step on your head," you say.

The growl of the earth movers rumbles beneath your feet and up your spine. You see the tower of Babel rise and reach into God's heaven.

"Why not? Why not us?" you ask Kevin, shutting one eye to the halo of sunshine around the boy's head.

He laughs like the hens your mother keeps in a coop outside her single room that is bedroom, kitchen and living room. The stinking, stupid hens your mother makes you clean after.

"They will not let you," Kevin says.

"Who?"

"Them," he says, opening his arms to summarize the world.

You know that he is telling the truth and this makes you angry and vindictive. "Stay poor if you want. Die like your father," you say.

Kevin stands up suddenly and dusts the back of his shorts although he has been in a squatting position too. He does not fight back as you expect him to. This stings you and you think of lunging at and pummeling him.

"Don't want too much, Jeremiah. Wanting too much will kill you," he says and walks toward the hole you made in the corrugated iron-sheet fence around the construction site's perimeter.

You throw a stone at the Caterpillars mauling the earth below. No one looks up. No one sees you.

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*Makena Onjerika* won the 2018 Caine Prize for African Writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Granta*, *Johannesburg Review of Books*, *Fireside Quarterly*, *Wasafiri*, *Waxwing*, *Jalada*, *New Daughters of Africa*, *Doek!*, *DRR* and others. She runs the Nairobi Fiction Writing



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