

# A Thing More Difficult Than This

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THE KOI-KOI-KOI OF Susan's black patent leather heels on the new tar on Zambia Road was unfamiliar. She was accustomed to the dry thud of her shoes on packed earth, and when it rained, the squelch of mud when she made her way to catch a bus into town. Leaving home every morning had long stopped being a hopeful journey into an uncertain future. Twenty-eight years old, unemployed, and living in her parent's house was not where she thought her life would be.

The torn, brown envelope with her laminated degrees and letters of recommendation was too big to fit in her purse, so she carried it under her arm as she walked past the shack where construction workers had their breakfast. The little shack was always full, even when construction in the area was slow. Loud chewing and louder slurps of milk tea accompanied the koi-koi-koi of her shoes. One of the men threw her a wolf-whistle and a wink. Her eyes focused on the houses in the distance. She waved a quick hello to the woman bent over a hot jiko, flipping a pile of chapati.

For some reason, the new tar on Zambia Road made people behave better. Just three weeks ago, cars dodged potholes and people, as animals, boda-bodas, school buses and the water delivery man's donkey cart struggled for space on this narrow stretch of dirt. The insults flew fast and furious during the morning commute and people returning resigned, less combative and more accommodating. It was an uncomfortable fit most days, but they all made do and found a way to use this one road, often without regard for each other. School children screamed as nannies dragged them to school. The fronts of shops and shacks were littered with refuse, and stray dogs chased bicycles and chickens for fun.

When the tar appeared, the kiosk owner near the milk shop stopped throwing her dirty leftover water onto the road and instead poured it into the drainage burrows that the Chinese company dug. Dogs snoozed on the warm morning tar, too content to chase chickens, and the chickens now had to venture further to find last night's refuse. Cars and boda-bodas made way for people and animals alike, and school buses honked and waved at the water delivery donkey. Instead of rushing home after suffering the Nairobi traffic, couples filled the evenings, young and old strolling under crooked street lights, smiling at each other. People too seemed not just nicer but also more *alive*.

The February sun created a mirage of a water puddle metres away, which Susan took to be a sign of good things to come. For a while now, she had been clinging to any superstition she could recall. Yesterday, it was a big white cat, looking like a small carpet with legs which she took as a lucky omen. Tomorrow it would be something else. She saw no harm in these beliefs, since everything else she tried had failed.

The 'HELP WATNED' sign outside RamCo Computer College made Susan pause. *What happened to people using Spellcheck?* She went in and asked a young woman with purple hair and five earrings dangling from one lobe whether help was still wanted.

The young woman paused to take in Susan's very formal outfit. A neatly pressed white cotton blouse with thin navy blue stripes, and

a form-fitting tweed skirt. Susan took a deep breath. *This again*, she thought.

‘Em ... I don’t know if this is the work you’re looking for, to be honest.’ The woman said and turned back to her phone..

‘What work is it exactly?’ she asked.

Purple Hair turned and looked at Susan like she had just walked in, a surprised expression on her face, as if to say, *oh, you’re still here?*

‘Ni kazi ya kusafisha hapa.’ A cleaning job.

‘How much does it pay?’ Susan asked.

‘Kitu fifteen kay a month,’ Purple Hair said, the words coming out like vomit, like 15,000 shillings was candy money lying at the bottom of her handbag.

Drumming her nails on the counter, Susan considered the meager pay and the possibility of taking orders from this child whose parents probably owned this shop. After holding out and turning down similar jobs for over a year, this could not be the one she was waiting to announce back home as her big break.

‘Okay, thanks,’ she said in the direction of Purple Hair, and stepped back out into the hot, Nairobi sun.

No matter how they dressed, how they sauntered through the streets of Nairobi, putting on airs, Susan could spot a job-seeker anywhere. There was always a crack in the performance when you looked close enough. A blink, a pause, when the despair and disappointment leaked through the ironed shirt and the neat makeup. The jaunty man leaning against the wall at a store window hid fidgety fingers inside pockets that kept rattling keys. The hearty laugh and full lips spread wide over white teeth distracted from the restless leg tapping under the table. They were a nervous, terrified bunch that could not let the world know that their biggest fear was unfolding before their eyes, and in front of everyone who believed that this thing did not happen to people with three degrees from two international universities.

Susan’s own tic was biting the soft skin of her fingertips. There was not much there but she would dig into the corner for anything. Last

week, she drew blood. Looking for a job *was* a full-time job.

When she graduated from the University of Nairobi with a master's in Forensic Accounting, she felt like she could fly. She did not know anyone outside her classmates, all 21 of them, who had degrees in this field. The world was a goldmine of opportunity and she had the biggest digger. Everyone would want a forensic accountant, she was told. She lay awake at night thinking about where she was going to build her house, what colour tiles the bathroom would be. She wondered what she was going to wear to the Safaricom Jazz Festival. Hugh Masekela was the main attraction the year of her graduation, and she dreamed of gifting her parents this once-in-a-lifetime experience of watching Bra Hugh live. Susan dreamed. Of the beautiful things she could do with her life and in those dreams her parents would look at her like she was the full moon on a night with no clouds. She missed that look of pride, of success.

That was over two years ago. It turned out that people did not *need* forensic accountants. A forensic accountant was only necessary in a crisis, and everyone preferred the regular accountant, especially one without a master's in anything. Many times she offered to do the regular stuff, but employers worried that they could not afford her or that she would not stick around. Plus the language of forensic accounting sounded ominous, like her job was to find something wrong in their books and shut their businesses down like some kind of a financial undertaker.

There was that one time Susan had considered becoming a receptionist at a dentist's office in Karen. Dr Something-or-the-other Patel had said that they did not need an accountant or a bookkeeper or anything to do with money, but that Susan had a nice set of teeth and a good smile. He said that the current receptionist was going on maternity leave, and if Susan was open to temping, then the almost-job was hers. Susan had said no thanks and left with her dentist's receptionist teeth.

Once she nearly agreed to do the books for a timber yard in Dagoretti Corner, where the owner, straight-faced and serious, told her that to

keep the job, she would have to cook the books. He went on and on about how the new tax rates and systems in Kenya were dodgy, and that the only tax he owed was to God the Father via his congregating at The Fire of Christ Tabernacle. His salary offer of 45,000 shillings was the highest she had received in a long time. Susan thought of her family and for a moment saw her face on NTV news at 7 pm: *Susan Nasimiyu arrested for cooking books at KwaMugo Hardware and Timber Yard*. She declined this offer.

For weeks, Susan courted the idea of running away. The weight on her shoulders was the dimming glint of hope in her parent's eyes when she returned home every evening and shook her head, no, in the kitchen. Her mother, a praying woman, often in her *God's Favourite* T-shirt, took her daughter's hands and gave thanks. Her father, unschooled in emotions but his own expert in disappointment, would pretend that everything was okay, joking and laughing at unfunny things on the TV. It was like watching a car crash in slow motion, and Susan was the driver.

As the first among three girls, and against everyone's advice, her parents did everything to put her through her master's at the University of Nairobi. They threw her a big graduation celebration, because like any wise investment the money would return twofold. It had to. The Kamaus down the road did the same and now their eldest daughter worked for the UN. Mama Susan started planning her retirement and wanted to open a small tailor's shop where she would make school uniforms for children. In the heady post-graduation days, her father would make comments about how he always wanted to live in a double-storeyed house, that maybe it was time the family house was extended. Susan herself would chip in; everyone was now putting tiles in their homes, and if there was room for one, they should also get a bathtub like in the movies. Her two younger sisters looked at her like she was a mix of holy apparition and pop superstar. For those few months, she could not imagine that anything so bright could burn out into nothing. Her hopeful returns home became slow and laboured shuffles, first

in the dust, then in the mud, and now on the tar, standing at the gate sometimes for hours before letting herself into her childhood home.

Were it not for the high hopes of her family, she was ready to mop floors under the supervision of Purple Hair at RamCo Computer College. But she could not do that to her parents.

Some Sundays past Mama Susan told her about a certain Pastor Okun who was visiting from Nigeria and had called for a great anointing over all the land. Pastor Okun asked everyone to purchase anointed cloths (that cost 200 shillings each) and present them for prayer and anointing. Mama Susan did just that, and knelt before the pastor that Sunday and asked him to bless her small rectangle of hope. He held both her hands in his large sweaty ones and said to her that the work of the Lord was not done yet, and that a great gift for her years of piety and faith was on its way. Mama Susan felt the spirit of the Lord course through her spine, and she knew that her deepest desires would be fulfilled soon. She stood up from the altar and went home to offer Susan the little handkerchief. Susan did not ask why she got the handkerchief, she just accepted it. She needed a miracle, and so she did as she was told.

A few days later, while looking through the newspaper that job-seekers shared at the GPO stage in Nairobi, Susan saw that Mitchell Inc., a big construction magnate, was hiring. They needed several financial accountants. Mitchell Inc. was an equal opportunity employer and a tertiary qualification would be an advantage. Susan had read a thousand such advertisements and applied for them all. But because quitting at the threshold of her big breakthrough cut her deeper than the possibility of more disappointment, she applied anyway. She reworked her CV and wrote a passionate cover letter in which she filled the two-year unemployment gap with short 'consultancies' done at fictitious businesses that her friends would vouch for. She then walked into Zoom Zoom Cyber Cafe and sent in her application.

Two weeks later, while biting into her forefingers at the GPO bus stop and sharing a cob of maize with a stranger, she got an alert on her phone. It was an email inviting her to come in for an interview

at Mitchell Inc. She sat on this news like it was an egg. She did not tell anyone at home about it; she could not bring herself to. It was too soon and she was afraid that a wrong move would crack this egg, and the promise of a new life inside it. She wrapped Pastor Okun's handkerchief around her bleeding finger and put her phone away.

Mitchell Inc. was situated somewhere in Old Muthaiga, at an old house that used to be some country's consulate. The Mitchell people had not yet bothered to change much about the place. The reception area had a thick glass barrier that separated visa applicants from visa givers; a sign above said VISAS. The room, on the whole, was cold and uninviting. She sat down, trying not to bite her fingers.

Across from her sat three other women and two men, equally antsy, shuffling already shuffled papers and doodling nothing on plain corners. She noticed the bright light of a recent graduate who sat closest to the door into the VISA section. Her back was straight and her hands and feet were still. Her lips were painted bright red and matched her nails and shoes and bag and jacket. She oozed confidence. She maintained eye contact with everyone that looked at her, and sat apart from the rest, as if having perceived the heady funk of despondence and defeat around her. Susan wanted so badly to walk through the door of her parent's house and announce that she got the job. That she would be earning an exciting salary and that the extensions to the house can be made. That she would be taking a loan and buying a car and that, finally, they would all be able to go to the Safaricom Jazz Festival.

One after the other, the interviewees were called, and they all walked out looking lighter and more hopeful than they had been going in. The Lady in Red floated out and smiled at everyone, like she had been hired. Susan regarded her own white blouse with ruffles and her black chino slacks, her lack of makeup and her short nails and hair. She had practiced her poise and facial expressions in the bathroom mirror late at night, while her father snored and her mother stayed up praying. This would have to do; knives had won wars and rats had sunk ships. She hoped that it was not how she looked that would matter but what she said.

‘Susan Nasimiyu,’ a deep voice called from a speaker summoned.

The interview panel was made of four men sat in a semi-circle, in suit jackets and pressed shirts. They regarded Susan with curiosity and caution, as if assessing something that could harm them.

‘Tell us about yourself, Susan.’ A voice from the left asked. She smiled her dentist’s receptionist smile, and began.

That evening, thunderclaps cracked clouds in half and the skies opened up and she got drenched on her way home. Tired from performing confidence and wit, she smiled her small smile at her mother as she entered the house. Her mother smiled back.

It had been raining non-stop for over two weeks when Susan got a call from a thin voice with a thick Kikuyu accent.

‘Hello, I’m looking for Susan Nasimiyu. Hello?’

‘This is Susan. How can I help you?’

‘Hi, this is Kate from Mitchell Incorporated. I am calling about your interview for the accountant position.’ Susan held her breath. ‘You have to come in for a second interview. Can you make it on Saturday, 11 am?’

‘This Saturday?’

‘Yes. At eleven in the morning.’ Kate from Mitchell Inc. said.

‘Sure, yes, I’ll be there at eleven sharp.’

She exhaled. And inhaled.

The week of the second interview crawled on slowly, as if on hands and knees across gravel. She carefully picked what to wear – a skirt this time, to show versatility and femininity, now that she knew that it would be a panel of men. A floral blouse. A dab of colour on her nails. The same black patent leather heels would have to do until she could afford another pair. Susan apologised to her family on Friday evening and promised to make it up to Grace who would be turning 14. She was out of the house before anyone woke up on Saturday. She went window-shopping on Kenyatta Avenue, then caught a matatu to Old Muthaiga. For the first time in ages she allowed herself to dream again. She imagined a new pair of shoes and a nice present for her parents.

Chicken on Saturday night with chapati, like they used to do when she was younger and her father still worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At half past 10, she jumped off the matatu and slowly walked to the office of Mitchell Inc.

Kate was not at the front desk and the VISA sign had since been replaced with RECEPTION. Susan remembered now that people do not usually work on Saturdays; how eager they must be to hire her for them to ask her to come in. She sat down in the same seat she had occupied the last time, for good luck. The same god-like voice echoed her name into the same empty room.

There was no panel this time. There was one man, tall, lean and with a beard. Susan was not prepared for a one-on-one conversation and was a little taken aback. Not moving her head, she looked around the room to see if there was anyone else, maybe a secretary in the corner taking notes. But they were alone, she and this man, who was standing by the window looking out at the trees. Something about the light coming in warmed her; she relaxed a little and allowed the back of the chair to support her weight. The man at the window still had not said anything, and the silence was unnerving.

‘I brought my laptop today because I figured this would be the practical part of the process,’ she said, the bag on her lap. The light shade of pink on her nails, borrowed from a friend who lived two houses down Zambia Road, bounced off some light, and she smiled.

‘I am up to date with all my certifications and I hear that Valid8 is the best software, so I have been doing some reading up on that as well.’ The man at the window turned, and smiled.

‘That won’t be necessary at this point,’ he said. ‘I called you here to get to know you better. To see who we are employing.’

*To see who we are employing.* The words bounced around in her head like a squash ball. *Did she get the job? How much did they pay? When could she start? Didn’t they want to test her skills? Would there be an opportunity to practice her forensic accounting? Did she get the job?* Despite herself she smiled back. Slow and wide. Allowed the happiness

to reach her eyes and pour out. She wiped her sweaty palms on the bag. She looked up to see the man watching her. With an inquisitive stare.

‘Okay. What would you like to know, sir?’ she asked, and uncrossed her legs. She was sweating behind her knees.

‘Call me Kimotho. *Sir* sounds old and I’m not.’ The smile came back. ‘You see, Susan, Mitchell Incorporated is embarking on some of the biggest real estate projects in Nairobi. I’m talking malls and residential houses, business complexes that sell a certain type of life to a certain type of person, you know?’ His back was turned again, as if he were talking to a Jacaranda tree outside. She wanted to chime in on all the research she had done on Mitchell Inc. She came to show that she was a thinking woman.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘And we need the right kind of people on board. People that won’t disappoint us along the way. We are looking for long-term team players, you know?’ He turned to face her.

‘Yes.’ She wanted to say how determined she had been for nearly three years to find a job. But saying out loud that she had been rejected time and again felt wrong in this place.

‘I’ll personally need people on my team that I can trust. And I think I can trust you, Susan.’

She smiled. *Trust*. What an odd word to use. Usually employers wanted dependability, but trust, that was new.

‘We will have to work closely together, you and I, and I’m a tough boss. I don’t like excuses and I expect nothing less than one hundred per cent all the time from everyone.’

Susan nodded her yes this time, and made eye contact with Kimotho. His sleeves were folded over muscular arms, up to his elbows. The shirt was a colour she did not see often on men, a soft peach, the kind that little girls in the neighbourhood wore on Sundays to church. He leaned on the big boardroom table looking at her. There was sweat under her breasts and armpits. His raised eyebrow told her what was happening. She saw his pause as her chance to do something, maybe run, or, to do the even harder thing, stay. She tried to figure out how

fast she could run out of the room. But the other side of the door waited the ever-closing walls of her parents' dashed hopes. He broke eye contact and smiled, the smile of an animal ambushing his prey. The whole room felt full of him, his Sunday peach shirt and his beard and his footfalls on the faded red carpet. He had taken up all the air in the room and she worked hard to not start gasping.

'Do you want to be on my team, Susan?' Before she could find any other words, 'yes' left her mouth like a potato dropped from a sack. It hit the ground between her and Kimotho and sat there, a small word but heavy as lead, immovable and irretrievable.

Putting on the seat belt in Kimotho's Toyota Corolla sedan, she thought of her sister's birthday celebration that she did not want to miss. Her mother had suggested that they could wait until Susan returned home later in the evening to sing happy birthday and cut the cake. It suddenly became important for Susan to not be late for her sister's birthday.

As he drove, she tried to count the trees lining Rhapta Road, but lost count at around 56, when the trees became bushes and then fences and then walls. He stopped outside a big black gate and hooted once. An askari in a G4S uniform opened the gate and Kimotho parked his car under a Jacaranda tree. She took her laptop bag and followed him, not making eye contact with the security guard whose gaze on her felt like a torch cutting through the dark.

The house was warm but her arms were covered in goosebumps. She clung to her laptop bag like a life buoy, and stood still and tall in his living room. The hot afternoon sun brought a lot of light into the room, which reflected off polished wooden floors and mirrors. She thought of his car registration number, KDC 404X. KDC 404X and recited it in her head several times. She would never forget it. For likely her whole life.

Kimotho gestured for her to follow him and she did, her footfalls on the wooden floor very different from the koi-koi-koi of her heels on Zambia Road. It was a large bedroom, with a big bed and very white sheets. She tried not to look at the clock. She did not want to

miss her sister's birthday. Kimotho was not in a hurry. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. She wondered if he was married, if he had children, if he did this with all new job applicants at Mitchell Inc. She wondered if people knew that this was part of their hiring process.

She stared at him, this man that held her future in his loins. He was attractive, clean, neat. His face, though handsome, was forgettable; you could lose him in a crowd of other clean, bearded men. Still, he was the kind of man that mothers nudged their daughters to and said, *Find a man like him*. But why did a man need to do *this*, when he could walk into any club or hotel in Nairobi and the women would bring themselves to him?

'I'll give you space to undress and get into the bed,' Kimotho said. He disappeared into an adjoining bathroom. He came back wrapped in a towel as white as the sheets. Across his chest was a long scar, just below his nipples, and she wondered what had happened to him. She began to pray. She hoped he would not ask if she was a virgin. She hoped he would use protection. She hoped this was something she could wash off.

She undressed. The underside of her bra was wet with sweat, and her painted toenails were chipped. She lay still on the bed and closed her eyes. The soup of thoughts began to churn. *KCD 404X. Did she have the job? Member of a winning team. One hundred per cent. Did she have the job? KCD 404X. KCD 404X.*

He looked like the hundreds of boys she had gone to school with. He looked like Uncle Paul. He looked like her ex-boyfriend Mike. He looked like the security guard that had just opened the gate. She felt his fingers, tracing the outline of her body, coaxing her body to agree, despite what her mind was saying. His skin was soft, softer than hers, and his body was warm. He smelled good, like the expensive soap she once used at a hotel in Mombasa during a holiday retreat while still at university.

He began kissing her neck and his body moving between the sheets sounded like slithering snakes. Something slithered between her

legs. Soft palms and long fingers coaxed the underwear off her body. Something slithered around her waist and on her breasts. The snakes were everywhere. Inside her, on her, around her. Something licked her ear and she whimpered. She still had not found her tears. She waited for a bite, a slap, an insult, some kind of pain, a reminder that this transaction was in fact violence.

She realised that he knew his way around a woman's body when he found the soft flesh of her inner thigh and kissed it. A sound foreign to her own ears left her lips, her body betraying her mind. But. Her mind went blank. Her lips parted and he came back for the kiss that was earlier denied. He did not ask and she did not say no. Her inner thigh was radiating heat outwards, towards the rest of her. A coup was underway and her plan to resist was falling apart. She was overwhelmed.

The hissing of the snakes became a low hum, like the engine of a KBS bus. Was that her hand on his back pulling him in? Were those her hips thrusting, receiving his own? Was that her moan into his shoulder, her sweaty brow meeting his chest? She mouthed the words *no*, but the sound that left her body was a plea, for him to stop, to continue.

He pulled her towards him, as if trying to absorb her, and exhaled into her. She closed her eyes as her body responded, willing it to stop. Tears came down her eyes, of pain, of relief, of release. The hum had since stopped and all that was left was the sound of her heart beating hard between her legs.

A week later, Kate called again and told Susan to come in on Friday morning to sign her contract with Mitchell Inc. She needed to bring her ID and National Social Security Card if she had one. She would be reporting to Mr Mbithi, the Human Resources Manager.

Susan said a string of yeses and sat on her bed. She took a deep breath and burst into sobs, crying herself to sleep. On Friday evening, after window shopping in town, she bought a bag of pears and walked home in time for dinner. Between a mouthful of ugali and sukuma wiki, she looked at her mother and smiled.

‘I got a job today.’ She pinched another handful of hot ugali.

There was silence in the room; only the voice of Victoria Rubadiri on NTV, announcing the rise in the price of maize meal given the drought and poor rains.

‘It’s with Mitchell Inc., a real estate company that’s going to be doing some construction work all over Nairobi. I’m joining the accounting team.’

Silence.

‘I join the team on Monday next week.’

There was collective relief in the room. Like they had been holding onto a rope and now everyone could let go. Mama Susan praised Jesus, and her father said something about the maize. Her two sisters asked her why the company was called Mitchell Ink if what they did was construct buildings.

Later that night, just before bed, Susan found that her mother had washed, ironed, and folded her little handkerchief from Pastor Okun, and placed it on the end of her bed, the frayed edges tucked and sewn, her initials embroidered on it.