

THE HOMELESS MAN

He arrived one sunny Monday morning, a fragile, forlorn figure, old and freckled. He limped across the road without checking right and left for vehicles, and I pressed my face against the window to follow his movement. At the corridor, he swung his old canvas bag off his shoulder and set it down very close to a streetlamp post. He then instinctively looked right and left, blew his nose and, casually, dragged the bag to the wall, less than a metre from our main door.

“What’s he doing?” I heard a voice ask me. It was my assistant manager, Sarah.

I turned sideways to face her and slowly shook my head. In that moment, up close, her beauty struck me, almost as if I was seeing her for the very first time. She was petite: pretty in every way, subtle and modest in attire. She had deep set blue eyes which could be unsettling in their stare. She had flowing jet-black hair, but today it was held in a ponytail. She was visually intoxicating, I can describe it no other way.

“Look, he’s settling down,” Sarah exclaimed, standing and placing her face to the window.

I turned my attention to the man again. He’d taken out a sweater from his canvas bag and was laying it carefully on the verandah, like a floor mat. He stretched the ends so that the sweater was evenly spread out, then with a hand against the wall, he gingerly eased his emaciated frame down to the ground. Once seated, he propped his back against the wall and seemed to gasp, probably in relief.

Our company occupies both floors of Furaha House, initially called Happy House, for it housed API, which locals called “appy”. The customers are served on the ground floor, with offices tucked away in the luxurious first floor. From here, the panoramic view of the park adjacent to Furaha House is spellbinding. There’s no better way to relieve stress than to look out of the window onto the beauty of the park, the cuddling couples, the flowers in bloom, the jacaranda trees shedding a purple carpet of flowers, the horses strutting up and down the park.

“This man is homeless,” Sarah said, and I could detect sympathy in her voice.

In more than a year, we had not encountered a homeless person in our street. The mushrooming rehabilitation centres had absorbed a good number of them, and it was thus a surprise to see the man cozily settle on our doorstep.

A soft knock sounded in the background. Sarah turned, and beckoned the man in. The footsteps were distinctly Patrick’s.

“Sir,” Patrick said in panic. “Someone has just sat near our door.”

“I saw him,” I retorted, irritated by his lack of sympathy. He could clearly see I was staring through the window, in the direction of the homeless man. Patrick was known for complaining about everything.

“We should send him away...”

“No,” Sarah said. “He’s just a homeless man and there is no suggestion he could harm us or the business...”

I agreed, not entirely because I thought the homeless man was better off left to stay on our doorstep, but because I knew workers from a local rehabilitation centre were going to arrive in the street in a couple of days, and they would pick him up. I’d be recognized as humane, for how many tolerated homeless people at their doors?

We decided to call the homeless man Muishi Nje. *He that lives outside.*

I was the last person to leave office that evening. I had a client who had popped in late and as we wandered out, we argued about politics. I was surprised to Muishi Nje lying near the door, curled up like a question mark. His eyes were open and he greeted us with a smile; my client was unsympathetic.

“Why do you allow a homeless man to make a home in the front of your office?”

“He’ll go some time,” I answered curtly, as we strode across the road to the parking bay.

“Your office will look less appealing with him there.”

“Don’t worry. I have it sorted.”

I turned just in time to see Muishi Nje scan Furaha House and, struggling to his feet, he pulled at the door handle then lay down again.

I panicked and later drove back to the offices before dusk; he was still seated on his sweater, staring into space, and even when I slowed down alongside him, he didn’t react. I drove home, my mind divided between letting him stay another day and sending him away.

The following morning, Muishi Nje was all over the place. He was excited and engaged with his surroundings. He showed me where to park (not that I hadn’t seen the only gaping space), helped Harrison lift a box of stationery into the back of our truck and also used his sweater to fan away dust that had accumulated at our doorstep.

But I wasn’t ready to like him yet.

For later, when clients started to arrive, he stood like an usher, showing them in. Most of them didn’t appreciate his efforts, and a female client scampered away around the street corner. Muishi Nje made as if to run after her and, watching from my window, I cringed with embarrassment. He remained at the door for the rest of the morning, offering to carry clients’ bags; some, for fear of being pestered, dropped a coin into his palm and he grinned sheepishly, thanking them effusively.

I watched him, peering through the window time and again, and I was surprised, no, impressed, by his boundless energy. All day long he darted about the area adjacent to the verandah, smiling at passersby and ensuring that the doorstep didn't become dusty.

I watched Sarah hurry across the road as she returned from lunch. She held her phone in one hand and there was a small parcel in the other. As she approached the door Muishi Nje jumped to his feet and stood into her path. I leaned closer to the window to see how Sarah was going to react. She dithered then, smiling at him, passed the parcel she was carrying. She then gave him a tender pat on the back, and they exchanged a few words before she continued her progress to the office.

I clenched my fists in irritation. He was flirting with her! And yet for weeks I'd not dared to do the same- I'd always hesitated.

When he'd unwrapped the parcel, I was again surprised. She'd just bought him chips and chicken, the favourite dish for office workers here.

"I've talked to the rehab centre," Sarah told me that evening as we descended the stairs. "They're full and unable to take in another homeless person."

This annoyed me: I was keen to see my newly arrived rival for her attention- her affection- move on as quickly as possible. My sympathy had evaporated.

"We'll have to find a way to send him away. That cannot be debated. He'll frighten away our clients. He's hassling them as they arrive for meetings. No, it can't be allowed anymore"

Sarah shrugged. She then gave me a quick glance, held onto the railing and looked straight ahead. I could tell she was unwilling to see Muishi Nje forced to move on.

"He almost terrorized our clients today."

She didn't reply. We reached the lounge and sauntered across it, the lights going out systematically as we made for the door.

Muishi Nje offered to help me lock up but I told him off, reminding him that he should have been in a rehabilitation facility by now. He looked at me as if he was about to say something, something I instinctively knew was important, but instead he remained silent. Sarah said nothing but also looked slightly awkward, embarrassed. Muishi Nje smiled at her but she turned away. The looks and unspoken words of the two were disturbing but I didn't know why. We then proceeded to the parking bay, where, barely looking at her, I barked,

"You stop talking to that vagrant. He shouldn't even be here!"

I drove away, now angry; the image of Muishi Nje smiling at Sarah had really taken hold.

I've always loved Sarah but never revealed this to her. Don't ask me why: fear of rejection, or perhaps embarrassment, or just a male ego thing. Also, having sworn never to get married until I reach 65 I still have twenty seven years to go, and, if I am indeed lucky to see 65, then Sarah will be 61. Sixty one!

Two days, then three, then four: Muishi Nje had become a part of the scene outside Furaha House. Our staff spoke highly of him: he had a big heart, he was always courteous, and was always eager to help. They dropped him packed lunches as they trooped in from Café Bhajia; they threw him random cigars and once he had to ask me for a light as I left the office. I just scowled at my rival and told him to go away and never come back. But he always reappeared the next day, always smiling, his eyes full of life. Always the same sweater, neatly spread out on the floor outside our office. He still ushered in visitors, waving his arms as he pointed to the door, almost as if he'd been paid to advertise our business.

I noticed Sarah once again chatting with Muishi Nje, it seemed almost conspiratorially at a distance. She'd then bolted, walking straight to her car. She didn't pass by the grocery store that evening, where I was waiting for her. I was going to give her a tongue lashing of a lifetime. This apparent flirting between the two was embarrassing and had to stop. Later that night I called her phone and it was switched off. I became worried about her, so much so that when she reported for work later than usual the following day, instead of chastising her, I apologized for being irritated, seeing her talking with Muishi Nje.

Muishi Nje was spending his fourteenth night in front of our offices the night when it rained heavily. I was hoping that the downpour would force him to leave to find shelter elsewhere, for once. As it pounded on the windows I lay in bed, satisfied that I had one problem less at my workplace. The downpour went on for a full two hours, and then light showers followed. When I woke up, there was still a slight drizzle which only began to subside as I drove to the office.

To my delight, Muishi Nje was not outside our door, nor was his ever-present sweater. I strode into the office, beaming, and was met by Sarah's sad face. She was crestfallen, she said, for who would enjoy the suffering of another man? I looked at her, feigning sympathy for a moment, but in truth I was relieved he'd gone

Outside, the park teemed with couples and job hunters. Doves cooed and the trees swayed, their leaves carried away on the gentle breeze. I savored the scene, letting my eyes sweep over the entire park. And then I saw him.

He limped across the park, a canvas bag strapped tightly to his back and a sweater wrapped around his waist. I watched him with rising foreboding, loathing every step he made, until he finally crossed the road without checking right or left. When he reached the door, he set down his canvas bag; I cursed, silently.

"What is it?" asked Sarah as she came to the window.

When she saw him, she squealed with joy. I looked at her scornfully then walked away, fuming. I was ready to call the police.

After disappearing in some alley, Muishi Nje came back with a mop and cleaned the verandah, after which he spread out his sweater and lay down to sleep.

Three weeks since Muishi Nje had become a near-permanent feature outside Furaha House, I was assigned some tasks by an international client. I spent the day hunched over my laptop and was so tired by the evening that I forgot to take some files home. I knew I'd have to work through the night to get the client's work completed on time. I had to do the inevitable: drive back to the office and pick up the files. I brewed coffee, drank it quickly, and then left for Furaha House. The traffic was light and I raced through the avenues, well over the speed limit.

When the headlights illuminated Furaha House, I saw Muishi Nje's bedding roughly heaped up into a mound near the building's door, but he was nowhere to be seen. But he was the least of my concerns at this time of night. I parked the car in front of the door and alighted. Slamming the door shut, I reached into my pockets and fished out the keys.

It was at this moment that something cold was pressed against the back of my head. Before I could react, a shrill, cold voice said;

“Open the door and take us to the safe.”

My heartbeat raced and I knew not to resist; I started walking towards the door.

In the corner of my eye, I could see the silhouette of a short man lurking beside my assailant.

I unlocked the door and entered. There, I stopped.

“To the safe!” the voice squealed as the nozzle of the gun smacked against my head.

I started walking towards the safe. I was shivering, and my legs wobbled with fear.

“Quick. We don't have time.”

I walked on. From the footfalls I could tell the robbers were two in number.

I considered leading them away from the safe: I knew we would lose a large amount of cash if the robbers had their way. I knew there was the risk of losing my life to save the business, but I needed to buy myself time. Suddenly, I changed course and started heading for the stairs.

A heavy slap landed across my cheek and I shuddered.

“I said to the safe. Don't be clever or you'll regret it!”

These people obviously knew where the safe was.

I turned and continued towards the safe. We were about five metres away when suddenly there was a loud bang as a large, heavy object crashed into my assailants. One of them bumped into me and collapsed to the ground as I went sprawling across the carpet. The heavy canister rolled to a stop inches away from me. A gunshot roared and the only figure who had been standing collapsed to the floor with a loud groan.

I was not hurt and quickly got to my feet. In the darkness I edged my way along the wall and flicked on the lights. The room lit up, revealing three bodies lying on the floor, two writhing in pain, and one motionless. The huge iron container had come to rest across the still body.

My mind cleared in seconds and I gasped when I realized that the man clutching his leg and writhing in pain was Muishi Nje.

“These people- they almost killed you,” he said grimacing, blood gushing from his leg.

“We need to...”

Muishi Nje rolled over to the masked man who was still struggling on the floor. He grabbed the mask and in one go tore it off.

I reeled in shock. Sarah’s unmistakable hair fell over her face, her blue eyes gazing into the light. She was dressed as a man, in oversize overalls and safety boots.

“She’s always tried to bribe me. She wanted to talk me into this. She really tried...”

With all my strength I rolled the container off the still man. There was no pulse, and he still held the gun in his hand. I stared into his lifeless face and felt a sudden upwelling of anger: this man was a regular client in my firm.

“What happened?” I asked, dazed.

“They wanted me to be part of this. But I’ve always look after your business, and have many, many times fought such robbers outside your door at night. These were a harder crew- they knew all about your business. They had s inside information...’

Muishi Nje’s head slumped back. He was losing a lot of blood. I ran to the wall and pressed the alarm button. It pinged then wailed like an ambulance’s siren. I proceeded to Sarah, squatted next to her, and with tears stinging my eyes asked her: “Why?”

The doctor looked at me with sympathy in his eyes.

“He’d lost a lot of blood. We tried as much as we could. He had pneumonia and was malnourished. We couldn’t save him. I’m so sorry.”

I fell to my knees and wept into my open palms. If anyone wanted Muishi Nje to live at this moment in time, it was me. Sarah, now in a police cell, could have asked for anything; no doubt she now regretted not having acceded to my request and sent him away. It was he, after all, who had now thwarted her criminal plan.

Back in the office I pressed my head against the window, hoping to see a fragile, forlorn figure, old and freckled, limping across the park towards Furaha House. I spent the whole day hoping, but he didn’t arrive, nor would he ever again. And neither would she, the woman I’d admired for such a long time who’d seemed to care him when in truth she never did. Her rejection of my irritation

about a homeless man making our verandah his home had been for completely ulterior motives; I'd been willfully oblivious to what had been right in front of me all the time.