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# NAIROBBERY: City of Injustice, City of Grief

By Gloria Mari



Prior to being let go from the most promising job I'd ever gotten, I'd entertained the idea that maybe I was somehow safe. But when the news was broken to me over a static-laced WhatsApp call from the *mdosi*, I barely reacted.

'Do you have anything to say?' he asked.

'Is this decision final?' I responded.

'Yes, it is.'

'Then I have nothing more to say.'

An awkward silence reigned the conference room and eventually I left them to whatever else they needed to settle. I walked to my desk, broke the news to my family and started looking for a new job. It's now been four months. I am yet to work in an office again.

I was almost 25 when I was technically fired. Each day that passed without a response to my job applications felt like a tightening noose.

Others who have been through the same - and it appears as though anyone with ambition has gone through this - told me, 'Relax. These things happen. Enjoy this moment.'

That's the problem. What's to be enjoyed when there's no money to leave the house? Eventually the stress of job seeking began to suffocate me, an unseen persisting pressure pushing my mind further and further to that inevitable pop. It once got so bad that a friend figured that the best way to comfort me was to show me how many other people had survived my situation.

'Even Oprah was fired,' she exclaimed. But that's about the only thing some of us will ever have in common with Oprah.

Job seeking in Kenya right now seems to be an extreme sport. One where only the resilient or downright lucky get to win. For some, getting a job is a straightforward affair. Graduate, intern, employee, retire. For others it gets a bit more creative. One friend of mine said you only need three key things, 'Looks, manners and connections.'

I thought it a bit shallow. She disagreed.

'Looking good is one step in the right direction. When you're presentable, the world is your canvas. That's why the world's best comen are also the best dressed. The moment you look good, it gets easier to insert yourself in groups. Once you do that, you can get connections anywhere.'

The logic in it couldn't be denied. Looking good is its own reward. Think about it. Everything we wear is indicative of adhering to an acceptable aesthetic. You have to look a certain way to be taken seriously. You can't show up to a pitch meeting with unruly hair and mismatched sneakers. And you can't just say that being sloppy is your preference. There is a standard to meet.



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You have to graduate from Charm School to be able to create a job opportunity out of a chance encounter. That's half a foot in the door. Why our teachers couldn't spare a moment out of the pointless curriculums to share this about *adulging*, we may never know.

But it can't just be about looking good. It has to be about qualifications too. Perhaps the reason why I can't get a job I would be perfect for is because I may not be as experienced as the recruiters want. Or because I don't possess the requisite degree. However, Twitter is inundated with posts of highly qualified individuals looking for work, any work. Plenty of individuals with prestigious degrees in fields like Microbiology and Engineering are looking for any kind of job. A few have taken to the streets with banners showing their qualifications.

Unemployment rates in Kenya are at a crisis point. Recent [reports](#) from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics show that seven million Kenyans are unemployed. Out of these, 1.4 million have been desperately looking for work. The rest have given up on job hunting, with some opting to go back for further studies.

The data suggests that rate of unemployment is at 7.4%. Other [studies](#) show the rate at 11.4%. I couldn't care less about the numbers. So what if seven million other people are as jobless as I am? It doesn't change my personal situation.

Sometimes these jobs are only available at entry level. And even then, they end up being

frustratingly temporary. A friend who eventually opted to seek employment abroad had an interesting early experience before he left.

After being employed as an I.T. intern in a reputable firm, a workmate suggested that he seek a permanent position.

'Just apply,' he was told, 'What could go wrong?'

After making the application, the senior manager called him aside and told him he needed to grease the wheels.

'You need to buy the *wazee* a *mbuzi*.'

After months of arduous labour configuring laptops and providing tech support, this was the thanks he got. When he showed hesitation in providing the *mbuzi*, the manager refused to approve his pay for two and a half months. This forced my friend's immediate supervisor to pay him out of pocket. Eventually he had to leave the job and figure out what else to do. He was lucky enough to get a better opportunity a few weeks later.

But his happy ending isn't the norm for entry-level workers. In 2016, I left a job as a data entry clerk because the project got axed. Other companies hire interns and have a policy against retaining them. Some start-ups, though courageous enough to hire newbies in the work environment, end up sinking anyway because of finances.

While this is a 'norm', it spells a world of doom for young people in their early twenties. Most of us end up getting *mjengo* type jobs where they're veritable casual labourers. The *mjengo* system is a daily struggle to earn an unsteady pay check. Contracts that are renewed monthly. No job security. Linear use of skills. Doubtful job roles. No benefits. No legal protections. And you have to struggle through them because you're 'paying your dues'. Desperately hoping that perhaps the universe sees it as a proof of workmanship. That it will in turn reward you.

Then this is where the Boomers and Gen Xers come in. Parents are mad at the 'lack of initiative'. If you're hard at work shouldn't there be fruits to show of your labour?

My father had one such conversation with me when I was unemployed after my first internship.

He raised one hand above his head, 'These are your expenses.'

Another hand hovered near the ground, 'This is your income.'

He brought his palms to meet around his face, 'This is where you should be. Why can't you get a job?'

Because nobody would hire someone fresh out of college with only three months' experience to their CV.

The murmur of frustrated parents echoes around homes in the city that still support their recent graduates.

'Why don't you start a business?'

'Food always makes money.'

'Even with the economy sinking, Kenyans won't stop wearing clothes, go into the *mtumba* business.'

But to be honest, entrepreneurship isn't for everyone. It's suited only to a gifted few. And even so, entrepreneurs struggle to make it through in a crony capitalist state like Kenya.

Another friend who owns a wildly successful travel solutions company told me, 'Not everyone is cut to do it.'

Sure. All you need is guts, guile and a never-ending thirst for glory, right? Wrong.

My friend went on to add, 'Cash flow is a serious problem, at least for me. Business only booms when the economy is good.'

'So how did you survive?' I asked.

'You have to stretch the shilling, make sure you have years of savings for utilities and expenses because profit will be erratic. Work from home, use business offices if you have to reduce rent expenses. Keep a routine. Prepare for bad times. The 2017 election period caught us off guard. Nairobi is no longer just about Kenya. Understand that you will be facing international competition.'

This sounds like a lot to think about. It's also what affects one entrepreneur among millions of others. If you are unemployed with barely any savings to your name, do you jump into that pool?

Technically, starting a business in Nairobi is supposed to be easy. Running it and keeping it afloat isn't. And with the rising costs of living in the country, starting a business seems like a bad idea.

Essentially, it brings you back to the job-seeking arena. Get a job, save some cash and start a business, yeah? However, getting that job still isn't easy. Most job-seeking sites have sales jobs aplenty. Sales seem to be the most common job available in the country.

'Sales jobs are numerous because no matter what is happening, you'll always want someone out there touting your product,' a friend of mine who heads business development for a media company tells me. It's basically free marketing. That way your company is always known and you always have a potential client to add to your portfolio.'

Sales jobs are also notoriously poorly paid. Some companies even pay only on commission with no retainers or benefits. You can operate at no cost to the company.

It's not always what it seems though. A sales operator for a hardware company told me it was difficult for him to get there. After leaving a job at an insurance company to go back to school, things didn't improve just because he had upgraded his papers.

Two years with casual jobs, he eventually gets an email inviting him to an interview. The fact that it was being held in the conference room of a church raised a few flags, none of them red. Upon showing up at the gate, a young well-dressed man asked for his name, phone number and a two-hundred-shilling registration fee for the meeting.

'Meeting? I thought this was for interviews?'

'No, this is a network marketing meeting.'

He looked around and saw the poster then. It was a gathering for a multilevel marketing training course organised by a well-known cosmetics company. Why did they have their meeting in a church? God knows. Perhaps church halls are cheaper? Maybe for credibility? Churches do have a reputation for getting people to make it rain so...

Months passed before he got a sales job that barely provides him with an income. But at least he gets that coveted job experience recruiters live for.

Nairobi ensnares dreamers, those who have the temerity to be ambitious, in its gaping maw, sucking them dry and then spitting them out. This phenomenon doesn't spare any generation.

A lady who had left for red, white and blue pastures in the early 2000s returned to Kenya after two years of experiences worthy of a depressing Chimamanda immigrant epic. Upon her return, she expected to be reinstated at her civil service job.

'It's standard practice. As long as you asked for leave, you just go to HQ and they reinstate you,' she told me.

Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned.

'When I left, I asked for the time off over my supervisor's head. He threatened me, told me to return after a month or else. I didn't return. And when I was back two years later I found out he'd written a bad recommendation to the seniors at headquarters.'

'Did you give up?' I asked her.

'No, I talked to a former workmate. He organised a meeting with one of the men in charge and they told me to pay KSh20,000 if I want to be reinstated. I paid and they told me to wait for two weeks then I can get my old job back. I didn't. They were reshuffled into other jobs and I never even got back the money I paid.'

'What about your supervisor? Couldn't you talk to him and get him to rescind his bad recommendation?'

'No, he died shortly after I came back. I was on my own. Every time I paid off the officials, they would get reshuffled. Eventually I ran out of money and none of them were willing to help unless I paid them.'

'What about family? Couldn't any of them help?'

'Nobody wants to help a 40-year-old woman who could afford to travel abroad. And everyone else said they didn't have any money or connections.'

Years later, she finally got a job. But she moved as far away as possible from Nairobi and its burdensome toxicity.

Is there any hope for little old me? We of the woefully unprepared for jobless insecurity, do we stand a chance? After experiencing an unprecedented bout of brokenness I reached out to people who were going through the same. Spells of having no money, crises of faith and crippling self-doubt. I asked a friend who has been through some of the most Dickensian worst of times.

'It gets better,' my friend promised.

'After clearing college, our school was changed which made my diplomas unusable. That was barely my first hurdle. After that I got a sales job but turned it down because I just can't do sales. I have tremendous respect for the people who do. I ended up drifting.'

'Drifting?' I asked.

'Yeah, I was sneaking into classes at a friend's school. I worked as a cleaner in a computer stall, I worked in a movie shop, I learnt to talk to people, how to broker deals and whatnot. I lost friends. I moved to Zimmerman and got a great job doing IT security then I got fired after a month. Let me tell you, don't believe your own hype. Don't oversell yourself on your CV.'

'I don't even know how to do that in my CV,' I quipped.

He laughed uneasily.

'I got an internship along Mombasa road where I had to walk to town every day because they weren't paying us. After, I went to a job in Karen where after two months, the money stopped coming in. The company was going under but the boss didn't tell us until after five months. I didn't leave until after seven months. The boss would give us handouts. But then I ended up not paying rent. Eventually my house was locked and my stuff auctioned except my laptop and the clothes on my back. I contemplated suicide so many times, I looked for ways I could leave all this from being shamed by my relatives, friends with the *'alirudi ocha'* vibe.'

'But after this I got my 'big break' because of a blog I had been writing since 2013. A CEO from abroad emailed me about it. At first, I thought it was a con but I just responded and got an amazing opportunity consulting with them. It's what I'm doing now. I've worked with celebrities, big tech and governments.'

I was so inspired by his story. Empowered too. Binging on prosperity porn is one of the survival mechanisms of dreamers who toil in dead-end jobs or are 'in-between jobs'. Stories like my friend's show that while Nairobi makes you struggle, it can breed greatness, right?

We soak in all the stories about people who were felled by circumstance or their own folly managed to claw their way back, and maybe even thrive.

You have to be lucky. You have to be timely. My peers call it 'your moment will come'. My more religious peers say, 'Wait for God's time'. Because there is a heavenly itinerary for when *watu ordinary* like Mwendu and Kimemia will finally get someone to notice their work. The sad truth is that for most, dreams come true through the 'blessing' of others. It is that successful people give you a chance to shine. It makes me realize that it's not necessarily your fault if you miss out when you've been working so hard for 'the moment'.

My former employer even reached out to me after I was let go, 'It had nothing to do with you or your talent,' she insisted.

Maybe there are forces at work that can swing either way. Beyond skills, qualifications, work ethic and experience, it seems like you have to have guardian angels, good luck charms and even the occasional visit to the *mganga* to get that dream job or set up that dream business. It seems like a whole lot of moving parts, and I can't blame anyone who can't keep up.

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