

**DISAPPEARED INTO THIN
AIR**

Douglas Mugambi

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Dedication

To my wife, Pendo, and my entire family for their support.

Foreword

Losing a loved one is excruciating. But it's more heart-wrenching when you lose them under unclear circumstances. The mental torture that comes with it is indescribable.

"Is he/she alive or dead?" is the refrain in one's thoughts, every minute, every day, sometimes for months and even years.

It's like a wound that never heals no matter how much you try to treat it.

This book is to encourage you never to lose hope. Have the assurance that there is somebody somewhere thinking about you. Hoping that you get reunited with your loved one.

As you read this book, may it reignite the flames in your heart to continue looking for them. One day the agony will end when you finally meet them.

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Chapter 1

The door banged behind him as they walked towards the waiting car parked in front of their house. He was handcuffed and escorted by two cops who did not care to hear his plea to bid his children goodbye and assure them all was going to be well.

He wrestled with them, trying to run back to the house. He could see his children peeping through a window, crying, and this tore his heart into a million pieces.

“You are already facing serious charges, and you are not making it easier for yourself by resisting, we request you to co-operate,” one cop warned him. The heavily built cops finally overpowered him and pushed him into the back seat of the waiting black Subaru Forester.

The car left at lightning speed, and Kuguru tried to catch a glimpse of his three children through the tinted window. Now standing on the porch, they looked confused. What would happen to them now that his wife was missing? He wasn't sure how long he would be away. He hadn't been able to hire a nanny for Meddy, Maggie, and Mike, thanks to his low-paying teaching job and daily drinking habit, so his wife was a stay-at-home mother.

Tears rolled down his cheeks. The devastation was heart-wrenching. *I want to wake up from this nightmare!*

His neighbours had come out of their houses to witness the chaos. Some laughed while others talked in small groups. Perhaps one of them would take the children under their wing.

Kuguru was lost in thought as the car drove through the crowded streets of their small town of Kikatiti. Who could have accused him of having anything to do with the disappearance of his wife?

Kitoto had been missing for two weeks. They had looked for her in every corner of the city – in the morgues and in the nearby forest. They had called her family members and even run announcements on local radio stations, all in vain. They had circulated her most recent photos everywhere, with a number to ring in case anyone saw her. Days had gone by, and not a word from anyone.

One witness informed the police that she had seen her that afternoon going to the market, carrying a white basket. Kitoto had asked the witness to look after her children as she went to buy groceries. She had been in high spirits.

Kuguru was baffled. He and his wife had differences that were known to their parents and neighbours, but were they big enough to make him a key suspect?

Kitoto was brought up in a dysfunctional family. Her father would drink all night and raise hell when he got home. He would beat and chase them out of the house while threatening to kill them with a kitchen knife. At first, their neighbours would offer them a place to sleep. And when it happened so frequently that the neighbours grew tired of them, they would huddle behind their house until the following day.

She had a scar on the back of her neck from that one night she tried to defend her mother from her father's beatings. As she and her mother ran out of the house, her father picked up a stool and threw it at them. It hit

her so hard that she fainted, and she woke up on a hospital bed a week later. The doctors said she was lucky to be able to walk again as her spinal cord had suffered minor damage. It took a year of treatment and therapy for her to walk again properly, though with a slight bend.

Finally, her parents separated, and she lived with her mother, but the 14 years of trauma left a permanent mark. She vowed never to be married by a man who drank alcohol – a decision that had kept her unmarried until her mid-thirties. When the villagers questioned her, she brushed them off, saying she was going to be a nun.

She met Kuguru at her local church, where they were both serving as ushers. Kuguru's mother had been posted to a local school as the headteacher while his father visited every weekend. He was shy, polite, cool, and always kind to everyone. He greeted and directed the congregants with a smile that melted her heart. They often had little chats about the church and their ushering duties.

One Sunday morning as she took her position in the church, Kuguru walked to her and asked if he could escort her home after the service. She refused and watched as he walked, head down, to his position. She felt sorry for him and barely heard anything the preacher said.

Later, as they walked home, her mother noticed her unusual silence. "What's bothering you, my daughter?"

At first, she denied it but after her mum's insistence, she told her what had happened that morning. Her mother listened keenly without commenting. Once they arrived home, however, she sat Kitoto down and narrated how she had met her father in church. "Be careful and take time to learn more about him. Do not be deceived by his naivety; not all that

glitters is gold. My daughter, pray and let God speak to you if this man is the right person for you.”

The matter bothered Kitoto through the week as she waited to see if Kuguru would make a similar request the following Sunday. Determined, Kuguru did, and this time round he wasn't ready to give up.

To the dismay of the villagers, they walked home together. They talked about church and politics, as well as how he was adjusting to life in the village, having been born and raised in the city. He liked the place and mentioned that he would like to settle down there and start a family. Kitoto learnt that he had graduated that year from the university where he had been studying to become a secondary school teacher, and he was waiting to be assigned a school by the government. Kuguru had an interesting personality, so Kitoto enjoyed the walk. She was disappointed when they bid each other goodbye at her gate.

From then on, they walked together after every Sunday service, and after one year, they decided to officially start dating.

Kitoto was excited to have him in her life and looked forward to their life together. She learnt that he was once an alcoholic but had gone through rehabilitation and had fully recovered. He had just celebrated his fifth year of sobriety. This worried her, but he assured her that he was now reformed and a God-fearing man. She discussed the issue with her mother, and they decided to pray about it.

Luckily, Kuguru was posted to a school that was an hour away from the village, and he commuted from his parents' home every day. Every Friday evening after work, they met at the local café for coffee as they discussed their plans. And on Wednesdays they fasted and prayed for

God to preserve and bless their union. They were the talk of the village, and every parent urged their children to learn from them.

One Sunday, the service proceeded as normal until Kuguru was invited to the pulpit when it was time for the announcements. He had just been appointed leader of the ushering team, so she thought he was going to thank the church for the opportunity. He looked at her, smiled, and then strode to the pulpit. He picked up the microphone, tapped it, and began to speak.

He thanked God and the church for believing in him and giving him the huge task of leading the most important team in the church. Kitoto beamed with pride as the congregation responded with applause.

She thought he was done, till he cleared his throat and said he had one more thing to say. The whole church fell dead silent when he called her to the pulpit.

In a daze, she approached him. She could feel her legs shaking as she looked at her mother, who was seated at the edge of the front row. She stood at his right side, unsure what to expect. She was shocked when he dropped to one knee, a ring in his hand, eyes fixed on her.

“Kitoto, will you marry me?”

She could not believe this was happening to her in the presence of the congregation. She had witnessed engagements before but not in church. Tears in her eyes, she accepted, lifting her left hand to let him slide the silver ring onto her middle finger.

The church rose in celebration as the senior pastor came to pray for them. After the prayer, they hugged, and together they went to sit down. Her

mother congratulated her as they walked home that afternoon. She had come to love him as her future son-in-law and did not doubt that he would make a great husband to her daughter.

The wedding followed after six months. It was held in the village, and no one was left behind. One year after marriage, they were blessed with a baby boy, then four years later a girl, and finally, a boy. They moved out of the village when he was posted to a school in the city.

Six years into their marriage, Kitoto noticed that her husband was coming home late. When she enquired why the sudden change, he complained that the headteacher was assigning him more work. He began missing church, citing illness or having work to do in school.

She had no reason to doubt him, so she'd go to church with the children. This continued for many months, until one Friday evening, as she was in the kitchen cooking, she heard someone singing from the gate. She listened keenly but couldn't quite catch the voice. "Who could that be?" she wondered. She ignored it and continued with her chores. But the voice grew louder and louder, and she could now recognise that it was Kuguru's. She lifted the edge of the curtain and was met with a shocking scene.

Kuguru was standing, his trousers lowered, urinating on the flowers as he sang a meaningless song.

*The world is mine and I will do as I wish,
I drink and eat whatever I want and no one can tell me anything,
If you are pissed off by my lifestyle suit yourself and get the hell
out of my way.
I went to the moon and back and I will one day write about it.
The next time I go, you won't see me.*

Kitoto was crushed. She hoped the children weren't watching.

“What are you looking at? Don't you have something to do, you woman?”
Kuguru upon noticing her.

“Look at yourself. A grown man embarrassing himself in front of his children and neighbours!” she responded.

“To hell with your ugly children and neighbours. They can all go to hell for all I care!”

“Is this the life you want to live? I beseech you to reconsider – that road is dangerous, and you know it.”

“It's my life and I will live it the way I want. Live yours and I won't bother you!”

Kitoto didn't want the children to see him in his state, so she rushed to order them to go to their bedroom. She would call them later once dinner was ready.

Kuguru staggered into the living room and collapsed on a couch. Devastated, Kitoto watched him lie there with his mouth wide open.

When she asked him the following morning, he said they had a school closing party and he had been forced to drink. He swore never to drink again. What she didn't know was that this would continue every day, even to the point of violence.

Chapter 2

Kitoto tried to understand the drastic change in her husband's behaviour. Was it a way to deal with the loss of his parents?

Two years earlier, when their youngest daughter was one-and-a-half years old, he was in class when he received a call from a new number. He took his lessons seriously and never picked calls while in class, choosing instead to call back later. He ignored the call and continued with the lesson. But before he could put his phone away, it rang again. It was the same number.

Irritated, he apologised to his students and switched it off to avoid further disruptions. Five minutes later, he heard a knock on the door.

"You have a call," the school secretary told him.

"Who is calling?" he asked.

"I don't know, but he says it's urgent," she responded.

He wondered whether it was the same person who had called him. If the person had called the school after failing to reach him then it had to be someone who knew him well. He excused himself and left, promising his students he would be back shortly to continue with the lesson or organise a make-up class if he couldn't return.

As he walked, he could feel his heart beating fast. He hoped nothing bad had happened to any of his family members. When he left the house that morning, everything had been okay. The children were on mid-term break, and they were still asleep when he left.

Could something have happened to them? But if that were the case, why hadn't his wife called with her number? He had spoken with his parents the previous night, and they had been okay and in good spirits. They had even promised to visit them soon to see their grandchildren whom they had not seen for one year.

The short journey to the office seemed kilometres long, and when they arrived, the secretary pointed to the receiver, signalling him to pick up the phone as the caller was waiting on the other end. He hesitated as he didn't know what to expect. Gaining courage, he picked up the receiver. "Hello, this is Teacher Kuguru. Whom am I speaking to?" he said in a low voice.

The person on the other end was silent for a moment and then cleared his throat. "I am Dr Rima from Mt Sebu Hospital."

The moment he heard the word 'doctor', Kuguru knew that things are not good. "What can I do for you, Daktari?" he asked.

"Mr and Mrs Kuguru have been involved in an accident and are at the hospital. We got your number from one of their phones," Dr Rima said.

The words hit him hard, and he felt his legs instantly weaken. The secretary pulled him a seat, and he collapsed on it, struggling to hold the receiver.

"How are they?" he asked. He was now crying and could barely hear what the doctor was saying. Suddenly, he couldn't hold the receiver any longer, and he dropped it. The secretary rushed to pick it up and took a message from the caller.

When she hung up she stood next to Kuguru, patting his back and trying to assure him all was going to be well. She poured a glass of water and placed it on the table in case he needed something to drink. He sat there, crying, for almost 30 minutes. When he composed himself, he asked the secretary if the doctor had left a message.

"He said you need to go to the hospital," she responded.

"Did he say how they were doing?"

Unwilling to break his heart, she lied. "Yes, they are stable and doing well."

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