

Stitches

Short Story by *Cinke Houghton*

Summary: *Stitches* is set in Nairobi, Kenya and follows Julius Kimani. A 61-year-old retiree who lives alone with his wife in the affluent neighborhood of Lavington. It explores separate rituals that both the Kimanis have adopted and perform every year in the month of May. It is the first short story of the author, Cinke Houghton, to be published.

Every Thursday night in March, Julius Kimani would check on the S&W revolver that he kept in the basement. In previous years he would dismantle the small, black gun until its tiny parts filled the entire space of his little writing desk in the basement. As time went on, however, the

inspection had reduced to removing the bullets to check the cylinder and barrel and extracting the floating firing pin from the frame. Only once he was convinced that the little steel pin was in good condition did he return it and the bullets.

Tonight, he finished just in time.

“Kimani! Dinner’s ready!” Lucia, his wife, shouted from the first floor.

“Alright.” He mumbled, placing the gun back in its box and shutting it. With a shaking hand he lifted it off the desk and put it behind his toolbox on the wooden shelf hanging above his head.

“Kimani? Did you hear me? *Nasema, chakula iko-*”¹

“Agh, Nimekusikia!² I heard you woman!” He bellowed and Lucia became silent. A short moment of silence passed before he heard her footsteps recede. He moved what few files and books lay on the shelf closer to the toolbox until he was satisfied that the grey box was completely hidden. He withdrew a blue book that Lucia had bought for him to write in from the drawer beneath and placed it on the desk.

Satisfied with the illusion, he stood up from his wooden chair and walked the length of the dimly lit basement to the

¹ Kiswahili for “I am saying, food is-

² Kishwaili for “I have heard you”

staircase. It always surprised him how empty it was. Small mounds of dried paint were scattered around the edges of the room from sickly, yellowish walls. Other than his little workstation there was only the old black keyboard that he had gotten years ago for little Bahati in the room. Just collecting dust like everything else in this house, he thought. As he passed by it, he ran his fingers over the keys.

Once he had gotten to the first floor the smell of dinner wafted by him and made his stomach grumble. He walked into the living room and found his wife sitting at one end of the table, waiting for him. Even at 52 one would not be at fault for calling Lucia Kimani beautiful. Her smooth, ebony skin

remained devoid of wrinkles or spots and shone even when the sun hid behind the clouds on the darkest days of the wet seasons. Today she had her hair secured tightly beneath a blue headwrap that spiraled perfectly in a bun just above her forehead. She wore a mustard yellow shoal around her shoulders, a black T-shirt beneath it and blue jeans. She had dressed up for dinner.

She was busy fiddling with her transparent sewing kit when she noticed him standing a few paces away watching her. "I thought it would be nice," she said with a small smile, pointing at the spread on the dining table that consisted of turkey, potatoes and green beans, "since... it's around the

time that-" Julius glared at his wife and she kept quiet. He said nothing and sat down at the other end of the table.

It was around this time, eleven years ago, on Saturday, the 21st of March in 2009 that they had lost their only child.

Julius had been alone with their daughter, Bahati, driving home from a piano recital that she had just performed for her whole 4th grade class at the annual talent show. She had been crying the entire way back because she had made a mistake on what she had called, "the most important part of Fur Elise." He had turned around for only a second to suggest they stop by to get some ice-cream for her and mama to cheer her up. That was all it took. A white range rover

on the opposite lane swerved to avoid an overtaking matatu³, and slammed into the right side of their car. Her side.

His last image of her was in a face full of tears. No amount of couple's counseling could drown out the sound of his wife's voice from his head as she gasped for air, breaking down when she heard the news. She resented him; he knew it. Even after he did what he did he could not give her any more children before it was too late, despite them trying. Eventually time had caught up with them, and it was now impossible. He had snuffed out the flame in her heart and could not spark a new one. He could see it every time

³ A van used for public transport common in Kenya

March rolled around. The bags under her eyes, the sadness in her smiles, the muffled cries that he would hear sometimes when he was in the basement.

He was responsible for that.

He hated that she would never say it. How it was his fault that the other elderly women at the Church on State House road looked at her with such pity. How they murmured quiet prayers as she walked up the aisle to receive the communion before dragging their grandchildren by their skinny, ashen colored arms after her. She probably thought he was too weak to hear it come from her mouth. So, instead, she was kind with her words and patient with his habits. Habits that

formed in order to drown out his own voice convincing him of the glaring fact.

Lucia had her way of dealing with it; by sewing and repairing anything she could get her hands on. Loose buttons, small tears in their clothes, emerging holes in the couches. Anything she could find. She always kept her kit close by, ready to spring into action. Julius quietly wondered if that was why she seemed so tired on the weekends of March. If she stayed up patrolling the 4-bedroom house they had bought for the future family they would have, looking for something to stitch back together. Julius had his own method, and it involved check-ing his gun every Thursday night, so that every

Friday he would not have to.

The following day, the 20th, went by in the same fashion that dinner had, in a grey silence. When the clock struck 9pm he announ-zzced briefly that he was heading to the bar and left before his wife could protest. This part of his routine was always the quickest. He drove quickly to his local pub on Kilimani road, whispering “May-be this time...” to himself. He got to the bar where the young bartender solemnly served him glass after glass of whiskey, without the two of them exchanging words. He downed the contents of the last, mouthed the word “tab” and was out the door by the time the alarm on his phone announced it was midnight. His vision had

begun to blur so he drove home slowly.

He parked in front of the house and breathed a small breath of relief when he noticed that all the lights in the house windows were off, all except the light in the main hallway. Lucia always left that one on for him. Once inside he headed straight for the basement. The stairs creaked softly as he descended into the darkness below.

“Maybe this time...”, he repeated, this time his voice cracked. He reached for the light switch at the bottom of the stairs with his right hand as he wiped away the tears with his left. As he walked to the desk, he passed by the keyboard and ran his hand across the dusty keys. Pressing each one of them as he

did. But they made no noise. The only noise in the room was his own short whimpers.

He reached in his shelf. Moving the files and books aside and pulling out the nondescript black box. His whimpers turned into sobs as he sat down in his wooden chair with the box in front of him, alone on the desk. The black book he had placed there earlier must have fallen, but it was of no concern to him right now. Nothing would be, soon enough.

He opened the box and retrieved the gun, perfectly placed and primed, just as he had left it. His hands were shaking as he lifted it out. He did his best to grip it as tightly as he could to stop it from falling and waking Lucia. “I’m sorry, h-honey.” He said,

choking on his words. “Singeweza-”⁴ He tried to take a deep breath but could not.

His shoulders shook quietly as he bowed his head and let the tears fall. As he did, his hands worked on their own. Pushing the cylinder open to expose all six bullets resting neatly in their chambers. His right hand emptied them all out onto his left, and his left grabbed one with its index and thumb and returned it into an empty chamber. The other five were put back onto the desk quietly. Only then did Julius open his eyes. Staring at the single bullet.

One out of six. “Sixteen percent chance.” The doctor had told them twenty years ago.

⁴ Kiswahili for “I couldn’t.”

“Sixteen percent chance that the egg is fertilized. I am sorry Mr. Kimani but your sperm count is just too low for it to be any higher.” Bahati had been that sixteen percent. She had been their only chance.

Sixteen percent... he thought, as he closed his eyes once more and spun the cylinder, hard.

This time...

He jerked the cylinder back into position and raised the revolver to his temple. “I’m so sorry...” he said, pulling the hammer back in place. “Lucia.”

Julius pulled the trigger.

CLICK!

His eyes shot open and he gasped for air.

He lowered the gun back to the desk and stood up.

He returned the gun and bullets back into the box and put the box back in its place. Placing a few files and books around the toolbox in front of it.

Not this time.

Just like all the other times. It was like the God that Lucia prayed for hours to was hellbent on keeping him in here. To wake up to the same empty feeling.

He walked out of the basement and up the stairs to the first floor and continued up to the second floor. Passed the common bathroom where he had given Bahati baths when she was little. Passed her bedroom where he had sung her lullabies in the language his mother had taught him. Finally, he opened his bedroom door halfway and slip-ped

inside. Lucia was sleeping in a ball on the right side of the bed. He stripped down to his undershirt and reached into his bedside table.

Dammit! He cursed in his head. He was out of sleeping pills, he'd forgotten to restock them this morning. He moved around the edge of the bed to the bedside table on his wife's side. He knew she had sleeping pills as well, they both needed them. Especially in March.

He opened the drawer softly and peered inside, immediately noticing the familiar yellow flash behind her sewing kit. He took the box out and then the pill container. Reaching inside, he took a snow-white pill out and swallowed it in one quick motion. As he silently placed the pill container

back inside the drawer, he thought of the grueling drive he would have to take in the morning to the pharmacy. The hangover would be especially tough this time. He was about to do the same with the sewing kit when something silver flashed in the glow of the streetlight outside.

Julius paused for a moment and peered inside the transparent sewing box. There, hidden among the needles and spools of thread was a little, steel, firing pin.

He stopped breathing.

He reached into the box and pulled it out, blinking in disbelief. It really was the firing pin. The same firing pin he had made sure to return into the black frame of

the S&W the night before.

Julius turned to his wife, who snored softly in her sleep. The woman who was always tired around this time, not because she had been sewing, but because she had been staying up to save his life. She probably woke up early too, to return the pin so he would not notice. She must have done this every weekend. But for how long? He thought.

He held onto the sewing box tightly before putting it back into the drawer. How long had she kept this secret? He wondered, as he walked slowly back to his side of the bed and got in softly, careful not to stir her. How long had the

sixteen percent not mattered? He moved up close to her and held her waist, kissing the back of her shoulder.

Before he fell asleep, he wondered if perhaps what she had been doing was sewing after all.