

The Week

Technology's conscience convenes in Nairobi for three days of panels and one afternoon of touring. Daniel Kerr goes for the panels, stays for the tour, and comes home with the receipts.

BY DANIEL KERR

1 FLIGHT, LONDON TO NAIROBI,
BUSINESS CLASS £3,412

The seat lies flat. I am going to start there, because the book I read on the way out starts with hands, with a sentence about the person telling the story having hands that have worked, and it seems right to be equally clear about what mine were doing on the way to the same city, which was holding a glass of something the menu card called a Kenyan-inspired aperitif and turning the pages of her book at thirty-eight thousand feet on the consortium's account.¹

I am not a technology writer. I should say that early, as it explains the invitation. I write about places, mostly, for this magazine and two others, and the pieces are the kind where the writer goes somewhere and stays a while and comes back with a shape. The consortium's invitation arrived through the magazine in August, and the editor forwarded it with a one-line note that said

"They asked for you by name, which I found interesting," and I have found it interesting too, at intervals, throughout the week. The technology correspondent I met at the gate at Heathrow, who has covered the industry for fifteen years and was on the same flight with the same lanyard in the same envelope, found it less interesting. He said they always ask for one of me.

There were three of us from the British press. The correspondent, who I'll call the correspondent, because he asked not to be named and because it is what he is. A travel writer, in her thirties, who told me before the doors closed that she had accepted the invitation for the optional half-day in the national park on the last morning and had every intention of attending the panels and no intention of remembering them. And me. There were others from elsewhere, seven or eight, whom we met at the hotel.

The amenity kit was in a pouch of a fabric I could not identify and contained socks, an eye mask, a toothbrush, a lip balm and a small tube of something for the hands. The menu offered a choice of three main courses and I had the fish. I mention this because everything that follows is

1. The sentence, on the first page of the book, in full: "The accounts I have read of moderation labor are written by journalists who visited a facility for a week, or by academics who interviewed former workers, or by activists making a case about exploitation. These are not wrong, exactly. They are incomplete." This piece is the first kind. It was commissioned as the first kind, flown out as the first kind, and will be paid for as the first kind. I have read the sentence and I am writing the piece, and the only thing I can offer against the sentence is that I know it is there. It defends nothing. It is a disclosure, and it goes at the top.

a question of what things cost and who paid, and the fish was the first entry on that account, and I ate it.

The press pack was on the seat when I boarded. A programme, three days, in a folder with the summit's name embossed. The lanyard, orange, with my name already printed. A glossy brochure, twelve pages, titled *Dignified Digital Work*, with photographs of young people at workstations in good light. And a folded map of the summit hotel and its surroundings on which the facility we would be visiting on the fourth day was marked with a star, on a road the map did not name, some distance from anything else the map did.

I read the book between the aperitif and the fish. I had brought it because a friend had pressed it on me in the spring and I had not read it, and because I was going to the city it was written in, and because I thought, without examining the thought, that it would be useful. It is a short book. It is by a woman who worked for eleven years on the morning rotation in a content moderation room in Nairobi and who does not give her name, and it is about what that work was and what it made. I reached the sentence that concerns this piece before the meal service. I read it twice, and put the book face down on the tray table, and the steward asked whether I was finished with the aperitif, and I said I was.

2 HOTEL, FIVE NIGHTS, DELEGATE RATE

£1,180

The hotel is a tower in Westlands with a rooftop bar on the twenty-first floor, and from the bar you can see, in one direction, the city centre's older towers standing in their own haze, and in the other the green of the arboretum and the roofs of the suburbs going

out towards the escarpment, and I am describing the view because the view is what the delegate rate buys and because I looked at it for longer, over five nights, than I looked at anything else in Nairobi.²

You arrive by car. The car is stopped at the gate by two men in uniform, one of whom walks round it with a mirror on a pole and looks at its underside while the other looks at you, and then the barrier goes up and the car goes down a ramp into the cool of the building. Every hotel of this kind in the city does this. It comes back later, on a pavement in another part of town. The man with the mirror knew the driver's face and looked under the car anyway.

The room was on the fourteenth floor. It was twenty-two degrees when I walked in and the air was moving, and there was a card on the desk from the general manager welcoming delegates to the summit, and a card beside it from the consortium welcoming me by name, and a bowl of fruit that I did eat, over the five days, all of it, including the passion fruit, which I had to look up. There was also, each night, on the pillow, a card. The first night's said *Welcome*. The three after that carried a quotation from that day's panels, in a script face, with the speaker's name beneath and the word *Today* in place of a date, and I understood by the second night that the consortium had arranged this with the hotel, and I kept them, and I have them, and they are in a footnote because they belong at the foot of something.³

Registration was on the mezzanine, a level below the lobby, at a row of tables under a banner. The press lanyards were orange. I had mine already. The young woman at the desk checked it against a list anyway, and gave me a second, identical one in case the first was lost, and a tote bag, and a printed schedule for the press that differed from the delegate schedule in that it had a session on the second afternoon marked Press Briefing (Closed) and a note that the facil-

2. The delegate rate was £236 a night against a rack rate of £310, which the consortium's confirmation email gave, unprompted, as a saving. The room was not on my bill. Nothing at the hotel was on my bill except a laundry charge of £14 on the third day, which I paid myself and have not claimed, and which is the only item in this piece that I am confident was mine.

3. In order. "*Judgment is the human advantage*." A speaker from the consortium, first day. "*Wellbeing is not a cost. It is a condition of the work*." The clinical psychologist, second day, and the only one of the three that its speaker would, I think, have chosen. "*The next decade belongs to judgment*." The consortium's chair, third day, closing. I slept under all three. The card was on the pillow when I came up and I moved it to the desk each night and it was on the pillow again the next, and on the fifth night, after Karen, there was no card, because the panels were over and there was nothing to quote.

ity tour on the fourth day was “press and selected delegates only, transport provided, please be in the lobby at 8.15.”

The opening reception was on the roof at six. There were perhaps three hundred people, in the mix a summit produces: the companies, in good jackets and no ties; the contractors, in suits; the delegates from universities and NGOs, in the clothes of people who have flown economy; the Kenyan government, in two people; and the press, in orange, standing near the food.

The consortium’s chair spoke first. He is American, silver, fluent as expensive people are fluent, and he said that the summit’s purpose was to put human judgment at the centre of the conversation about AI systems, and that Nairobi had been chosen because Nairobi was where so much of that judgment had been exercised, and that the consortium was proud to be here and prouder still of the people who had done the work. He did not say what the work was. Nobody at the summit ever said what the work was. The phrase used across three days, in every room, was “the work,” and after a day it had become a noun with no referent, and I began to hear it as a place name.⁴

The contractor’s chief executive spoke second and was the best speaker of the week. He is Kenyan, in his forties, and he built the company that, by every account I could get in five days, held the contract for the room in the book, though he did not say so and the book does not name it. He spoke without notes. He spoke about a generation of graduates in this city who had finished their degrees and found no work that used them, and about what it had meant for a business to arrive that would pay them, in his phrase, “to think for a living.” He said the queue had been that generation’s second chance. He said he had personally sat in the rooms, in the first years, and done the work himself, to know what he was asking. He said the industry had learned, and was still learning, what the work

cost, and that his company had led that learning rather than followed it. He said the room was where the future had been made and that he was not ashamed of any of it.

I believed him, and I say so. I believed him on the roof, and I still believe him now, about the second chance and the graduates and the rooms he sat in, because none of it is untrue and because he said it as a man who had been there and not as a man who had been briefed. The essay is going to have a harder time with him than with anyone else in it, and I would rather say so at the start than pretend, later, that he was easy.⁵

The correspondent found me by the food. He had a plate and a drink and the expression of a man at his eleventh version of the same evening. He asked what I’d made of it. I said I’d believed the second speaker. He said yes, everyone did, it was his gift, and that four years ago he had asked him a question about headcount at the older facilities and had been told about “transitioning to higher-value roles,” and that he intended to ask it again on the second day, and that he intended to be told the same thing, and that he would then have the sentence for his piece, which was that it was the same thing. He said the industry’s great advantage was that its answers did not go stale.

“Judgment is the human advantage.”

The travel writer joined us. She had been on the roof for an hour and had a plan for the park drive already, and had learned from the concierge which of the two lodges did the better breakfast. She asked whether I was going. I said I hadn’t decided. She said the giraffes were the thing, apparently, because you got the city behind them, and that it was the only place in the world you could do that, and that she’d been told

4. I counted, on the first day, and stopped counting on the second because it had stopped being a count. “The work,” “the important work,” “the work that made this possible,” “the people who did the work.” Once, from a delegate on the wellbeing panel, “the labour,” said carefully, as if it were a foreign word. Nobody said “moderation” from a stage in three days. The brochure says “content review.” The book says “content moderation” on its first page and thereafter says “the work,” which I did not notice until I heard the phrase on the roof and went back to check, and found that she and the consortium had arrived at the same two words from opposite directions.

5. His company’s name is on the summit’s sponsor board, second tier, and on the brochure’s back cover, and I am leaving it out. The book leaves it out, and I have decided to follow the book on what it leaves out, wherever I can, which is not far.

this by three people and was prepared to believe it.

The reception ended at eight. I went up to the room and opened the book at the page I had turned down and did not read it. I looked at the view instead, which I have described, and which was worth the delegate rate. Nobody on the third floor of an office block in the industrial area east of the city has seen it from this angle. The building the book describes is not on the map the consortium printed, and from twenty-one floors up it is not distinguishable from the buildings around it, and I looked for it anyway.⁶

3 PER DIEM, THREE DAYS AT £70 £210

The panels were in a ballroom on the mezzanine with the partition walls pulled back, and there were nine of them over three days, and I went to all nine, and I'll quote from them very little, because a summit panel is one sentence delivered by different people in different chairs, and after the second morning the sentence was familiar enough that I could have delivered it myself, and on the third afternoon, in the bar, for the travel writer, I did.⁷

The titles are worth having, though, as printed. *From Moderation to Stewardship. Wellbeing by Design. The Human in the Loop: A Decade of Learning. Beyond the Queue: What Comes After Human Review. Scaling Judgment. Partnership Models for Responsible Deployment. Voices from the Floor* (which had no one from the floor on it, in the sense I had understood the title, and which I will come to). *Nairobi as a Global Hub. The Next Decade*. Each ran fifty minutes with a moderator and four chairs, and the chairs were arranged so that the audience saw the panel in

three-quarter profile against a screen that carried the summit's name and, below it, the title, and the room was cold in the manner of ballrooms and I kept my jacket on for three days. The travel writer attended one of the nine, *Nairobi as a Global Hub*, because it had Nairobi in the title, and left at the second slide, which was a map.

I'll give four things from the nine.

The wellbeing panel was on the second morning. The contractor's clinical psychologist sat second from the left, a woman in her forties who had, she said, been with the company for six years and had designed what she called the resilience programme, and she described it with a care I should acknowledge before I say anything else, because she was the only person on any panel who described the work in terms of what it did to a person, and she did it without the word "impact." Rotation off difficult categories after a set number of hours. Mandatory breaks, timed by the queue software. Peer support groups, weekly. Individual counselling on request and, since a date she gave, on schedule. A decompression protocol at the end of each shift, which she described and which I would see, on the fourth day, as a room with a sign. She was asked, by a delegate from a Dutch university, when the programme had been introduced, and she gave a year, and the delegate said thank you, and the moderator moved on.⁸

The headcount question was on the second afternoon, at *Beyond the Queue*, and the correspondent asked it, as he had said he would. He asked what had happened to headcount at the older facilities since the classifiers had begun taking the escalated cases, and where the people had gone. He asked it politely. The contractor's chief executive was on the panel and took it, and said that the company had been proud to sup-

6. The consortium's map runs from the airport road in the south to the arboretum in the north and marks the hotel, the summit venue, two restaurants, the national park gate, and the star. The industrial area east of the centre is on the map, as a grey block with no roads drawn in it. I put my finger on the grey block on the first night and could not have said, then, which part of it I was pointing at. I can now.

7. The sentence, as I gave it to her: "The work has been hard, the industry has learned, the learning is ongoing, and the future is one in which human judgment is elevated rather than replaced." She said it sounded like a wedding speech. She was right, and I had not seen it, and it explains something about the three days that I could not otherwise have explained, which is that everyone on every panel spoke as though something had been successfully married.

8. The year she gave was five years after the year the book gives for the author's start in the room. The book says that the support available was "developed reactively, in response to documented harm, rather than proactively, in anticipation of it," and does not say which year the documenting began, and I did not ask the psychologist, because I could see that she knew, and because the Dutch delegate had already asked the only question that needed asking and had received the only answer.

port colleagues transitioning to higher-value roles, both within the business and across the wider economy, and that the story of the sector was a story of progression, and the moderator said that was a good point to move on from. The correspondent wrote something down. He told me at the bar that it was the same answer to the word, and that he now had his sentence, and he ordered a drink, and he seemed, for the first time in three days, content.

Voices from the Floor was on the third morning. I had read the title on the plane and had assumed it meant reviewers. It meant the trade: two managers from the company's facilities, a trainer, and a young man introduced as a "reviewer alumnus" who was now a team lead and who spoke for four minutes about opportunity. They were good. The trainer was funny about the reference materials, which she said ran to eleven hundred pages and were updated fortnightly and which nobody, including her, had read all the way through, and the room laughed, and I laughed, and I have the laugh in my notes and I am leaving it in because it was real and because it was the only time in three days that the reference materials were mentioned at all. The book gives each workstation two monitors, one for the queue and one for the reference materials. The eleven hundred pages are the second monitor.

Scaling Judgment was on the first afternoon, and the moderator opened it by asking the room to turn to a neighbour and share, in one minute each, "a moment of human judgment from your week." The room did. Four hundred people turned in their chairs and the ballroom filled with the sound of a thing being complied with. My neighbour was the Dutch delegate, who turned to me and said, without pause, "I decided to come," and then waited, and I had nothing. I had been in the country a day. I looked back over the day for a moment of human judgment and found the fish, which had been on the plane and did not count, and did not say the fish, and

said instead that I was still thinking, and she said that was fair, and we sat in the noise for the rest of the two minutes and did not speak, and I have liked her since. The travel writer, three rows back, had turned to a man from the consortium and was, I could see, being told something at length.

There was a press briefing on the second afternoon, closed, in a meeting room off the mezzanine. The consortium's comms lead ran it, a woman in her thirties who had been kind to me since the airport and who remained kind throughout, and whom I liked, and whom I'll quote once. She said the tour on the fourth day would take us to the company's newest facility, which she called "a next-generation site." She said we would see a working floor and a demonstration of the review process using representative items. She said photography of screens was not permitted, for reasons of policy compliance, and photography of people was by consent, and that consent forms would be available on the bus. She said the facility had been chosen because it represented "where the sector is going, not where it has been." And she said, when the Nigerian journalist asked whether the tour would include any of the older sites, that the older sites were operational environments and were not suitable for visits, and that she was sure we understood.⁹

I asked nothing, in the briefing or in the nine panels. I have looked back through three days of notes for a question of mine and there is not one. The correspondent asked his. The Nigerian journalist asked four, and got four answers, and told me afterwards which of the four she believed. The Dutch delegate asked hers. I sat in the cold with my jacket on and wrote down what was said, which is what I do, and which is what I had been flown out to do. The absence of a question from me across three days is, I think, the most accurate record of the assignment I can give.¹⁰

9. On "operational environments." It is true. The room in the book is an operational environment. So is a kitchen, and so is a cockpit, and I have been in both on assignment, with a lanyard, and been told where to stand. What the phrase does is turn the reason we could not visit into a property of the place rather than a decision by the company, and it does this in two words, and I admired it, as you admire a lock.

10. The comms lead had said at the airport that the consortium valued "fresh eyes." I had taken it as a courtesy. It was a specification.

The older sites are operational environments and are not suitable for visits.

The per diem was paid in cash, in an envelope, at registration, in pounds, which I had not expected, and which I have since understood was a courtesy to the British press so that we would not need to claim. I spent none of it on the first day, because there was nothing to spend it on; every meal was in the hotel and on the consortium. On the last morning I spent forty pounds of it on a taxi. On the third I spent nine on a paperback from the hotel shop, a guide to the birds of East Africa, for the travel writer, who had said she wanted one and who was, by then, someone I wanted to give something to. The rest is in the envelope it came in, still. I have not claimed it because it was not an expense. It was given to me in a room where I was given everything, and I have decided to treat it as what it was.

4 REGISTRATION, WAIVED £0

I did not register for the summit. I was registered. The distinction is the section.

The lanyard had my name on it before I boarded the plane. The list at the desk had my name on it before I reached the desk. The card in the room had my name on it before I had a key. At no point in the week did I fill in a form, sign anything, or pay for anything, except the laundry, and the laundry was a mistake, in that I had not understood that laundry was also covered and had paid at the counter before anyone could stop me, and the young man at the counter had looked at the fourteen pounds with a courtesy I have not forgotten.

Waived is the word on the claim form, in the box for registration, and it is the consortium's word. Waived means a fee exists and has been set aside. The fee is on the summit's website for delegates who are not press, and it is on a sponsorship deck that was in the press pack as a link, and that I opened on the second night, and that gave, on its fourth page, under the heading *Your Investment*, a figure for what the summit cost per delegate to deliver. That figure goes in a footnote, and beside it goes another, which I obtained on the third day from two people who worked in the older facilities and who will not be named, and who gave me, separately and within a few thousand shillings of each other, what a reviewer on the morning rotation is paid in a month.¹¹

There is no sentence connecting them. The claim form does not have a box for that.

5 TRANSFER, FACILITY TOUR £0

The bus was in the lobby forecourt at 8.15 with its engine running and its windows tinted to the point that, from outside, it had no inside, and there were fourteen of us on it, the press and four selected delegates, and the comms lead with a clipboard, and a man from the company who was introduced as our host for the day and who spent the journey on his phone. The consent forms were handed round as we left the gate. I signed mine. It gave the company the right to photograph me at the facility and to use the photographs "in connection with the summit and its outcomes," and I have since seen one, on the consortium's site, in which I am seated at a workstation looking at a screen with an expression I would describe as attentive, and which was taken about four seconds before the thing I describe below.¹²

Thika Road is a superhighway, eight lanes, built by the Chinese, and the bus took it north-east out of the city for forty minutes past the

11. From the sponsorship deck, page four, *Your Investment*: cost to deliver the summit, per delegate, three days, exclusive of travel, \$2,850. From two reviewers, on background, morning rotation, current: between 62,000 and 68,000 Kenyan shillings a month, which at the rate on the day was between £370 and £405, before deductions, for twenty-two shifts of eight hours, at what the book gives as roughly three hundred decisions a shift. I have the figures side by side on the same page of my notebook, in the same pen, and that is where I am leaving them.

shopping malls and the apartment blocks and the churches and the long walls of the business parks, and then turned in at a gate with a barrier and a guard, and the guard checked the driver's face and looked under the bus with a mirror on a pole, and I looked at the correspondent and the correspondent looked at his phone.

The facility is a building of two storeys in glass and pale stone in a park of similar buildings, with a lawn in front that had been watered that morning and a sign at the gate carrying the company's name and, below it, the words *Centre of Excellence*. Inside the doors there is a wall of living plants, floor to ceiling, perhaps eight metres wide, with a drip system whose pipes you can see if you look. A man was standing at one end of it with a hose and a bucket when we came in, and he stepped back to let us pass, and he was the only person we saw all morning who was not on the itinerary.¹³

The host handed us to the facility manager, a woman in her thirties in a company polo shirt, who was good, as people are who give a tour twice a week. Reception. The wellbeing lounge: low chairs, more plants, a shelf of books, a window onto the lawn, and nobody in it, because the shift was on the floor. There were eleven books on the shelf and I read the spines while the manager talked. Two on management. Three novels of the kind bought by the metre. A guide to Kenyan birds, the one I had given the travel writer the night before. A large-format book about the company. Four I did not have time for. The book was not among them. I had not expected it to be, and I checked anyway, and the manager saw me checking and did not ask what for. The decompression room, which is a room with soft light and four chairs and a sign on the door that says *Decompression Room* and beneath that, in smaller type, three sentences explaining that decompression is the process of transitioning

from review work to rest and that all reviewers are encouraged to use the room at the end of each shift and that the room is monitored for occupancy but not for content. I read the sign twice. The manager waited. Then the stairs, and the floor.

The room is monitored for occupancy but not for content.

The floor is one room, thirty workstations in five rows of six, each with two monitors, and twelve of the thirty were occupied, and the twelve were, the manager said, the morning team, and the other eighteen were "capacity." The lighting was daylight through the glass and a soft white from panels overhead, and the temperature was comfortable, and there was a coffee machine of the kind that grinds the beans. I noted all of this against the book, and knew as I was noting it that the noting was the point, that the room had been built to be noted against the book by people like me, and I noted it anyway.

The twelve did not look up. They had been told not to, I think, or had been told they need not, and the effect was the same. The room made the sound of twelve keyboards and an air handler, and the coffee machine, which grinds, did not grind while we were there. They wore headphones. Their second monitors showed a window that the manager said was the policy assistant, "an oracle-backed tool that surfaces the relevant guidance for each item in real time," and I understood that the eleven hundred pages were now behind a chat window, and that the reviewer asked the window and the window answered, and I thought about the trainer's laugh.

Then the demonstration. There was a workstation at the end of the front row, unoccupied,

12. The consent form was two pages and I read both, which the comms lead noticed. The second page listed the "outcomes" the photographs might be used in connection with: the summit report, the consortium's website and social channels, "future convenings," and "sector communications." I signed it because everyone signed it and because refusing would have made me the story on the bus, and I mention it because the photograph of me at the workstation is now a sector communication, and the expression on my face is the expression of a man about to approve a bicycle.

13. The living wall is maintained under contract by a landscaping firm whose van was in the car park and whose site lists green walls as a service, with a starting price per square metre that I have and am not going to use, because the wall was the one thing in the building that was doing exactly what it appeared to be doing. I asked the man with the hose, on the way out, how often he came. He said three times a week. He said the wall was healthy. He said it as a man says something about a thing he is responsible for, and it was the plainest sentence anyone said to me at the facility.

and the manager invited the press to sit at it in turn and “experience the review process,” and the queue on its screen was, she said, a demonstration queue of representative items, and the items were a photograph of a dog with a caption, a comment on a news story that was rude about a politician, a listing offering a used bicycle, and a post in which someone described, in ordinary words, being sad. The correspondent declined. The Nigerian journalist went first, and was quick, and was right four times, and the manager said “very good” in a tone that told me she had expected it. The travel writer went, and enjoyed it, and said so. Then me.

I sat. The photograph of the dog was fine and I said so. The rude comment was, I thought, within the guidance the window offered me, and I approved it, and it was. The bicycle listing gave a price and a phone number and a line saying the seller could also supply “other items on request,” and I read it twice, and approved it, and the manager, behind me, said, kindly, that the classifier would have caught that one upstream, and I would never have seen it, and the room laughed, and it was a kind laugh, from people who liked me, and I have it in my notes as “laugh (kind),” and I am leaving the bracket in.¹⁴

Then the young man. The manager brought him from the third row, and he took his headphones off, and he was introduced as one of the team, in his second month, and he stood beside the demonstration workstation with his hands behind his back and answered the press. He said the work was good work. He said the team was supportive. He said the decompression room was useful and he used it. He was asked by the Nigerian journalist what he had done before, and he said he had been finishing a degree, and she asked in what, and he looked at the manager, and the manager smiled, and he said “computer science,” and the Nigerian journalist wrote it down. I did not ask him anything. I have thought about what I would have asked and I am not sure

there was a question that would have been fair to put to a man in his second month with his manager beside him and fourteen strangers in lanyards looking at him, and so I looked at the floor, which was a pale composite, and which had been cleaned that morning.¹⁵

We were on the bus by eleven. The travel writer said, as we came back through the gate, that it had been nicer than she’d expected. The correspondent, across the aisle, without looking up, said that was the point. She said she knew that. She said it was still nicer.

The Nigerian journalist found me at the hotel bar that afternoon, before the cars for Karen, with a laptop open and a coffee, and asked whether she could put a question to me, since I had put none to anyone. I said she could. She asked what I was going to do with the figures. I said I had them side by side in a notebook and had not decided. She nodded as though that were the expected answer and told me what she was going to do with hers.

She was writing for a paper in Lagos. The piece would run the following week and would give the salary range for a reviewer in Nairobi, and the range for the equivalent role in Lagos, where the rooms also exist and are not on any map either, and the number of shifts and the number of decisions, and the name of the contractor, which her readers would know. She said the piece would be read by people who would then apply. She said that plainly, and I have kept the word. She said the salary was, for a graduate in Lagos, a good salary, and that her readers would see the number and not the book, because most of them had not read the book and would not, and that this was not a failure of her readers.

Then she said what my piece would do. It would be read in London, she said, on a train, by people who had never been in a room like the one in the book and never would be, and they

14. The item was a listing. The words “other items on request” are, in the reference materials, a flagged phrase in the category the manager named, and the policy assistant on the second monitor had, I saw afterwards, surfaced the relevant guidance while I was reading the item for the second time, and I had not looked at the second monitor, because I had been looking at the first. Which is the book’s point, made in a showroom, by me, in front of fourteen people, with a photographer.

15. The book says the younger workers in the room lasted between six months and two years. The book’s author was hired because she was older and had a degree and would stay. He is in his second month. He has a degree. He was brought from the third row because he was the one who could be brought. I have no reason to think he was anything other than what he said, and I am leaving him as what he said, and the arithmetic is in the book and not in me.

would feel something, and the feeling would be accurate, and it would last until the train stopped. She said this without unkindness. She said she had read my pieces too and that they were good and that this one would be good, and that it would be, in her phrase, “a piece about a place,” and that the place would be Nairobi, and that Nairobi would not read it.

I asked whether she thought I should write it anyway.

She closed the laptop. She said the book had already answered that, on the first page, and that I had read the first page, and that I was here.¹⁶

6 DINNER, HOSTED, KAREN £0

The dinner was on the fourth evening at a restaurant in the suburbs, in Karen, on the far side of the city from the facility and the far side again from the hotel, in a garden under trees strung with lights, with a long table for thirty laid on the lawn and a fire in a brazier because the evenings are cool at that altitude, and the consortium had, the comms lead told me at the car, “wanted to say thank you properly,” and did.

I’ll stay at the table for a while. It is the section of this piece I have found hardest to write, because nothing happened at the table that I can point to, and because the nothing is the thing I most want the reader to see.

They were generous. The wine was good and there was a great deal of it and the food was the best I ate in Kenya, which was a high bar, and the seating had been arranged, and I had been placed between the contractor’s chief executive and the consortium’s comms lead, which I assume was not chance and which I do not complain of, because they were the two best conversations of the week.

They were funny. The chief executive told a story about his mother, who had not believed, for the first two years of the company, that what

he did was a job, and who had said so at every family occasion, and whom he had finally brought to the office and sat at a workstation for an hour with the queue running, and who had stood up at the end of the hour and said, in Kikuyu, “This is a job,” and had never raised it again. He told it well. The table laughed. I laughed. It is a good story and I have told it since, at a dinner in London, and it got the same laugh, and I stopped in the middle of the laugh because I had heard what I had done, which was to carry a story about the queue from one table with tablecloths to another.¹⁷

They were unbothered. That is the word I have settled on after trying several. Nobody at the table was defensive. Nobody was evasive. The headcount question came up, because the correspondent raised it again over the main course, and the chief executive answered it again, at more length and with more warmth than on the panel, and said that of course people had left, that was what happened when work changed, and that the company had done what it could. He would not pretend the change had been painless. He thought, on balance, that the room had given more than it had taken, and he was prepared to be wrong about that, and nobody at the table, he said, had done the work, including him, for a long time. The correspondent said that was the first real answer he’d had in four years. The chief executive said he was sorry it had taken four years. They shook hands across me.

The comms lead asked me, over the pudding, what I was going to write. I said the receipts. She laughed, and then saw that I meant it, and said that was usually the good ones. She said the consortium didn’t expect a puff and wouldn’t have asked for me if it had wanted one, and that they had read my pieces, and that what they liked about them was that I went somewhere and looked. I said I had looked. She said she knew, she’d watched me on the floor, and that I’d been the only one who read the sign on the decom-

16. Her piece ran. I have read it, in translation from a language it was not written in, because it was written in English and I read it in English and the translation I mean is the one that happens between a reader in Lagos and a reader in London. It is eleven hundred words. It gives the figures. It names the contractor. It does not mention the summit, the hotel, the fish, the wall, the dog, the bicycle, or me. It is a better piece than this one and it will be read by more people and it was written in an afternoon at a hotel bar by someone who asked four questions and got four answers and knew which one to use.

17. I have not told it since.

pression room twice, and that she'd liked that. I did not know what to do with being liked for it, and I still don't. She meant it.

The cars came at ten. The fire was low. The chief executive took my hand in both of his and said I should come back, and I said I would like to, and I meant it, and I mean it now, and none of that is the piece.

At the hotel bar, afterwards, the correspondent and I had one drink, and he told me where the building was.

He had known for years. He described it as a route rather than an address: which matatu from which stage, which stop, which turning, the colour of a wall, the name on a sign for a business that was no longer there, and then the building, and the guard. I wrote it down. He watched me write it down. He said he had never put it in a piece and never would, and that nobody would print the address of a building that was not on a map, and that he would not give it to them if they would, and that he was giving it to me because I was going to go anyway and he would rather I found the right one.

I asked why he had never gone in.

He said he had. He said it was eleven years ago, with a lanyard, for a week, and that it had been the best piece he'd written and that it had changed nothing, and that he had read the book when it came out and had recognised the coffee machine, and had put the book down, and had not picked it up again.¹⁸

7 NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK, OPTIONAL HALF-DAY

£0

I did not go. The travel writer went, with the correspondent, who said he was going because it was the only thing on the programme that would not ask anything of him,

and they left the hotel at six in a consortium car, and at 8.40 she sent me a photograph, which I have in front of me now. It is a giraffe, in three-quarter profile, on a plain of dry grass with a line of acacias behind it, and behind the acacias, small and grey and exact, the towers of the city centre, including, if you know where to look, the hotel. The light is early and comes from the left. The giraffe is looking at something out of frame. She had written under it: *told you*. It is a good photograph. It is the one place in the world you can take it, and she took it, and it is what the consortium's programme had promised her, and it was true.

I had a taxi at eleven.

The correspondent's route began at a stage, which is what the city calls the place where matatus gather, and the taxi took me there, through the Friday traffic, in twenty minutes, and the driver asked whether I was sure, and I said I was, and he said he would wait, and I said it might be some hours, and he named a price for waiting that was less than I would have offered, and I gave him half. He parked under a tree. He had a newspaper.¹⁹

The matatu was a fourteen-seat van painted in the colours of a football club I did not recognise, with a name across the windscreen in a typeface that took some reading, and a young man hanging from the sliding door who took my money and looked at my lanyard, which I had forgotten to take off and did not now take off, and said nothing. The music was loud. The seat was a bench with a strip of carpet on it. We went east. The route the correspondent had given me had no street names in it and the roads had no street names on them, and I found that I could follow it anyway, because he had given it to me as a sequence of things to see, and the things were there. The roundabout with the statue. The long wall painted the colour of a certain brand of paint. The railway. The sign for a tyre dealer that had moved, which was rusted through at

18. The route is in my notebook and is not in this piece and will not be. What I will say is that it took him about a minute to give, and that at no point in the minute did he use a street name, and that when I asked him whether that was deliberate he said that the city did not use them either, for that kind of place, and that the book had got that right, and that she had got the guard right, and that she had got everything right that he could check, and that this was why he had stopped reading.

19. Forty pounds, in two halves, for a wait of four and a half hours under a tree. It is the one expense on the week I set myself and the one I am surest was fair, and I have it on a page torn from the driver's own notebook, in his hand, with the time he began waiting and the time I came back, and he wrote both times down without being asked, which is a thing you do when you have been asked to prove waiting before.

one corner and still legible, and which the correspondent had described with a precision I now understood to be eleven years old.

I got off where he had said. The industrial area east of the centre is, at midday on a Friday, a place of long walls and gates, of godowns with their names in painted letters and lorries parked nose to tail along the verges, of dust that is red where it has been disturbed and grey where it has settled, and it was hot, and it was quieter than I had expected, the lorries out and the gates shut behind them. I walked. The turning was where he said. The office block was where he said, set back, four storeys, concrete rendered and painted a cream that had gone the colour of the dust, with a row of small windows on each floor and a set of glass doors at the bottom with a security desk visible through them, and a name on the building that was the name of the building and not of anything in it.

There was a matatu stop across the road, a shelter with a bench and a tin roof, and a man was sitting on the bench, and I sat on the other end of it, because I had walked from the previous stop and it was hot and because I did not yet know what I was going to do about the doors.

He was in his fifties, in a pressed shirt, with a folded newspaper, and he looked at the lanyard and said, "You are with the conference." I said I was. He said he had seen it in the paper. He asked whether the conference had brought me here, and I said no, and he nodded as if that were the answer he had expected, and then he said, looking at the building rather than at me, that he had worked there for six years, on the afternoon rotation, and had finished four years ago, and that he came past sometimes because his brother had a business two streets over, and that he had not been inside since.

I asked whether he had read the book. He laughed, which was the only time anyone laughed at that stop. He said everyone had read the book. He said everyone who had worked in the building, on either rotation, had read the book within a month of its coming out, and had passed it round, and that there were copies in the building itself, he had been told, though he could not say by whom. I asked whether people

had a view about who had written it. He said people had views. I asked whether he did. He said he did. He said he was not going to tell me, and that I should not ask him again, and that he was not protecting her. She had chosen, he said, and the choosing was the thing she had left, and it was not his to spend. I did not ask him again.

He said one more thing about the book, unprompted. He said she had got the guard right. He said the guard was still there.

The guard was still there.

He was at the desk inside the glass doors, a man of about sixty in a blue uniform with a company crest on the pocket and a ledger open in front of him, a paper ledger, ruled, and when I came through the doors he stood up, which I had not expected, and said good afternoon, and asked how he could help. I said I had come to see the company on the third floor. He asked whether I had an appointment. I said I did not. He asked for my identification anyway, and I gave him my passport, and he looked at it, and looked at me, and wrote something in the ledger, and gave the passport back, and said that visitors to the third floor were by arrangement with the company and that he could not admit me without one, and that he was sorry.

He was courteous throughout. He did not look at the lanyard, or looked at it and gave no sign. I said I understood. I asked, because it was the only question I had and because I had come a long way to be told what I had already been told, how many were on the morning rotation now.

He thought about it. He looked at the ledger, though the answer was not in the ledger. He said nine.²⁰

I thanked him and went out.

There is a low wall across the road, beside the shelter, and I sat on it, and then stood, and then sat, for two hours, in the sun and then in the shade of the shelter's roof as the sun came round, and nothing happened. A lorry came and went. The man in the pressed shirt left at some point, with a nod, and I did not see him go. At three o'clock the glass doors opened and people came out, and I counted, and there were seven, and they stood on the step and put on jackets,

because the air conditioning in the building runs cold and the afternoon outside was warm and their bodies had been in the one and were now in the other, and then they went their ways, three towards the stop and four the other way, and none of them looked across the road, and I did not cross it.

I walked back the way I had come. The tyre dealer's sign. The wall. The railway. The taxi was under its tree with the driver asleep in it, and I woke him, and paid him the other half, and he asked whether I had found what I was looking for, and I said I had found it, and he said that was good, and drove me back through the traffic to the hotel, where the travel writer was in the lobby with a bag from the gift shop, and asked how my day had been, and I said quiet.

8 AIRPORT TRANSFER

£38

The magazine has a form. It is a page long and it is for hosted travel, and it requires the writer to list everything received on the trip with a value against it, whether or not the writer paid, so that the line at the foot of the published piece saying who paid can be written accurately and so that the magazine knows what it has been given. The consortium's confirmation email had, as it happened, given most of the values, unprompted, as savings. I filled the form in on the plane home. It is the structure of this piece, and I did not choose it; the form did.

The return was economy. The consortium had offered the return in business and the magazine had declined it, as a matter of policy, and had booked its own, and I say so without complaint

and without credit, because the policy is the magazine's and not mine, and because a seat that does not lie flat is the only thing about the week that I can say I did not accept.

The receipts are in an envelope. Nine of them. The taxi, both halves, on a page torn from the driver's notebook. The bird guide. The laundry. The rest are the consortium's, printed, itemised, with the word *hosted* in the box where a total would go.

The book is in the seat pocket. I read the page I had turned down on the first night, and then the sentence after it, which I had not marked and which I will give here because it is the last thing in the book I can offer against the week, and because it is hers: "I helped to make something that will not know me." I closed the book. I put it in the pocket with the in-flight magazine. The steward asked whether I wanted anything, and I said no, and she moved on down the aisle, and I sat with the form on the tray table and the envelope beside it and the numbers filled in, and I added them up, and I have put the total in a footnote, with one other number.²¹

The envelope is on my desk. It has not been opened since.

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Daniel Kerr travelled to Nairobi as a guest of the summit's organising consortium, which covered his outbound flight, accommodation, meals, and transfers. Meridian paid for his return flight.

Daniel Kerr writes about places. He has contributed to Meridian and two other magazines for twenty years.

20. From the book, the first page, in full: "We were on the third floor of an office block in the industrial area east of the city center. There was a security guard at the entrance who knew our faces and checked our identification anyway, every shift, for eleven years. There were forty-three of us on the morning rotation, distributed across two large rooms, each of us at a workstation with two monitors: one for the queue, one for the reference materials. The lighting was fluorescent. The air conditioning ran too cold. There was a coffee maker in the break room that produced coffee no one liked, and that everyone drank." Nine. I have checked the rest of the inventory against what I could see from the pavement, which is the building and the doors and the guard, and it holds. The rest is hers and I did not see it, and I am not going to pretend to have seen it by describing it. What I will put here, and nowhere in the body, is what I understood on the low wall across the road, which is that the summit existed so that this building could be visited without being entered, that the tour to the business park was how the visiting was done, that I was the one it was done through, and that I would file the piece anyway, and have.

21. The form's total, everything received and everything paid, is £4,840. From the eleventh note, a reviewer on the morning rotation earns between £370 and £405 a month for twenty-two shifts of roughly three hundred decisions, which is between five and a half and six pence a decision. Taking the middle: eighty-two thousand decisions. Twelve and a half months of the morning rotation. That is what the week cost, in the unit the building uses, and I have no other unit to offer, and this is where the piece stops.