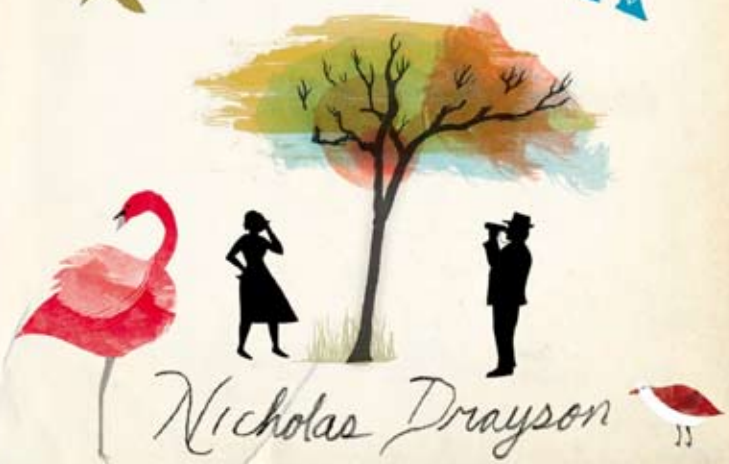


'A funny, ingenious and touching love story,
packed with vibrant local colour'

JOANNE HARRIS



A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF EAST AFRICA



A Guide to the Birds of East Africa
by
Nicholas Drayson

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I

'Ah yes,' said Rose Mbikwa, looking up at the large dark bird with elegant tail soaring high above the car park of the Nairobi Museum, 'a black kite. Which is, of course, not black but brown.'

Mr Malik smiled. How many times had he heard Rose Mbikwa say those words? Almost as many times as he had been on the Tuesday morning bird walk.

You never know exactly how many kinds of birds you will see on the Tuesday morning bird walk of the East African Ornithological Society but you can be sure to see a kite. Expert scavengers, they thrive on the detritus of human society in and around Nairobi. At his first school sports day (how many years ago was that now – could it really be fifty?) Mr Malik remembered little of the sprinting and javelin throwing and fathers' sack race but he would never forget the kite which swooped down from nowhere to snatch a devilled chicken leg from his very hand. He could still recall the brush of feathers against his face and that single moment when as the bird's talons closed around the prize its yellow eye looked

into his. Of course it wasn't quite accurate to say that he had no memories of the javelin throwing. Few would forget the incident with the Governor General's wife's corgi.

There was already a good turnout. Seated along the low wall in front of the museum a gaggle of Young Ornithologists (YOs), mostly students training to be tourist guides, chattered and preened. The Old Hands were also out in force. Joan Baker and Hilary Fotherington-Thomas were leaning against a car chatting to a couple of pink-faced men, one bearded, whose pocket-infested khaki clothing instantly identified them as tourists and their accents as Australian. Standing furtively to one side were Patsy King and Jonathan Evans. They had been carrying on their Tuesday morning affair for almost two years now and though Mr Malik had never had an affair, he supposed that a certain furtiveness was necessary to achieve full satisfaction in these things. The two were an unlikely match. Imagine a giraffe, towering above the wide savannah. Now imagine a warthog. But Mr Malik was used to seeing the lanky figure of Patsy King striding along road or track, her 10 x 50 binoculars enveloped in one large hand, with Jonathan Evans trotting along beside her. To Mr Malik they seemed, like members of his own family, no longer remarkable.

Keeping himself to himself as usual was Thomas Nyambe. He was standing with his back to the crowd, looking up towards the sky, entranced. Mr Nyambe loved birds, and had been coming to the bird walks even longer than Mr Malik. Tuesday was his rostered morning off from his job as government driver. A driver in Kenya is seldom paid enough to afford a car of his own, so as usual Mr Nyambe had walked to the museum from his home in Factory Road, just behind the railway station. As usual Mr Malik would offer him a lift to wherever they were going that day.

A bang and a rattle and a loud curse through an open window announced the arrival of Tom Turnbull driving over the speed bump in his yellow Morris Minor (the speed bump had been there

over a year now but still it took him by surprise). He opened the door, of the car, got out, and slammed it. He cursed, opened the door and slammed it again. The distant town hall clock struck nine.

‘Good morning and welcome,’ said Rose.

All conversation ceased, all heads turned.

‘I see a few new faces here – and many old ones – but I welcome all of you to the Tuesday morning bird walk. My name is Rose Mbikwa.’

Mr Malik had got used to it by now, the transformation of Rose’s normal low contralto speaking voice into her public voice of distance-shrinking volume and clarity. Rose looked around the group, nodding here and smiling there, then conferred again with the young woman who had earlier pointed out the bee-eaters.

‘And to those of you who don’t know her, may I introduce Jennifer Halutu. Just to remind you, I will be away next week and Jennifer will be leading the walk. Last week, you may remember, we thought we might try the MEATI but we didn’t have enough cars. Do we have enough this week?’ She looked around the car park. ‘I think we might. Who can give lifts?’

Hands were raised, calculations made.

‘Good, that’s fine,’ said Rose. ‘Then the MEATI it is. You all know the way?’

It was left to Joan Baker and Hilary Fotherington-Thomas to explain to the mystified newcomers that the Modern East African Tourist Inn was a popular restaurant on the southern outskirts of town.

Thomas Nyambe had already slipped into the front seat of Mr Malik’s old green Mercedes 450 SEL. The back seats were still empty. Perhaps, thought Mr Malik, the two tourists would like to come with him? He was about to offer a lift when another Mercedes, a shiny red SL 350, bounced in over the speed bump and swung into the car park. A tinted window opened, a sunglassed face leaned out over gold-braceleted arm.

‘Hi, Rose – not too late?’ The man leapt out of the car. ‘Hey, David, George, there you are. Your chariot awaits.’

The tourists, who Mr Malik now surmised were called David and George, walked over to the red Mercedes to be greeted with handshakes, smiles and shoulder clasps.

‘These guys are staying at the Hilton too, Rose, so I said they should come along. OK with you?’

After the three of them had gained Rose’s approval and paid their visitor’s subscription the two guests were shown into the passenger seats while the driver jumped back behind the wheel, started the engine and pulled out on to the drive, yelling out through the window just before it closed.

‘See you there, everyone.’

Who on earth was that? Brown skin, white hair, expensive clothing, and some kind of American accent; yet he looked slightly familiar. Mr Malik had little time to ponder this question, nor how this man seemed to know Rose Mbikwa, before a gaggle of young black Africans piled into the back of his old Mercedes. The rest of the YOs slipped and squeezed into Rose’s 504, Tom’s Morris Minor and the assortment of Land Rovers, Toyotas and other vehicles that other Old Hands had brought along. Engines were started, handbrakes released. As he drove gently over the speed bump and eased his tightly packed load out into the morning traffic, Mr Malik was wearing a worried expression.

That man. No, it couldn’t be. Not after all this time.



2

Before we find out more about the mysterious stranger I should tell you a little more about Mr Malik, and about Rose.

Almost every Tuesday for seventeen years, at half past eight rain or shine, Rose Mbikwa has pulled up outside the museum in her Peugeot 504 station wagon. She bought the car in 1980, the year after a 504 won the International East African Safari Rally for the third time running. In those days it was just as easy to drive her son to school as have him hanging round for the school bus (Rose liked driving and refused to have a driver, even later when things got bad). Besides you saw more birds early in the morning if you were out and about, and she had always liked birds. But when Rose's husband was first arrested she thought it best that her son was out of the way. He was packed off to boarding school close to where her parents still lived in the house where she had grown up, just opposite the thirteenth hole of the Merchants' golf course in Morningside, Edinburgh.

Did you see Rose as a black woman? No, she is a white woman. Rose Macdonald as she then was, red of hair and fair of skin,

had gone to Kenya in 1970. It was to be a holiday, an Abercrombie & Kent gift from her parents for passing her final law examinations. A glorious future lay ahead of her. Had she not already secured a fine position with Harrington, Harrington, McBrace and Harcourt, Advocates and Solicitors? In time, said her mother, she might even marry one of the partners. By the time Rose was due to go home to be awarded her degree and start work at the lawyers' office just off Princes Street she'd had second thoughts about a lifetime of torts and conveyancing and fallen in love with Kenya – and with one particular inhabitant thereof. Despite simultaneous storms in Morningside and the Muthaiga Club she and Joshua Mbikwa, who had just finished his doctorate in physical anthropology but had a passion for politics, were married at the Holy Family cathedral in Nairobi on 16th July 1971. Joshua was elected to parliament the following October and their son Angus was born the following month. Joshua Mbikwa was re-elected in 1977, arrested for the first time in 1985 (just a warning, so they said) and in 1988 became Deputy Leader of the Opposition. In December of the following year he was again arrested, charged with sedition, convicted and imprisoned. While Rose spent her days and nights campaigning for her husband's release and writing letters to anyone important she knew or could think of, she also began to study the plants and animals around her. In both tasks she succeeded. Her campaign created such pressure within Kenya and without that Joshua Mbikwa was released, exonerated and reinstated in parliament, while Rose herself found that she had become just as entranced by African bulbuls and weaver birds as she had ever been by the blackbirds and thrushes of Scotland.

When Joshua was killed five months later in that unfortunate and mysterious accident with the light plane, the President himself assured her that he was just as distraught as he knew she must be and insisted she call him personally if there was anything he could do to make her return to the UK as painless as possible. Rose Mbikwa, who now loved Kenya as fiercely as

her husband had loved it and knew more about the plants and animals and politicians of the country than most people who had been born there, thanked him for his kindness. The next day she went along to the office of the East African Ornithological Society at Nairobi Museum and joined up, paying three years' subscription in advance.

When the time came to renew her subscription Angus had moved on from his beloved boarding school in Edinburgh to study international relations (both of them were amused by the idea) at the University of St Andrews, but she was still living in the same house in Serengeti Gardens, Hatton Rise, Nairobi. And she had developed a plan. Just because her beloved husband was dead did not mean his convictions and his work for a better Kenya should die with him. It was becoming clear that Kenya, buffeted by the winds of global change while shackled by the chains of internal corruption, needed help. Rose could see one bright light on the horizon and it did not involve the law. It was tourism. What did people come to Kenya to see? The wildlife. Who was training local tourist guides to show them the wildlife? No one. Surely, thought Rose, this was something the Nairobi Museum could get involved in. With its team of curators, and its collections and displays on plants and animals, land and landscape and people past and present, the museum would be an ideal focus for a comprehensive tourist guide training programme.

Rose worked behind the scenes, advocating, soliciting, persuading, planning. There was no money for such a scheme, of course, but now that her son had finished his schooling she was happy to contribute a part of what remained of her own small inheritance to get it up and going. Her husband, she was sure, would have done the same. The measure of her success was that when the Minister of Tourism and the Minister of Education called a joint news conference to announce the training programme which she had designed, each seemed to think that he alone was responsible for the whole idea.

Rose accepted the position of programme coordinator and

leader, a position she still holds. Chances are that if you go on safari in Kenya today your guide will have trained in the programme – listen for the trace of a Scottish accent. But Rose still loves her birds, and as Honorary Secretary (Expeditions) of the EAOS still takes each Tuesday morning off from her main job to lead the bird walk as she has been doing almost every week for the last sixteen years. Though most of her red hairs are now white her enthusiasm is undimmed, her knowledge is unmatched, and her car is now as old and battered as any other Peugeot 504 anywhere else in Africa.

Mr Malik, as you already have guessed, is neither black nor white. He is a brown man, sixty-one years old, short, round and balding. Most men go bald. Be in possession of one X and one Y chromosome, live long enough, and at some stage you will find your hair thinning, receding or just plain disappearing, and the fact that follicles which depart the scalp seem to appear reinvigorated in nostrils and ears is usually of small consolation. So men are sooner or later faced with a choice – live with it, or fight back.

Mr Malik had just turned thirty-two when, on a visit to his barber at the shop in Nkomo Avenue where he had been going for his regular fortnightly cut and style since well before Nkomo Avenue had changed its name from King George Street, he was informed that sir was ‘going a little thin on top’. To a man proud of his sleek locks, this was less than welcome news. His barber went on to suggest that perhaps it might be time for a new style.

It has to be said that on aesthetic grounds alone this suggestion had some merit. The Brylcreemed quiff that a daring young Mr Malik had brought back from London in the early 1960s may have caused a satisfying intake of breath from the short-back-and-sides Nairobi of the time, but this was 1976. If an impression of a serious man of business was what you wished to create – which by now Mr Malik did – a Brylcreemed quiff and four-inch sideburns were probably not the best way to go about creating it.

‘Perhaps something a little more formal, sir. Formal, but not old-fashioned.’

Sir, having just had his hair washed and being now in the process of having his scalp massaged, was feeling both blissful and benign.

‘Did you have anything in mind?’

From a shelf above the basin the barber whipped down one of several loose-leaf folders.

‘I’m thinking tapered at the sides but straight Boston at the back,’ he said, flicking through the pages. ‘Sideburns if sir insists but no more than three-quarters of an inch. Something like this, perhaps?’

He thrust the book in front of his seated and robed customer. The page showed the Hollywood actor Rock Hudson in a publicity still for a recent film. It appeared, from the bandanna round the actor’s neck and the check shirt, to be a western. Mr Malik had long had a soft spot for Rock Hudson – especially in those films with Doris Day (if he had a soft spot for Rock Hudson he went all squishy when he thought about the divine Miss Day). He looked hard at the picture. Rock Hudson was also wearing a fairly substantial moustache and unless he had a very small head his sideburns were well over three-quarters of an inch long but the overall effect looked modern enough. If he half closed his eyes Mr Malik even thought he could see the hint of a quiff.

With the aid of combs and mirrors the barber demonstrated another advantage of this new style. If sir’s hair was parted just a little further over to the right, the thin patch would be undetectable. Mr Malik agreed, leaving the shop with a new hairstyle and a confident spring in his step, and the barber with a more than generous tip. And call it coincidence if you will but just a few weeks later Mrs Malik announced that seven years and one month after their one and only son had been born, she was again pregnant.

As his little daughter Petula grew taller and fatter, Mr Malik’s

thin patch grew thinner and wider. At first this was not a problem. Mr Malik discovered that all he had to do was move his parting just a fraction further towards the right so that more hair was available above the parting to cover the thin bit. When it got thinner still he found that a little Brylcreem (of which a large jar remained at the back of the bathroom cupboard from his quiff days) helped the hair to stay in place. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the parting got lower, the Brylcreem thicker. Now there was no doubt about it. What had begun thirty years ago as a straight Rock Hudson had developed into a classic comb-over.

The now grown-up (and slimmed-down) Petula might tease him about it, the abominably hairy Patel might make sly references at the club to certain British footballers known for their adherence to the style. His barber might suggest that perhaps it was time sir might like to think about a toupee (his wife was by now sadly deceased and so silent on the matter). But one major change of hairstyle in life was enough in any man. Wigs were out, and he would not go from a covered scalp to a bare one no matter how long it now took him every morning to arrange each hair, and no matter how unconvincing the effect might be. But it is a little-appreciated truth that a bad hairstyle neither reflects nor affects the heart within. Passions burn as fiercely in Mr Malik's breast as in those of other men.

For the last three years Mr Malik – brown, short, round and balding though he may be – has been passionately in love with Rose Mbikwa.