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The Honey Guide

Written by Richard Crompton

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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THE HONEY GUIDE

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Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

978 0 297 86795 1 (cased)
978 0 297 86796 8 (trade paperback)

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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For Katya

Foreword

This novel is set in the run-up to, and the immediate aftermath of, the Kenyan election of 27 December 2007.

Amid claims of vote-rigging from both sides, the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, was sworn in on 30 December, sparking protests and violence across the whole country.

Some of the worst violence was seen amid the slums of the capital, where long-standing ethnic tensions rose to the surface.

This book is a work of fiction. The timeline is accurate, and most of the locations are real. But it is not intended to be a factual portrayal of events. Rather, it is an attempt to capture the spirit, energy and courage of this remarkable city, Nairobi, which I call my home.

It is thought that between 800 and 1,500 Kenyans lost their lives in the post-electoral violence. Countless others lost their homes and livelihoods, and experienced terror and deprivation. This book is a tribute to the memory of those who perished and to the resourcefulness of those who survived.

The Origin of Death

In the beginning there was no death. This is the story of how death came into the world.

There was once a man known as Leeyio, who was the first man that Naiteru-kop brought to earth. Naiteru-kop then called Leeyio and said to him: 'When a man dies and you dispose of the corpse, you must remember to say, "Man die and come back again, moon die, and remain away."'

Many months passed before anyone died. When, in the end, a neighbour's child did die, Leeyio was summoned to dispose of the body. When he took the corpse outside, he made a mistake and said: 'Moon die and come back again, man die and stay away.' So after that no man survived death.

A few more months elapsed, and Leeyio's own child died. So the father took the corpse outside and said: 'Moon die and remain away, man die and come back again.' On hearing this, Naiteru-kop said to Leeyio: 'You are too late now, for, through your own mistake, death was born the day when your neighbour's child died.' So that is how death came about, and that is why up to this day when a man dies he does not return, but when the moon dies, it always comes back again.

Traditional Maasai story

1

SATURDAY, 22 DECEMBER 2007

The sun is at the vertical, and shade is as scarce as charity on Biashara Street. Where it exists – in shopfronts and alleyways, like cave mouths and canyons – life clings: eyes blink; and patiently, they watch.

They see a man and a boy walking along the sidewalk, the boy adjusting his stride every third or fourth step to a skip to match his companion's rangy stride.

The man, in concession, has stooped slightly to maintain a conversational height. Their posture suggests that if either reached out a hand, the other would grasp it – but that for their own reasons, neither will offer. They are father and son.

—But where would you ride it? the father asks wearily. It's evidently a long-running conversation.

—Anywhere! says the boy. I could go to the shops for you.

—Adam, this is Nairobi. You go out on your own on a bike, you're going to get killed. Have you seen the drivers here?

—Then around the compound. Grandma's house. It's safe there. Michael's got a bike. And Imani, too, and she's only seven.

The tall man pauses in his stride and the boy runs into the back of his legs. Something has disturbed him: immediate, palpable, yet indefinable. The sense of trouble about to strike.

Just for once, thinks Mollel, just for *once*, I'd like to turn off this instinct. Be able to enjoy going shopping, enjoy spending

time with my son. Be a member of the public, instead of a policeman.

But he can't. He is what he is.

—That's the one I want! says Adam, pointing at the shop window.

Mollel is vaguely aware of a display of bicycles inside, but he is watching the reflection suspended upon the glass. A group of teenage girls, all gossip and gum, mobile phones wafting like fans, handbags slung over shoulders like bandoliers. And from the shadows, other eyes – hungry now – emerging. Watching without watching, getting closer without moving in, the men nonchalant yet purposeful, disparate yet unified, circling their prey: hunting dogs.

—Go inside the shop, Mollel tells Adam. Stay there till I come back for you.

—Can I choose a bike, Dad? Really?

—Just stay there, says Mollel, and he pushes the boy through the store's open door. He turns: it's happened already. The group of men are melting away: the girls are still oblivious to what has just taken place. He clocks one of the guys walking swiftly from the scene, stuffing a gold vinyl clutch bag – *so not his style* – under his shirt.

Mollel takes off, matching the hunting dog's pace but keeping his distance, eager not to spook him. No point in letting him bolt into a back street now. Pace up a beat, narrow the gap. Quit Biashara Street. Cross Muindi Mbingu. Weave through traffic – ignore the car horns. Busier here.

The hunting dog is in his late teens or early twenties, judges Mollel. Athletic. His shirt has the sleeves cut off at the shoulders, not to expose his well-developed arms, but to ease its removal. The buttons at the front will be fake, Mollel knows, replaced with a strip of Velcro or poppers to confound any attempt to grab the bag-snatcher's collar, leaving the pursuer holding nothing more than a raggedy shirt like a slipped snakeskin.

While he weighs his strategy – a dive to the legs rather than a clutch at the torso – Mollel realises the thief is heading for the

city market. Got to close the gap now. Lose him in there, he's gone for good.

Taking up an entire city block, and with more ways in and out than a hyrax burrow, on a day like this the market's dark interior is thronged with shoppers escaping the sun. Mollel considers yelling *Stop, Mwezi!* or *Police!* – but calculates this would lose him precious time. The thief leaps up the steps and deftly vaults a pile of fish guts, pauses a moment to look back – showing, Mollel thinks, signs of tiring – and dives into the dark interior. Mollel's gaunt frame is just a few seconds behind, heart pounding, gulping lungfuls of air with relish, even as his stomach rebels at the powerful reek of fish. He hasn't done this for a while. And he is enjoying it.

It takes his eyes a moment to adjust. At first all he can see are tall windows high overhead, shafts of light like columns. Noise fills in what eyes cannot see: the hubbub of negotiation and exchange, the squawking of chickens, the multitudinous laughter and chatter and singing and hustle and bustle of life.

And amongst that hustle and bustle – a bustle, a hustle, that should not be there. He sees it now, as well as hears it, just a few stalls ahead. Figures tumbling, voices raised in protest. His quarry.

Through a gap in the crowd, Mollel sees the thief. He's scattering people and produce behind him in an attempt to obstruct his pursuer. No point going down that aisle. He looks left and right, plumps for right, rounds a stall and starts to run down a parallel row. Although he's keeping up with his prey, Mollel's not going to catch him this way. Ahead, he sees sacks of millet stacked loosely against one of the stalls. It's his chance. He bounds up, one, two, and is atop the stall, balancing on the boards which bound the grain.

A howl of protest rises from the woman behind the stall, swiping at his legs with her scoop. —Get down from there! But he is already gone, leaping to the next stall, hoping the rickety wood will take his weight – it does – and run, leap, again – it does.

A better view from here, and a clearer run – despite the efforts of stallholders to push him, grab him, drag him to earth. He rises above the hands, above the stalls, intent only on the pursuit.

The fresh, clean smell of peppers and onions cuts through the dusty dryness of millet. Easier to negotiate. He bounds across the stacked vegetables, skipping, skimming, recalling chasing goats across mountain scree when he was a child. Momentum is everything. Each footstep expects you to fall: cheat it. Be gone.

Outraged yells fill his ears but he feels as if the great hall has fallen silent: there is no one in it but him and the fleeing man. Distance between them measured in heartbeats: arm's reach; finger's grasp.

And then he is out of the door.

Mollel suddenly finds himself standing on the final stall, surrounded by furious faces. They barrack him and block him; hands reach for his ankles. He sees the back of the thief's head about to melt into the crowd outside the market. He sweeps his arm down; feels hair and hardness – coconuts – beneath his feet. Another goat-herding trick: if the animal is out of reach, throw something at it.

The coconut is out of his hand before he even thinks about it. It describes a shallow parabola, over the heads of the stallholders, through the square, bright doorway. He even hears the crack, and relaxes. He has time now to produce his card and clear the way to the doorway, where a circle has formed.

The crowd is now eager, anticipatory. The rear doorway of the city market is inhabited by butchers' stalls, and the metallic smell of blood is in the air.

They part before him, and Mollel steps into the ring. The thief is on his knees, gold handbag dropped to the ground, one hand dazedly rubbing the back of his head. The smashed coconut has already been snatched by a pair of children, front of the circle, who suck on the sweet flesh and grin at Mollel. Free food and a floor show. What more could you want?

—You're coming with me, says Mollel. The thief does not respond. But he staggers groggily to his feet.

—I said, says Mollel, you're coming with me. He steps forward and takes the thief by his upper arm. It is wider than Mollel can grasp and as hard as rock. He hopes the guy's going to remain concussed long enough to drag him downtown. If only he had cuffs—

—and then the arm wheels away from his, Mollel just having time to step back to take a little force out of the blow which lands on the side of his head. No concussion – the faintness feigned – the thief now alert and springing on his heels. A lunge – missed – at Mollel. The crowd cheers. He is strong but top-heavy, this fighter, and the policeman judges that a swift shoulder-ram would push him once more to the ground. Mollel seizes his chance, head down, body thrown at his opponent's chest, but he misjudges the timing, and the thief parries him easily. Mollel feels a sharp, agonising pain in his head – everywhere – stabbing and yanking, the pain of capture, and of submission.

His opponent laughs, and a roar of approval comes from the crowd. No partisans, these. Mollel feels his head jerked from side to side, up and down. There is nothing he can do.

—I have you now, Maasai, laughs the thief.

He has put his thumbs through Mollel's earlobes.

The bane of his life, those earlobes. Long and looped, the flesh stretched since childhood to now fall below his jawline, the *i-maroro* are a mark of pride and warriorhood within Maasai circles – but an object of ridicule and prejudice elsewhere. He knows many Maasai who have had the loops removed, but somehow the stumps sing of regret to him, and their ears seem just as conspicuous as his own.

One advantage, though: no one is going to grab them by the ears. The crowd are in near-hysterical laughter: he can expect no help from that quarter. They have never seen a policeman led by his ears before, like a bull with a ring through his nose. Even the

thief, his face now leering at arms' length, seems hardly able to believe his luck.

—All right, so this is what we're going to do, Maasai, he says. We're going to walk together, slowly, out on to K-Street. I'm not going to rip your pretty ears off. And you're not going to come after me. If you've got it, nod your head. Oh, I'm sorry, you can't, can you? Would you like me to nod it for you? Yeah, that's right!

Quite a comedian, this one, thinks Mollel, his head being tugged up and down. The thief enjoys the audience. He even swaggers somewhat as he holds the policeman captive – glancing at the crowd, enjoying his moment of fame. Let him, thinks Mollel. Means he won't be ready for what I'm about to do.

What he does – brutally, swiftly – evinces a sympathetic groan from all the men in the watching crowd. They have no illusions about what a size-ten police-issue steel-capped boot can achieve when brought into such intimate contact with its target.

Almost tenderly, the thief lets go of Mollel's ears. His eyes look into the policeman's with a look of heartbreak and agony. This time, Mollel knows he'll have no problems bringing him in.

2

—If this was *China*, the Chinese woman sobs, we not mess around. We get this sorted out!

—Well, it's not China, says the desk sergeant. This is Kenya. Here, we do things *properly*. He licks the tip of his ballpoint and starts writing in a large ledger. Work permit number?

—This not about me, this about my landlord! He take my money and change the locks! Who am I supposed to sleep with tonight, huh?

In the general merriment caused by this statement, Mollel catches the desk sergeant's eye over the heads of the throng. He is glad it is Keritch – no awkward questions. He just gets a quizzical look as the desk flap is lifted to allow him through. As Mollel leads his prisoner down the corridor to CID, he hears Keritch sighing once more: Work permit number? And has *anyone* got a pen that works?

Central Police Post. It's a long time since he's been here. Nothing's changed. The smell is of sweat and fresh paint – it's easier to paint the walls every couple of years than clean them daily. The single-storey building was once a homestead, and now sits dwarfed by the massive modern buildings around it. It's a sleepy, rustic image totally at odds with the constant activity within, presenting an aspiration of a Nairobi benignly overseen by one colonial-era bobby on a bicycle: which was probably the

case when it was built. And it couldn't be farther from the truth, today.

—Well, well. Maasai. Brought a gift for us, I see?

Mollel directs the prisoner into the CID office. Decrepit office furniture and overflowing filing cabinets are squeezed into what was obviously once a bedroom. Mwangi sits at his same old desk, feet up, reading the *Daily Nation*. Grizzled, cynical, slightly greyer of moustache. Mollel approaches and flicks up the front page.

—What are you doing?

—Checking the date. It's the only way I can tell whether you've *moved* for two years.

—I wouldn't be so sure, says a younger man. Shirtsleeves, eating a *sambusa*, policeman's moustache on the way. He has it delivered to his desk these days.

—Mollel, meet Kiunga. My new partner, says Mwangi. And believe it or not, Kiunga, this Maasai used to be my partner, too.

—I've heard about you, says Kiunga, neutrally.

—*Everyone's* heard about him, says Mwangi. Question is, what is he doing back at Central? Last I heard, he'd been busted down to traffic duty in Loresho.

Kiunga laughs. —Is there any traffic in Loresho?

—There's a job to be done, replies Mollel. Overcrowded *matatus*, out-of-date tax discs. The occasional donkey-rage incident.

—And now you've brought us Oloo, says Mwangi, looking at the prisoner. The boss *will* be pleased.

—You know this guy?

—Oh, we know Oloo. Nice handbag, by the way, he says to the thief.

—What the hell is *he* doing here? thunders a voice from the back of the office. Mwangi casts Mollel a scathing glance and slowly lowers his feet to the ground. Oloo, the prisoner, visibly relaxes.

Otieno, the head of Central CID, has entered.

—I thought I told you I didn't want to see *him* in here again! he barks.

He is an imposing man, tall and massive, his round, blunt head retreating into his thick neck. His inky-dark skin is pocked and the colour bleeds into the whites of his eyes, which are stained like walnuts. Otieno, a Luo, in a profession dominated by Kikuyus, has developed a hide as thick as that of the ox he resembles, and a reputation for being just as stubborn.

—It wasn't us, boss, coughs Mwangi. It was our Maasai friend here.

Otieno turns to Mollel, seeing him for the first time. The wide face breaks into a dazzling grin – the last response Mollel had expected.

—There is an old Luo saying, says Otieno, slapping Mollel heartily on the back, that an unwelcome visitor brings good cheer. They mean, of course, when he leaves. But this time, this time, my unwelcome friend, you might just be able to help me out. Get rid of this nobody and I'll tell you all about it.

—I've got to charge him first, says Mollel. Robbery and resisting arrest.

Mwangi and Kiunga exchange a glance.

Otieno's grin disappears. He takes the gold handbag from Mollel and rifles through it.

—Mobile phone, purse, tampons, cigarettes… he holds up an ID card. Amazing how careless some people can be with their valuables. Thank goodness there are good, honest citizens like Mr Oloo here, prepared to hand in lost property.

Now it is Oloo's turn to grin. —My pleasure, he says smugly. Now if you don't mind, Officers, I think I'll be on my way.

—But, boss! protests Mollel.

—But, nothing! Right now I'm running the best figures in Central Division since the nineties. Robbery is down eight per cent. You think I'm going to let a little *mavwi* like this mess up my statistics? Ask your buddies here.

Mwangi and Kiunga look at Mollel with resignation.

—Yeah, butts in Oloo. That's right. So, about this lost property, then. Where do I get my reward?

Otieno laughs a hearty, jovial laugh. Then, still smiling, he raises his fist like a shovel, and slams it into the thief's face.

—*There's* your reward.

Oloo is on the floor, blood gushing from his broken nose. Otieno turns to Mwangi and Kiunga.

—That was just to prove to you Kikuyus that there's no tribal favouritism going on. Mwangi, get him out of here. Kiunga, get the pool car. We're taking the Maasai on a little drive.

The police Land Rover weaves through the Nairobi traffic. Kiunga manages the jam with a young man's confidence, squeezing the vehicle into gaps with inches to spare, overtaking other cars on both sides, mounting the sidewalk when necessary.

—You never learned to drive, then, Mollel? Kiunga calls back, as he pushes the car into the narrowing canyon formed by two Citi Buses.

—No, replies Mollel. Did you?

Otieno, in the front passenger seat, gives a booming laugh. —That's why you ended up in traffic division. It was *someone's* idea of a joke.

Yes, and Mollel knows whose. Still, if Otieno wants him along for the ride today, he must have something interesting in store.

They pull off the Uhuru Highway and on to Kenyatta Avenue, past the Serena Hotel, where Otieno barks some directions and Kiunga pulls an illegal U-turn on to the other carriageway. They push through the opposing traffic, Kiunga pointing a warning at an irate *matatu* driver, Otieno retaining his bulky composure. Then, up a kerb, and off the road: between two concrete bollards that Mollel thinks they couldn't possibly fit through – but they do – and into Uhuru Park.

Uhuru Park: Nairobi's playground. Named after freedom, but also granting it: a little freedom from the sprawl and the spread and the spleen of the city. Being Saturday, it is busy. People lying

on the grass dotted in groups – families picnicking, lovers discreetly loving – or singly, people with nowhere else to go or a few hours to kill, sleeping on the ground. A larger group is stood in a circle, holding hands. They all wear the same red T-shirts: a prayer meeting. Vendors of sodas, nuts and ice cream push their wagons lazily down the paths – only to dive out of the way as the Land Rover bears down upon them.

They drive past the area known as Little Mombasa. In his forty-two years, Mollel has been to some extraordinary places, but he has never been to the Kenyan coast. He surmises, though, that the real Mombasa has a bit more going for it than a shallow boating lake and a paddling pool. The place is popular enough – but seems to be losing custom to a new attraction over towards the rear of the park, where the ground slopes steeply away from the city and eventually becomes Upper Hill.

The car draws to a halt by the mass of people, and the instant Kiunga cuts the engine, Mollel knows what they're going to find. The only time a group of Kenyans en masse is quiet like this, is when there's a body.

They descend from the car and push their way through the strangely reverent mob, towards the mess of chain-link fence and barbed wire which marks the boundary of the park. It seems far removed from the peaceful, green interior. As they draw to the front, Mollel sees a drainage culvert, some four feet deep, and a couple of uniformed city cops keeping a desultory eye on the crowd, who are all looking into the ditch.

Beyond them, standing in the concrete culvert but barely clearing the top, is Dr Achieng.

—Ah, Otieno. And you've brought your pet Maasai with you, I see. Good thinking. Been a long time, Mollel.

—You not retired yet? Mollel asks the old man.

—Can't afford to. I thought *you'd* disappeared.

Otieno butts in: —From your description of the body, I thought it would be useful to *re*appear him. What have we got, a termite?

Termite: Nairobi police vernacular for a body washed out of the storm drains after a heavy bout of rain, the way white ants are flushed from a flooded nest.

—Could be. Rain was probably heavy enough last night to bring her some distance. That could account for a lot of the impact wounds. Unless she was dead before she entered the drain.

Achieng beckons to Mollel. —Come, take a look. Tell me if our hunch was right.

Mollel takes the pathologist's small hand and steps down into the ditch. The steep concrete banks slope to a flat bottom about a metre wide, along which a further rill of just a few inches deep runs, to keep water flowing in dry times. There is barely a trickle now, despite the rains of some few hours earlier: such is Nairobi weather. Mollel places his feet either side of the body, which is laid on its side partially in the central rill, its spine curved into an impossible contortion: a non-recovery position.

She is wearing a flimsy dress, torn and blackened with mud, but expensive-looking nonetheless. It has ridden up above her waist. There is no underwear. Smears of blood and mud snake back across her thighs.

—You'll see that she has many wounds on the body, most of them consistent with a beating, says Achieng. But there appears to be considerable bleeding from between the legs. Have to turn her over in a moment to see more.

Mollel follows the line of the body's curvature; one arm unseen below the corpse, the other tossed upwards and above the head.

—Let me move this, says Achieng, lifting the arm. Are you ready to see the face?

Mollel nods. Achieng uses the arm to pull and pivot the corpse on to its back.

Mollel finds himself looking down at a young, oval face; the ashen greyness would have been a brilliant bluey dark in life. High cheekbones, high forehead. Noble. On either cheek, a small, low 'O' had been engraved, a long time since.

It is a familiar face. He does not recognise the person, but he knows the people: his own.

—Yes, she's Maasai, he says.

—Thought so. I'm not familiar with all tribal scars but those looked typically Maasai to me. Can you tell which clan?

—Not really. It's a commonplace enough marking. Could be from the west: Sikirari. Matapato. But I'm confused about the ears.

—The ears? I didn't see anything remarkable.

—Exactly. They should be looped, like mine. Probably pierced at the top, too. But look at her lobes. There's only a small hole, for fashion jewellery. She's got the cheek scars which are given at childhood, but not the ear loops, which Maasai girls get given at puberty. So it could be that she left her village before that time.

—Could be.

—No ID, I suppose?

—What you see, says Achieng, is what you get. Now, I want to move her, see if my suspicions are correct.

He beckons to a policeman near by, who joins them in the culvert. The pathologist motions for the policeman to grab the girl's ankles. Her lower body is still twisted, and with some difficulty, they straighten the legs.

A dismayed gasp goes up from the watching crowd.

—Oh, God, says Mollel.

He's seen plenty over the years. More dead bodies than he cares to think about. Blood, guts. But this is something else.

Achieng comes round to join him at the feet of the body.

—Vicious, he says. Looks like someone's taken a knife to her genitals. Brutally, too.

There is some commotion among the onlookers: someone has fainted.

—Get those people out of here! shouts Otieno. Even he, under his dark complexion, looks shocked. What do you think this is, a circus?

The uniformed policemen step forward and begin to disperse the crowd.

—Do you know anything about female circumcision, Mollel? asks Achieng, quietly.

—I know it's not like this, Mollel replies.

—Maybe not as brutal. But among Maasai, it means removal of the clitoris, doesn't it?

Mollel nods. —*E-muruata.* I've never seen it done, myself. Men are strictly forbidden from the ceremony. But yes, teenage girls have their clitoris removed, by a female elder. It's illegal now. But it still happens, of course.

—You say it's usually done at puberty? Like the ear loops?

—Yes.

—Maybe she never had it done as a girl, and someone was trying to put that right, mutters Otieno.

—I'll have to look more closely during the post-mortem examination. But it looks like that's what happened here. Certainly, no care was taken for the health of the patient. I'm pretty sure this is what killed her.

—Right, says Otieno. If you're done, Doctor, let's get this body taken to the City Mortuary. File it under *Unknown Maasai Prostitute*.

—What makes you think she was a prostitute? asks Mollel angrily.

—Be realistic, Mollel, replies Otieno. They always are.