

# Independence

by Kenny Mann

i. nusu-nusu

on a pleasant evening in february1954, my father, the late Dr. Igor Mann, called me into the dining room.

“Come, Iki,” he commanded in his thick Polish accent. “You will see something you must never forget.”

Two years earlier, we had moved to Nairobi from our modest cattle ranch at Athi River. Now, with Papa’s new appointment as Director of Veterinary Services at Kabete, we had been transported to the great city where Mama had designed a large, Spanish style house on Crawford Road (now Milimani Road). Here, my brother and I played in the eucalyptus forest in our back yard, where we imitated the heroes of European fairy tales. Lady Guenevere, Sleeping Beauty—we could have been in the Dark Ages in England—hardly in Africa.

By the time I was ten, I was allowed on Saturday mornings to walk down the road, past the pink Delamere Flats to “town,” or even to catch the Number 12 bus which dropped me off at the New Stanley Hotel, opposite the statue of Lord Delamere that commanded the view down his very own avenue. From there, it was a few steps to Deacons—the most fashionable store in the world, as far as I was concerned. Around the corner, I could order an ice-cream Parfait at the Penguin Café. Or I could spend my

pocket money at the fabulous Woolworths on the corner of Delamere (Kenyatta) Avenue and....Oh, the delights of that store! Miniature sewing kits! Tiny pocket mirrors! Paper tubes of powdered Sherbert, to be sucked up through a liqourice straw!

If I crossed the road to the old Torr’s Hotel, I could visit my grandmother who was the head baker at the Café Vienna, where she provided a gaggle of European cronies—refugees, drifters or business people who had settled in Kenya—with frothy Austrian *torte*. Best of all, though, were the flicks shown for children at the Odeon Cinema, opposite the old bus depot, where we jeered or laughed at Disney cartoons, Doris Day comedies, or cowboy and pirate flicks.

I felt very grown up. During the school term, I rode my bike a few miles to St. George’s Primary School at Kilimani . I had even been to Europe. So what could my father possibly show me on this day in February, 1954, that I had not already seen?

I followed him into the dining room. On the table lay a rifle. He picked it up and opened it, pointing out the empty cartridge case.

“I will be patrolling Crawford Road from 6 PM until 9 PM, “ he said sternly. You are not to leave the house for any reason because we have curfew. But I want you to know that I will never shoot anyone. Not a thief, not a murderer and not even a bloody Mau Mau! I am a pacifist! Understand?”

*Curfew? Pacifist?* I had no idea what he was talking about. But a cold chill traveled down my spine and fear entered my soul. Mau Mau. I had heard about them. Wild men who lived in the forest around Mount Kenya and made people take terrible oaths that had to do with blood and raw meat and things I did not understand. They killed white people and wanted to take the country away from us.

Now, I was sure, they had come to Nairobi to kill us. And if they did, Papa would not defend us! Mau Mau were Kikuyu. Our cook, Duncan, was Kikuyu.

For two or three years, fear of Mau Mau was a tangible entity for me, even though I came to understand their struggle better and to realize that my parents supported the battle for Kenya’s independence.

Nevertheless, rumours abounded at school of the “up-country” sisters whose parents had been buried alive by Mau Mau. The girls were sent off to England and never seen again. Duncan, the cook, was arrested on suspicion of being a Mau Mau collaborator. Papa promptly paid bail for him and he was cooking dinner as usual the very next day. *Was he a Mau Mau spy? Would he poison our food?*

By 1956, the Mau Mau “Emergency” was almost over. The British army had bombed the forest

hide-outs and in 1957, Dedan Kimathi was hanged. Papa had thrown out his rifle and life in Nairobi was on a tremulous upswing. Coffee-time at 4.30 PM every day at our house had become known as a meeting place for all manner of foreign aid individuals, diplomats, artists, writers, politicians, African and Asian friends, famous and infamous, known and unknown.

In our house there was no color bar and everyone was welcomed to a meal and a bed, if necessary. My parents were a charismatic couple, always plotting the next fun event. It might be dinner at the Pagoda—Cherry Blossom's Chinese restaurant, or a costumed arts ball which required weeks of preparation and attracted hundreds of guests to the rented hall. It might be a fund-raising walk for Freedom From Hunger, of which Papa was Chairman, or perhaps Mama would be sewing exquisite costumes for the puppets used in opera performances at the Nairobi Arboretum.

By the time I was 14, I was fully immersed in Nairobi's rich cultural life myself. I saw foreign movies at the Alliance Francaise and the Goethe Institute, and watched lengthy Indian films at the Shan Cinema, at the Thika Road junction. I was deeply involved in amateur drama at school, at the Donovan Maule or the National Theatre. I took piano and ballet lessons, participated in national competitions and sat for the English examinations. I spent hours at the MacMillan Memorial Library, reading or doing my homework, and spent many Saturday afternoons at the Nairobi Museum, poring over the insect collection and slightly revolted at the dusty stuffed animals.

Along with my sister, I now attended the all-white Kenya Girls High School, affectionately known as the "Heffer Boma" and ruled with an iron hand by the English head mistress, Ms. Stott.

Classes ended at 4 PM, after which there was "tea" and then obligatory sports. Dressed in cumbersome grey knee-length "shorts" I flailed my way around the hockey pitch or never shot a goal in netball. No, I was not athletic at all. My real interest was in boys.

My best friend Avril and I were always on the look-out for potential "boyfriends" and had also become intensely curious about Nairobi. Unbeknownst to our parents, we spent our weekends riding all over the city on our bikes. I could easily ride the ten miles to Avril's house on Brookside Drive, and together, we would set out for Nairobi Dam, off

Ngong Road, where I had a canoe and we could eye the school boys showing off their water skiing.

Up until then, our lives had been more or less restricted to Nairobi's "white" urban areas. Now we roamed down River Road, through Eastleigh and Mathari Valley, streaking through African slums with fear and amazement. *This* was how they lived? We free-wheeled through Parklands, staring into windows to glimpse Asian families at their meals. We circled the Khoja Mosque, lit up every night with thousands of bulbs. Amazing! Nairobi had *Muslims!* And we cruised slowly along Muthaiga Road, marveling at the mansions and lush gardens that bespoke the untold wealth of their white inhabitants.

We never did meet any boys, but we gradually realized that we had taken for granted or simply ignored the strange triad of Europeans, Asians and Africans living parallel but largely separate lives in this City in the Sun, as it was called. Our awakening was slow and confused. Why was it that the only Africans we "knew" were our servants, and even then, only by their first names? Why was it whispered that Harriet, a school-mate, was a "tramp" because she had been seen with an African boy? Why did we avoid the glances of Asian boys on the streets? Why was I so afraid of Victor, the "half-caste" boy who actually *talked* to me at the bus-stop—broke the unspoken taboo that divided us all?

These were vague questions, nagging at the back of my mind. But I had no answers and was hectically involved in being a teenager. I was an avid reader and loved the out-

door news stand near the Post Office, where one could buy almost any magazine or newspaper from almost anywhere in the world. *Time*, *Life*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *The London Times*—the world was at my finger-tips and I was hungry to explore it. I thrilled to the delights of Bazaar Road, where I bought silk stockings and fabrics that Vera Brablik tailored into pretty dresses. Mama bought me my first high-heeled shoes at the Italian shoe-store near the New Stanley Hotel. I soaked my net petticoats in starch to make them even fuller. I tried to straighten my unruly hair by ironing it.

I was mad for the BBC radio dramas broadcast from London. I was mad for the British Top Ten Pop Charts, broadcast by the British Forces Broadcasting Network in Nairobi every Friday night. And on Saturdays, I could rush down to Assanand's, the music store near the Kenya Cinema, to buy the latest hit by Connie Frances, the Everly Brothers, Helen Shapiro or Cliff Richard and the Shadows. And when—oh amazing bliss—The Shadows actually performed in Nairobi, my friends and

I thought that the three guitarists, singing their bland harmonies with a step forward, a step back, were the sexiest thing on this planet. From then on, our frequent Saturday night dances became raucous with rock 'n roll, the hand-jive, and the twist, our minds always tuned to the latest fad in England or America.

We spent our weekend afternoons flirting at the Nairobi Club swimming pool—unaware that this bastion of anti-Semitic British colonialism had refused my own father membership some years earlier. We went on safaris, camping in the bush where we were more familiar with the picturesque tribal people than with our African urban neighbors. But racial barriers in Nairobi were slowly crumbling. With some older boys, I began to frequent the forbidden Sombrero Club, near the Nairobi Market, where African and Asian youths hung about drinking Tusker Lager. We eyed each other curiously.

As a teenager I was oblivious to local politics, but even I could feel the rumblings that rocked Nairobi's party atmosphere in the years before Independence. Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga led rival political parties. Jomo Kenyatta had been released from prison. Duncan, our cook, told me that after Independence, my little Fiat 600 would be his. Every week, friends—including Avril—left Kenya for good, their families terrified of what they believed would be a blood-bath. Now our parties were to say farewell as boys and girls from the Duke Of York, the Prince Of Wales, St. Mary's, Loreto Convent, The Boma and other local high schools flew off from Embakasi Airport or boarded the train for Mombasa, heading for the ships that would take them "home" to England or away to South Africa and Australia. My parents—Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe—had firmly made Kenya their home and had no intention of leaving. I studied hard for my "O"-Levels and passed in 1962 with flying colors. Only two more years to the "A"-Levels, I thought, and I too would leave Kenya to join my friends in England.

On December 12, 1963, my family attended the Independence celebrations. There were very few other whites present. At midnight, the Duke of Edinburgh lowered the British flag and the Kenya flag was raised to a triumphant roar from a hundred thousand African throats. Just when we thought it was over, the last Mau Mau appeared in the floodlit arena—gaunt men with matted hair and ravaged bodies who had been living in the Mount Kenya forest for some ten years.

They laid down their arms before President Jomo Kenyatta. And with that gesture, I knew that I, too, was liberated. There was nothing more to fear. The Freedom Fighters had won and I was free to stay or to go, to leave or return. Kenya would find its own path, as I would mine.

## ii. baksheesh

Every day, I spend several hours at the YooKay Internet Café in Nairobi, which has now become my "office". The day comes when I cannot find my very expensive and much treasured little Sony flash drive. Could I have left it at the Café? I drive all the way back there, hoping to recover it but feeling unreasonably despondent. Of course, I will never see it again, someone will have picked it up and kept it—after all, this is Kenya, where the gap between rich and poor is considered the widest in the world and the black market for electronic gadgets lives and dies on stolen goods.

When I ask the manager—a pretty young Kenyan with long, braided hair—if anyone has handed in a USB flash-drive, she raises her eyebrows. "Sony?" she asks. My heart leaps. "Yes!"

I thank her profusely. It is a moment of triumph. After all, we are bludgeoned daily by one scandal after another—government corruption more treacherous with each passing day, daylight robbery an accepted fact of life—so I greet this simple, honest act with elation.

As I climb the stairs to my favorite place at the bar, where I can plug in my own computer and order a fresh passion fruit juice and a delicious vegetable *samosa*, I am nagged by a troubling thought. Should I have given the manager a *baksheesh*? It would certainly have been expected.

I am about to go downstairs with a five hundred shilling note clutched in my hand (about \$7.00) when I stop myself. Why should I pay someone for being honest? Why should this normal act of human kindness be rewarded with money?

I turn around and walk back upstairs. I need to think about this a little more.

Two days later, my sister and I are driving through Nairobi's notoriously crime-ridden center. We are headed for the Skylite Hotel—a four-story backstreet building in which a maze of tiny,

cell-like rooms has been converted into illegal shops where West African traders sell beads, carvings and curios. In the passenger seat, I swelter in the mid-day heat, but can only open the broken window a crack.

My sister's window is open about three inches. "Is your door locked?" she asks.

"Yes," I sigh, weary of all the precautions one must take before braving these teeming lanes. I have stowed my purse on the floor below my seat, but my sister wears a tiny pouch to hold her cell phone and watch. The pouch itself hangs well below sight, but its narrow strap hugs her shoulder, visible through her window.

As traffic slows to a crawl, we both leap in fright when a young man pounds his fist against my door and points down to the front tire. As our attention is thus diverted, a little boy thrusts his skinny arm through my sister's window, snatches at the tell-tale shoulder strap and darts off with the pouch. In seconds, the accomplices have vanished in the crowd.

"Goddamn!" my sister yells. "Goddamn it! That's the third time! Bloody hell!"

In my mind's eye, I see only the frantic, white-rimmed eyes of the older youth; the flashing black arm of the child, muscled, snake-like, the practiced strength with which he ripped the strap from my sister's shoulder.

"That really stinks," I offer.

"Oh well," my sister says, "already putting the experience behind her. "The mobile and the watch were both old and cheap—worthless, really—what's gone is gone."

She has already forgiven the thieves, for they are poorer than we and therefore their crime can be anticipated. In any case, we are *wazungu* (whites) in a black country—as Mama sometimes says, "the only drop of milk in the coffee"—so what else can we expect?

We are invited to a South African *brei*—a Sunday barbecue that traditionally starts at lunch time and continues until all hours. The hosts are Selma, a Danish woman employed at the Danish Embassy, and her South African friend, Celine. Ranita, a Kenya-born Hindi arrives, along with Alice, an American journalist.

We sit outdoors around the large wooden table. The air is fresh from the new rains, thick with the scent of Franji Pani. Pink petals from a soaring Bombax tree waltz down into our Shandies. We lounge about, languidly waiting for lamb and corn and sausages and butternut pumpkin to roast slowly over Celine's perfect coals.

"I just can't get my cook to learn anything new," she complains. "She does everything I tell her beautifully, but she has no initiative at all! I say, 'Here's the recipe book—now find all the recipes for pork and choose one that you would like to cook and tell me what I need to buy for it.' he looks at me blankly and it's just hopeless."

"I know!" exclaims Ranita. "We have the same problem at home. Mother has to do all the cooking because Joseph only knows *posho* (corn meal) and *sukuma weeki* (kale). It's not just that they won't learn new dishes—they won't even try any new foods. What kind of mentality is that, I ask you?"

"Maybe a form of rebellion?" I suggest. "Or maybe they are content with a very limited diet and think we are crazy—always worrying about new foods."

"Oh, nonsense!" Ranita shouts. "Come on! They are employed like anyone else—they should have more pride and interest in their jobs."

"Absolutely," my sister agrees. "They're lucky to have those jobs—we take care of them as though they were our own children. Without us, they would be starving on their *shambas* or living in some Nairobi slum on ten shillings a day, or losing their goats to the drought in the north."

"Yes," I agree. "We have worked out a perfect system of bondage."

I am uncomfortable in this exchange, containing its own truth yet rife with echoes of old Colonialism in every sentence. Alice has been listening quietly all the while.

"I was recently in Mali," she says, "being shown around a new development project. We were in a small village and invited to remain until dark. With great pomp and ceremony, the village chief plugged a cable into an electric socket and one naked bulb lit up. Everyone applauded madly and drank beer in celebration and made endless speeches about this wonderful achievement." Susan runs her hand through her short, grey-blonde hair. "But I was disgusted!" she continues.

"What do you mean, great achievement?" I asked. "You're raving over one light bulb? You should be ashamed of yourselves! Come on! You've had forty years of development aid—you should have had the whole village lit up by now."

There is general agreement.

“You know,” Selma muses, her chunky body hunched over the table to emphasize her words, “In Denmark, we have to give 1.7% of our gross national product to aid for developing countries.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because we feel guilty, and we feel that we are obligated to help these poorer countries,” she replies.

“But isn’t that the root of the problem?” I ask. “Why do you feel obligated? Especially Danes—you hardly had any colonies—what do Danes have to do with African development?”

“Well, we are altruistic,” Selma replies, “and we can afford it. And of course, there are pay-offs in trade relations.” However, she points out, the Kenya government recently passed a new law. The country is swarming with NGO’s (non-governmental organizations) for everything from AIDS education to drought relief. Whereas such NGO’s could previously administer and allocate their own funds, the new law dictates that such funds must first pass through a government agency, which also controls their allocation. Needless to say, very little money is actually passed on to the intended recipients and the Danish government has drastically reduced its funding to Kenya.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Celine says. “Let all these people just clear out and let Kenyans get on with it. They don’t need us any more! It’s been forty-three years since Independence!”

“Ah no—we Hindis who live here need this!” Ranita exclaims. “You see, we are totally involved in developing our karma and gaining good points for *darma*—so we give, but it is totally selfish. I am telling you, worrying about our karmic points really keeps us on the straight and narrow!”

In India, Ranita explains, the thriving economy is fueled by young Indians who have been educated abroad—primarily in Silicone Valley—and who return much richer than when they left. “They pour their money into schools, community projects, micro-finance—they come back and want to give to their country and also to do good *darma*. Here in Kenya, the Africans do not have a sense of country—it is all about the self, and the family—it never goes beyond that. And of course,” she adds, “there are powerful interests that have no intention of allowing Kenya to ‘develop.’”

My sister relates her newest chunk of gossip. The film *The Constant Gardener*, which was shot in Kenya, has just been released here. The English musician who composed the score for it has been given twenty-four hours to leave the country. “The government didn’t like the film,” my sister says. “It came too close to the bone, so they are deporting anyone who was associated with it. This composer is married to a Kenyan, has three children and supports twenty-seven others,” she says, “but the government wants him out.”

“No, that’s not it,” Ranita says. “You can bet that some politician covets that bit of business, wants to buy into it, so they have to remove the competition. Look—they tried to shut down the Nakumat chain of supermarkets, which are Indian-owned, for the same reason. Somebody wants that chunk of the pie, that’s all.”

Overhead, the sky has clouded over. A brisk breeze sets up a susurrus rustle in a pepper tree. Any moment now, it will pour. The party is over. On the way home, my sister and I drive along Spring Valley Road. Tall acacia trees lean forward, their yellow trunks forming a luminous tunnel through which we pass. As the first heavy drops fall, red dust spatters up in tiny ferrous discs.

My sister’s cell phone rings. It is Lkaitasian, a Samburu friend who has helped her with her safaris in the north. His fourteen-year-old niece is in Kenyatta Hospital, awaiting heart surgery, and he needs more money from my sister to buy food for her, since the hospital does not provide any.

My sister agrees to meet him the next day, but as she ends the conversation, her shoulders sink and she is almost in tears. “I just can’t handle it any more,” she says. She has already given Lkaitasian some forty thousand shillings (about \$500) – a vast fortune in this country, and spent hours on the phone trying to raise funds for the surgery. Last week, her maid’s mother died and she had to provide the bus fare and part of the funeral expenses. In the same week, her gardener Silvano had to attend a court case involving a dispute over his land. My sister pays his bus fare every time he travels the five hundred miles home, and gives him money for food. She pays the lawyer. She bribes the authorities for him. And because she has helped these members of her staff, she will have to

help Koske , her Samburu watchman whose goats were stolen by the Pokot. My sister has a hard time making a living herself, but the financial support of one's staff is an unwritten rule. They are indeed "family."

At home, slightly bored, we spin through Kenya's five TV channels, hoping perhaps for a bad movie—or even a good one. The hot news today is that about four billion dollars worth of cocaine—which had been captured as it was smuggled into Kenya—have been officially destroyed. We see shots of the flames leaping from an iron furnace, masked men throwing in the half-pound plastic bags, happy politicians. Thick clouds of black smoke escape the incinerator's chimney. The newscaster announces that a judge has officially declared the removal of the cocaine to be complete—but that incidentally, half of the stash, which had been in storage for about four years, seems to be missing. "Of course!" we crow in unison. We have been following the decidedly weird story of two Armenians who were recently arrested in Kenya.

They appeared on television, wearing sunglasses and prominent gold crosses around their necks, and were at first accused of being mercenaries, but their story was that they were "just the accountants" in a business deal for the wife of a very prominent government official. They had no idea, they claimed, what was being traded—they simply handled the money. According to my sister's undisclosed sources, the Armenians were indeed the conduits for the drug deal, and the missing half had been secretly collected by none other than the politician's wife. A week after their arrest, the Armenians were spirited out of the country, never to be seen again. Could it be that there was a pay-off somewhere in this story?

It seems that anyone can be bought.

The next time I go to the YooKay Internet Café, a young man approaches me. "Me, it is I who found your flash drive," he says. He smiles disarmingly, clearly waiting for his *baksheesh*.

"Thank you so much!" I say. "That was such a kind thing to do. I really appreciate it. Thank you, thank you!"

I turn back to my work. No *baksheesh*.