

One

I know what did it. You can't go trying to work out what music is, and what Africa is, and how they fit together, and all the time you're playing late night gigs and snatching junk snacks, so you end up crying with it all, unseen tears that block your chest then drop like poison into your guts – you can't do all that and get away with it.

So I was in hospital, and every day I didn't eat I got thinner. And every day I crapped that terrible diarrhoea I got thinner.

So there I was in the men's ward – I wasn't too bad at this stage, I hadn't got round to chatting with death and saying it's okay by me – but I was lying there when along came two angels.

I saw them enter the ward, two pretty black girls, and they stood by the cubicles and curtains, looking round. Two orderlies got in the way, helping an old guy with a wheelchair. A nurse walked in front straightening her tunic. Then the way was clear and they saw I was alone.

'Do you mind if we talk to you?'

I didn't mind. Half of Nairobi seemed like it was walking through the ward that night, peeling off to this bed and that bed.

Anyway being the only white guy in the place was getting to me – everyone speaking Swahili, except the odd Indian patient with his twenty visitors, and they'd be talking Gujarati. I mean, the Africans here do talk English, but for most it's not their best language.

And then you get the mamas, and mamas' sisters, and mamas' cousins all sitting on the windowseat with nothing better to do than stare at the muzungu – that means white guy – and they're all thinking, 'Hey, a muzungu being ill: I wonder if he'll put on a good display of being ill if we stare hard enough.'

So I didn't mind two angels talking to me, and when they asked about my illness I didn't say 'Being too visible' but answered 'Ulcerative colitis.'

I thought I'd better explain this, so I told them it's a sneaky illness that goes on holiday for two or three years at a time, then it comes back and it hits you, bam, and the medicines don't work any more, and food doesn't work too good either, so you think you may as well check how a Kenyan hospital looks.

Now, I could still show interest at this stage, so I asked about them. They said they were Christians and they were visiting some crash victim in another ward ('Didn't you hear about it, that horrible Matatu crash?') Then for a moment I went into a sort of trance, reminding myself about the outside world. I pictured the matatus – homemade minibuses, like converted vans, rainbow-painted, passengers crammed through the back doors and driven like they were late for a fatal accident.

Well, the prettier girl, she sort of bent and looked at me. I think my trance caught her curiosity. 'And you,' she asked, 'what things do you do?'

I liked that, I liked her interest. 'I think about matatus,' I told her.

And I saw her smile. It was one of those horizontal ones, like it was painful to pull it so wide, crammed with teeth and stretching from jaw to jaw. 'I mean what sort of work do you do?'

And I saw her eyes, deep brown, but bright, too bright, like she was too alive for her body.

So I forgot about the hospital and my drip feed and the visitors in the nearby cube praying for their relative as though God was deaf and not really concentrating. And I focused on her, and I thought maybe she wasn't just pretty, maybe she was even beautiful. 'I'm a musician,' I said. 'I play keyboards and sing in a band. Maybe you've heard of us – Black Notes And White Notes? We play hotels, night clubs.'

Then – I don't know why I said it, it must have been those unnaturally bright eyes, those crazy eyes that could catch crazy words and live with them – but I told her 'I follow melodies. I chase the melodies you know, I don't play them. They just happen because I'm able to follow and find out what they are. And one of the guys, Mwangi, he's like my brother, he always gets what I'm doing. We both play keyboards, and he's black and I'm white, like the band's name. So the people listen to us swopping phrases and think we're really cute.'

And the other girl, the one who was only ordinary pretty, she stared like I was talking some sort of Swahili no one had heard before. But the really pretty one, the maybe beautiful one, she got it. She was like Mwangi, she knew what I was saying.

So I told them to sit on the bed, and I levered myself up to perch higher, because I was getting a good feeling from these girls. And I looked beyond my curtains at the Indian guy with the twenty saris round him, and the mad alcoholic guy with the three visitors all mugging God with prayer, and I felt I'd got the best deal.

That stuff about following melodies I really believe it, and right now I was picking up the music of these two girls. I was there with the flow of it. 'You're Christians,' I said. 'How did you get into that?' Don't ask me why I said it. Normally I avoid scriptural salespeople, but right now the melody was saying ask them, so I asked.

So the maybe beautiful one, she started. Her eyes popped a bit, like she was working extra ideas into them. 'You're going to think I'm mad,' she said, and then her eyes didn't just pop, they exploded. A brightness flashed from them. 'Perhaps I was. Do you know what I did? One day at school I stopped talking. I wouldn't speak. I wouldn't move. They sent everyone to see me, but I didn't respond.'

And I could see those teeth of hers, flashing, flashing as she gave the story to me.

‘I used to be so popular because I led the other girls in all sorts of trouble. But they couldn’t follow me into this one. Do you know, my relatives had to come for me in a car and drive me home. But no one could get me to talk. They all decided I must be going mad.’

I could see her slender figure, animated with the story. She was a child woman, spiritually slim.

‘But you know how it is? Once you have out yourself into a silence it is so hard to come out again. I felt as if there was no point. Do you know, it was a whole year before I could go back to school.’

And I saw the roundness of her chest and felt comforted to know she wasn’t all slim.

‘But now I had put myself in another world, and suddenly I’d know there was someone behind me. I would be walking along the street, and I’d turn and there was a warrior from the old days, dressed in feathers and cowhide and he’d be waving a panga at me, one of those sword things for cutting bushes. The city would go away and I’d be running, running over grass and past bushes, and he would chase after me waving the panga. Then at some point I’d black out. I might wake to find myself lying on the pavement or I might be in the road with a matatu pulling on its brakes to avoid me.’

She stopped for a moment, and I think by this stage I was already in love with her. I sat there on the hard hospital bed with the pillows propped against my back – and it seemed like she was the melody I’d always been chasing. I sat there in my brown hospital robe – and it seemed she could show me what was wrong with the universe. The world, I felt, was a beautiful woman chased by a madman waving a panga. I could follow the music of it. She was the suffering of creation.

Then she told me about becoming a Christian, but I didn’t listen so close. I knew what it would do for her just like I can feel a routine tune beneath my fingers. It would keep the

maniac at bay. It would stop her going mad. I knew that, but it wasn't the deepest music. It didn't tell me why the maniac was there.

Anyway, the other girl told her story next and it was very good, very Kenyan. Father had left home and mother had eight children and they had to be fed and schooled, so she was like a second parent earning money for them. It was a good story and she was good girl, and the more I studied her the more she looked good too. But she didn't catch me with the note of tragedy. I didn't hear the music of the spheres with her, all bent out of shape, and sobbing, sobbing for what it was and what it might be. She'd set some other man on fire, but not me.

Visiting time was coming to a close. The malaria case in the next cubicle had got up carrying his drip feed bottle with him. He looked excellently dazed and a nurse came and asked him what he was doing.

Then I did something weird. I took both girls by the hands and said I wanted to pray with them. Really, that's what I said. But you see, I've found I can get truly high just murmuring nonsense – no words or anything. It works, honest it does. So I held them and mumbled the stuff and – I mean I'm a musician, so I could do it – I started singing it as well. It was gibberish I guess but it came out slow and gentle. And it did the job because I felt really close to them.

Well, the ordinary girl, she thought I was praying in tongues so she was just delighted. And the other one, my maybe beautiful one, what did she think with her crazy eyes and smile so wide it hurt? I think she sensed what was really going on.

That's when I think I hooked her. She realised I could fly just as crazy as she could, and I saw a kind of awe on her face. She never thought it would happen.

Then it was leaving time and a nurse was going to the guy in the opposite cubicle. She had her flute box with her, but it didn't have a flute, it had a pressure gauge. And her mini piccolo was really a thermometer.

So I got the girls to write down their names and contacts, and my crazy amazing one was Teresia Njeru. I liked that – Teresia. Then they were gone.

Well, they visited a few times after that, and once when Teresia came on her own our lips didn't say much but our eyes talked enough. Then there was a gap in time while they had some church business, and in that time I got discharged.

I wanted to call the girls, but I thought I'd better get some strength back first. That didn't happen, though. I got worse and had to come back in.

So as I took the long slow dive towards the mortuary they couldn't visit me any more because they didn't know where I was. There came a time when the surgeon looked quiet and reckoned he'd have to attack me with his panga next day. I lay there. All that existed were my eyes and pain. Then I slid my look sideways, and there was Teresia.