



About the Author

Originally from East Lothian, Scotland, Graeme is married to Candy, his childhood sweetheart. They both work as general managers of a luxury safari lodge in Amboseli, Kenya, and when not working, live in Morbihan, France. They have two sons; the elder, Kris, lives in Shanghai with his wife Kirsty, and daughter Matilda (Tilly), and the younger, Sean, lives in South Korea with his girlfriend Gigi. Graeme loves living and working in Kenya and is heavily involved in the local Maasai community. He has helped raise thousands of dollars to build and extend the village school.

Don't Shake the Mango Tree
Tales of a Scottish Maasai

Graeme Forbes-Smith

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This is a work of fiction.
Names, characters, places and incidents originate from the writer's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Candy, who has shared my life through all of the trials and tribulations life has thrown at us, and helped me at every turn, to laugh, see the bright side, and continue to play the game.

The book is also dedicated to my childhood friend, Gordon King, with whom I shared many of the adventures depicted within this book, who sadly passed away three months after our arrival in Tanzania, and was the inspiration for me to begin this tale.

I also cannot fail to mention, John Simonson, and his wife, Annette, and their family, who made us feel instantly welcome on our arrival on Ushongo Beach. John appears in a number of different guises throughout the book, and as an inspiration for several characters within the book. He tragically passed away from Covid during 2021, and is very sadly missed.

The night before we departed Edinburgh for Tanzania, we enjoyed dinner with two great friends, Alan and Jeannie Raynor, who presented us with a beautiful leather-bound book. On opening the book, I remarked, "Thanks, but it is empty?" To which Jeannie replied, "That is because tomorrow is the

first blank page of a story which is waiting to be told, and we know you will fill it.”

Be careful what you wish for.

Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to write this book if Candy had not joined me on our life's great adventures. Nor, if I was not encouraged at every turn by my sons, Kris and Sean, and certainly not had I not been nagged and pushed every step of the way by Sandy and Peter Williams, and Jan and Tom Coffey, all the way from California! Of course, I am also deeply grateful to the people of East Africa, and the Maasai community, that I am humbled to be a very small part of.

CHAPTER 1

GORDON'S LAST SAFARI

We transplanted Scots have gathered together more by accident than by design. Gordon is working, helping to build a communal farm. My wife Candy and I are hiding out from the economic disaster that had hit the UK economy. Brian is visiting his old pals on holiday. The rest of the guys are just here because they love the fun. And we're having a lot of fun.

Valentine's Bar, in downtown Pangani on the northeast coast of Tanzania, is having its first-ever Scottish farewell party. It's just that nobody knows it yet.

Rasta Ali, Bariki, Stanley from Immigration, Hothot, Zainaboo and many other bemused locals join in at the bar as the Kilimanjaro beers and Konyagi disappear, another round arriving on cue. It isn't long before a change of venue is called for, and we all move on to the nearby Shimonie bar—on foot, by car, by *pikipiki* motorbike. Later, as dusk falls, by ferry and by car we decamp again, this time to the Jahazi in Mwera Village. Eventually, the dwindling assortment of Scotsmen and native Tanzanians, by then fairly inebriated, assembles at Kwa Graeme and Candy—our home on Ushongo Beach—where we all gather on the terrace, laughing still and drinking still until the sun rises over distant Zanzibar, and we each finally head to our various beds. It would be a night to remember.

In the late morning and with little sleep, Brian and I head to Mwera to service my pick-up, while Candy and Gordon are

back on the terrace, sipping coffee and enjoying recollections of last night's hilarity. The morning wears on, and Gordon rises. He asks to borrow a book, which Candy promptly produces, and he heads off with a wave and a grin on the short walk along the beach to the Beachcomber bar, to visit his old friends, Tony and Faithfully.

At around noon, Brian and I return home and, together with Candy, decide to have lunch at the Beach Crab. As we pose for Brian in the garden for some holiday snaps, the ocean a stunning backdrop, the air hot and clear, the day a perfect ten, the phone rings.

"Graeme, please come quick; Gordon is sick!" Faithfully screams in my ear.

I turn to Brian and Candy and say, "Just carry on without me. I'll sort this out." Too many beers last night, I assume.

I drive the two minutes to the Beachcomber, park the pick-up, and smile as I spot Faithfully waiting in the drive. *Habari asubuhi* dies on my lips, however, as I approach close enough to see her face.

Gordon lies flat-out on the sofa, facing the sea, his favourite view. Tony is giving him mouth-to-mouth, and Rashidi pumps his heart. Gordon is grey beneath his tanned face. This is no hangover.

Clearly, he needs more help than we can give, so we drag him into the back seat of my double-cab pick-up, Tony on top of him, still doing mouth-to-mouth. Mohammed, the young barman, jumps into the bed of the pick-up, and I see the waitress, Cecilia, toss a small towel to him. She knows. The rest of us don't.

On the gravel road leading to the clinic in nearby Mwera, I pull a four-wheel skid at the corner by the mango tree, where

school kids spend their afternoons throwing sticks to dislodge the fruit. They stare in wonder at another crazy *mzungu*, whose wheels screech as the truck just clears the tree. My heart is pounding in my chest.

As we cross the small bridge over a little stream, Tony shouts, “He’s not breathing!”

I reach over the passenger seat, and with my left hand I do my best to pump his heart while driving with my right. Tony continues mouth-to-mouth. I can hear each breath as he sucks in air, a rhythm which seems to run counterpoint to my own heartbeat.

We reach the clinic in record time, but time has run out for Gordon. One look, and the doctor shakes her head sadly.

“*Pole sana*—sorry—your friend is dead.”

No oxygen. No hasty shot of adrenaline. Nothing. Just dead. Tony and I slump to the ground. Mohammed reverently places the small towel Cecilia had given him over Gordon’s face. Tears streak his cheeks, and he leans his head against the car. Nothing has prepared him, or any of us, for this.

Minutes pass. It must be longer, but eventually I push Gordon’s legs back into the car and close the door. We begin the drive to the hospital in Pangani in silence. In Africa, you don’t call for an ambulance. In most places, there isn’t one. Family or friends are responsible for the remains of their lost loved ones.

Everyone at the ferry already knows. I don’t know how, but they do. In Africa, news travels fast. On the ferry, almost everyone stops to say, “*Pole sana*—we are sorry.” We drive the short distance to the hospital, and already a group has gathered: Ali, Bariki, Stanley, Hothot. They are distraught. I don’t know what to say to them. Slowly, the numbers rise.

Candy, Brian, Faithfully, Mike, Darko, Eyal. They all arrive.

The formalities don't take long. The doctor asks me how he died.

In a daze I mumble, "Heart attack, I think." The typewriter taps out the result of my first autopsy. I am astonished to discover that the hospital has no morgue.

Once again, I am carrying Gordon, his old friends helping. We bring him back out to the car park and we load his body into a *dala dala* for the trip to the morgue in Tanga, sixty kilometres away. I can't do it, so I pay the attendant to wash and clean his body. Numbed by the trivia we cling to, I empty his pockets: some cash, a cell phone, keys, a last bar bill (unpaid), cigarettes.

I return the next day to officially identify the remains. Naturally, there is no electricity, so the body has already started to decompose. Ninety degrees and no freezer facility. This is no way to store a corpse, I think, especially the corpse of a lifelong friend. I phone our embassy for help, and wish I hadn't. It appears that we're on our own.

I phone the family back home. I buy a coffin, a shroud, some perfume. We dig a grave in the red African soil. We arrange for a priest. Each friend, unasked, does his bit to help. This is Africa.

The night before the burial, we get a call. The villagers are holding a vigil. Gordon's son and sister have arrived from

Scotland, and together we drive to the village. We discover the street outside his favourite bar, the Jahazi, blocked off, an awning erected, and over fifty villagers sitting on the ground or on plastic chairs, singing hymns in their uniquely beautiful, rhythmic, melodic way. We stand in silent gratitude. Awe. Gordon's son finally says that this is perhaps the happiest day of his life, a comment which one day we might think odd, but which at this moment seems just right. The hymns go on and on. The deep, haunting African baritones and harmonies make the hair on my neck rise, bring goose bumps, sting my eyes. I have no words. Well after midnight, we go home. The villagers don't; they stay there all night. It is their custom.

We return early, 7 a.m. By now there are almost three hundred people gathered, still singing. They have covered the street in petals and flowers. Six cows have been slaughtered. In huge vats, rice simmers. I feel humbled. Everyone who sees me hugs me, muttering, "*Tupa pamoja*—we are together." I can barely speak.

The coffin arrives in a *dala dala* from Tanga. Accompanying it are: the ever-dependable Rashid; Rasta Ali; Stanley, the immigration official; Bariki, his massive Masai friend; Hamesi; and Nixon. They have all spent the night with Gordon in the morgue, dressed his body, and placed him in his coffin. Even Urse, a young Swiss tourist we had befriended, is there. He had come to photograph wildlife, and is now asked instead to video a funeral.

Each of them hugs me, but none can speak. The coffin is placed on a table in the middle of the street. We pray and sing a hymn. People toss flowers on the coffin. Ali Mohammed, the chief of police, helps to carry the coffin to the police pick-up that today does double-duty as a hearse: an ironic tribute.

Everyone follows the pick-up through the village, past the mango trees, to the graveside.

The grave is very deep. Gordon will lie forever in a stand of flame trees, surrounded by coconut palms and stately mango trees, on a hill looking down to the Indian Ocean. I have seen worse places. The stand is packed with over three hundred mourners. We all join in the beautiful, haunting Swahili hymn, *How Great Thou Art*.

Each close friend takes his turn to shovel the rich African soil into the grave. The red dust blows gently over us all as we stand, a moment in perfect silence. I stutter a few inadequate words, but remember to say, “*Tupa pamoja*,” which is greeted with murmurs of approval by the locals.

In silence again, we walk together back through the trees to the village, where we all eat in the open air outside the Jahazi, the wind blowing the last of the petals gently down the dusty street. Tony stands and says a few words, ending with, “Gordon came to Africa to visit me, but stayed so long because of all of you.” Fitting words. Probably the most fitting of the entire day.

Without a conscious plan, Gordon’s closest friends start to leave, by jeep, pick-up and *pikipiki*, all heading to the Beachcomber. We gather in the beachfront bar and sit quietly sipping our drinks, very aware that this was where it ended.

Tony starts slowly strumming a guitar. After a short while, Jeff joins in with another. Rashid gathers up a *ngoma* and launches into a compelling, repetitive slow beat. Stanley joins him with another drum. Hamesi picks up the same rhythm on a wooden xylophone. More drums appear and join in. The beat gets stronger and stronger. Soda bottles are stroked with kitchen knives, adding to the rising, insistent cadence. Mike

adds bass on a didgeridoo, the women begin clapping along, and still others pound the tables in time with this wondrous African rhythm. I find myself on my feet. I raise my glass and shout, "To Gordon!" The music abruptly halts as everyone leaps to their feet, echoing my toast, glasses in hand. The spell is broken; we collapse into our seats talking and laughing.

The mourning is over.

Old Mohammed, the fisherman, takes me gently by the arm, leads me outside, and in halting English and Kiswahili tells me that I am not to be sad any more. Life, he says, is like the mango tree. When each fruit becomes ripe, in its time, it falls from the tree. Just like us.

I sit alone and stare out at the red, sharp disc of the sun, setting slowly over the wild African bush, and wish somebody would stop those kids from throwing their sticks so hard at the mango tree.