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Husband Hunting in Africa

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The equator runs across these highlands . . . and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. —Isak Dinesen, Out of Africa.

It is difficult for me to relate to Isak Dinesen's experience. New York Jewish women do not live on farms in Africa. I will never reside at the foot of the Ngong hills. I merely met an African supernatural potential husband named Ndugu. I feel much more at home on a starship with my clones than on a farm. Isak Dinesen, a non-Jewish writer incarnate, did not begat moi, that is to say Shira Schwartz.

The phone in my Forest Hills, Queens apartment rang. "Hello. Professor Schwartz?" inquired a woman with an unmistakably South African accent. "I'm Carrie Veldt from the University of Cape Town. The South African government has given me a travel grant to interview American science fiction writers and critics. May I meet you next week when I'm in New York?"

"Thursday at three in the Museum of Modern Art would be great. I'll be in front of Monet's "Water Lilies." The painting takes up the entire wall. You can't miss it."

At the appointed time, I was greeted by a pleasant looking red haired thirty-five year old.

"I have never been to South Africa. Is there any chance I could come as a guest professor?" I asked Carrie. I know that this inquiry seemed sudden. But I could never pass up an opportunity to use academe as an access ticket for international travel adventure.

"I admire your contributions to feminist science fiction scholarship, Shira. So this is most certainly not an interview. I just want to get to know you as a colleague and eventually as a friend. I'll be happy immediately to propose the guest professor idea to my department head, Gavin Gavinbach. Cape Town is gorgeous and our department includes André Brink and J. M. Coetzee. We can camp out in a game preserve."

"Sounds good—although I'm not sure if I'm the game preserve type. I do know not to get out of the car to take pictures of cute lions. Just out of curiosity, what happens to tourists who are not equally enlightened?"

"They become lion lunch."

"Is Gavin Gavinbach single?"

"Absolutely."

"If he approves my guest professorship, ask if he would like to join me for lunch immediately upon my arrival." No hungry hunting lion could better discern a potential lunch quarry than me, a husband hunter par excellence.

“Sure thing. Hope to see you soon in Cape Town.”

Carrie communicated Gavin’s invitation. I boarded a thirteen hour flight to Johannesburg. My itinerary called for changing planes there before going to Cape Town where Gavin would meet me. When I took my assigned seat, I was reassured to see that the man sitting next to me looked innocuous. I did not want to endure a pesty nut for thirteen hours.

“What are you going to do in South Africa?” the man asked.

“Teach. And you?”

“I’m going to hunt. I hunt to take a vacation from my dental practice,” he said as I masked my disgust.

“Oh? What kind of animals do you bag?”

“Lions. I shot a big one named Cecil.”

It was time for me to adjust the parameters of the conversation to suit my particular hunting quarry. “For years and without success I have pursued animals of the two legged male variety. My quarry is elusive: single men who want to marry me. I think they’re on the endangered species list.”

Feeling sorry for the animals this hunter would slaughter, I decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. I turned him into fair game quarry.

“Are you married? Are you Jewish?” I did not expect his answer to the latter question to be affirmative. Jewish men do not travel to South Africa to hunt. “I must excuse myself. Lions and tigers and bears, you know. Oh my.”

I scanned the crowded plane to look for a vacant seat and made my way toward one located about fifteen rows ahead. A forty-something black man attired in native garb sat next to the vacant seat.

“May I sit here?” I asked.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Hi. I’m Shira.”

“My name is Ndugu.”

“Are these long thin items yours? Are they ski poles?”

“I am from the west African coast. My desert home does not lend itself to skiing. You refer to my ceremonial spears. As the chief of my tribe and a witch doctor, I never leave home without them.”

“How did you get your spears past security?”

“Easy. I turned them into snakes.”

“Snakes? Tell me more about your magic poles.”

“After stowing the snakes in the overhead compartment, I changed them back into spears. The airline allows two pets per flight. I simply made an advance reservation for two snakes. Do you find my story hard to believe?”

“Absolutely not. I’m a science fiction critic. Spears which you turned into snakes? No sweat. When I spent a Fulbright year in Germany, I brought my cat along on a Lufthansa flight. I married the cat soon after my extraterrestrial clones turned him into a human male. They changed him back into a cat, though. I need to find a real human husband. The cat is now in my clones’ starship with my talking horse.”

Ndugu and I spent hours discussing how real magic realism impacts upon our lives. I was even on the verge of offering to introduce him to the Shira clones and my sexy male vampire friend Ilya. But the conversation stopped when we approached Ile de La Sol, the flight’s first stop in Africa. Ndugu became tense.

“Shira, I’m leaving the plane in Ile de La Sol. I don’t want to leave you. Will you marry me?”

“What? Hold that thought.” I picked up the in-flight phone and called my mother. “Hello mother. You will never guess what.”

“You’re so ungrateful Shira. I looked away when you married that cat. I’ve had enough with animals ever since you inflicted that talking horse on me and your father.”

“A man asked me to marry him.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a chief, a witch doctor, and a spear carrier.”

“You’re marrying a doctor? Or a Hollywood studio head who casts himself as an extra. Wonderful. Before I close my eyes forever, I will be able to bring your Hollywood or doctor husband to the beach club.

“You’re jumping the gun,” I said with the hunter in mind. “Ndugu is a real witch doctor and he does in fact carry a spear. His spear is not always what it appears to be, though.”

“In your life nothing is what it appears to be. Just get married. Is there a rabbi on the plane? If not, the Captain can marry you. Ndugu? Did I hear you say Ndugu? Is Ndugu Jewish?”

“Ndugu is black.”

I heard a thunk. The sound unmistakably emanated from a one hundred thirty pound woman fainting on carpet covered with protective plastic runners. I returned the phone to its proper resting place. Ndugu showed no sign of deviating from wife hunting.

“We can journey together down an African river on a raft. You can establish a farm. I am a rich man. In exchange for your hand, I can give your family many cows.”

“My parents are still ‘plotzing’ from when I housed my talking horse on their terrace. After that experience, the landlord made them sign a lease which specifically bars hooved animals. I am unable to house cows. I can’t marry you. I have to meet my department head in Cape Town.”

“I can offer you your own hut in the center of my village. You can be friends with my four other wives.”

“Jewish women from Forest Hills do not live in huts. And, as for my being friends with your wives, sisterhood is just not that powerful. Please know that I am very sorry about declining your generous offer. My decision stands. There is no procedural irregularity.”

The plane landed in Ile de La Sol. Ndugu removed his snakes from the overhead compartment. They hissed at me. He looked crestfallen as he exited the plane. I flew on to Johannesburg.

When I boarded my connecting flight to Cape Town, I was surrounded by Afrikaner men—giant boisterous specimen of exaggerated masculinity who ooze excess testosterone.

“This flight has open seating. May I sit next to you?” I asked one incredible hulk. By any chance do you have a wife who resides in a hut?”

“No. Afrikaner women from Cape Town do not live in huts.”

The plane landed and I nervously prepared to meet Gavin Gavinbach. While scanning the crowd, I noticed a good looking middle-aged man holding a sign which read “Welcome Shira.” The sign holder of course could be none other than Gavin. He turned out to be a very business-like man. Although he was quite attractive and I would have welcomed the opportunity to date him, nothing other than professional discourse ever transpired between us. I was not prepared for the fact that he wore a khaki shirt, khaki shorts, and a pith helmet. Gavin, in other words, resembled a refugee from an Abercrombie & Fitch ad.

“Hello Gavin. I’m Shira. Thank you for inviting me.”

“Welcome. Let’s get your stuff and I’ll drive you to your apartment.”

Gavin removed his pith helmet upon our arrival at a pleasant university residence. I looked out of the living room window and saw some brown blobs on a distant hill.

“Wow, the dots on the hill must be cows.”

“I’m afraid not. You’re looking at wildebeest.”

“Wildebeest? I’m living with a direct view of wildebeest? Do wildebeest moo and make noise at night? Are wildebeest carnivores? Are wildebeest kosher? These window screens are very flimsy and they contain big holes. There are potential carnivores out there and I have holes in my screens. I knew that when I came to Africa I would encounter Woody Allen’s worst nightmare: blades of grass growing far from a subway station. But I never expected to endure having hole sodden screens serving as the only thing separating me from a carnivore infested hill. Why doesn’t the university call the exterminator?”

“Calm down Shira. Wildebeest are not carnivores. Wildebeest are kosher. Wildebeest live peacefully on university property.”

“What a relief. Mosquitoes are the only things threatening to eat me I’ve ever faced.”

My time in Cape Town progressed rapidly. Before I knew it, I was preparing to return home to Forest Hills. After handing in my grades, I packed my belongings and, while doing so, located my magic red clogs. I tapped them together. Smoke engulfed my university housing residence. The wildebeest quizzically scented the air as the smoke exited through the window screen holes and wafted towards them.

“You rang, dearest S?” asked my trusty friend Ilya the vampire.

“Yes. Before you return to your creepy castle, please zap me back to Forest Hills. I just can’t face another thirteen hour flight. Especially after dealing with the men I met when I flew here in the usual way.”

“Of course. No problem. You know the zap flight procedure by now.”

I put on the magic red clogs and tapped them together. I immediately found myself sitting on my Forest Hills apartment couch. I smelled a musty vaguely horse-ish odor. I saw a wildebeest calmly munching on a head of iceberg lettuce. At least, since wildebeest are not carnivorous, this particular one was not having an après dinner salad to assuage heart burn caused by ingesting my mother’s head. I said hello to the wildebeest. She or he looked at me blankly and chomped on. The wildebeest began to sniff around the refrigerator and paw the linoleum. It grunted, raised its tail, and bent its hind legs. I panicked. I frantically clicked the red clogs together. Smoke appeared.

“You miscalculated when you zapped me back. You included an inadvertent stowaway. Ilya, get this wildebeest out of my kitchen this minute.”

Ilya snapped his fingers. The wildebeest vanished. The kitchen floor was left unscathed. Ilya apologized for accidentally transporting the wildebeest to Forest Hills. The landlord was spared having to deal with a magical wildebeest residing on the terrace. My husband hunt would continue on my home turf out of Africa.

There was no time like the present to begin. Ilya, after all, is a man. So what if he's an immortal vampire. His immortality is a very good thing. I would never have to worry about becoming a widow. I went in for the kill.

“Ilya, before you vanish like the wildebeest, I need to ask you a question. I'll speak in my most direct New York voice. Can you handle it?”

“Fire away, Shira.”

“Will you marry me?”