

Adultery and Africa

by Geoffrey Fox

It's cold and damp and any way I turn my shirt tickles, my knees my toes the air everything is cold and damp and it's not fair because we rent this house in East Hampton mostly for weekends and here it's June and a weekend and raining.

I should finish this article. No beach today, anyway, or tennis either. "Renata?" I say.

"Hnn?"

She is hunched over a table correcting dictées. She stops, red pencil poised over a female student's neat, rounded, pubescent script. She -- Renata, not the student-- raises her head, then turns it enough so she can look up at me by rolling her eyes hard left. Three separate motions: lift, swivel, roll.

"What would you think if I committed adultery?"

She pauses very briefly before replying.

"What, you got time on your hands?"

I shrug. Nine years married, I should know by now I can't throw her.

"No," I answer at last.

She puts down the red pencil and lowers her glasses to the fleshy little nub where her nose turns up. She's really very pretty, prettier now than when we got married, at least I think so. An Irish face, with turned up nose and intelligent blue eyes, and a smile that sometimes spreads slowly, wearily, warily, when she tilts her head and looks up with those intelligent, questioning eyes, like now.

"You don't love me anymore?" she asks.

"Naw. Cut that out. Of course I do. You know that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh," I start. And I'm sorry I did. But it's a reflex by now, a routine we've developed. Whatever's bothering me, it's like a rule, I just have to blurt it out, in the same strange, unedited way it first occurs to me, so that it's as close as possible to the inarticulate feeling.

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Then we try to understand it. Same rule for both of us, but her way is different. Her way is to remain rational, controlled and efficient, on and on, long after efficiency has lost its original purpose, until she blows up and starts throwing things. She and I have a pact. We've agreed not to remember those episodes.

"Look," I say, "when somebody rejoins human society, there are some really great rewards, you know, but, I mean, there are risks, too."

She takes her glasses off and lays them on their back on top of the student's paper, their legs open and ready for action.

"So. Welcome back."

"Thanks."

I smile. I really like her. I think she knows it.

"You know how isolated I've been."

We've talked about this. Talked so much that I am boring myself just by bringing it up again. I ain't got no buddy but you, Renata, it goes.

"*Tant pis*," she says.

"You said it," I say.

"And now?"

"*Hein*," I say. It's my favorite French expression. Actually, it's much like a noise my farm cousins in Indiana make. I always thought they'd learned it from the animals.

"What do you mean, '*hein*'?"

"No, nothing. It's just that, now that I'm finally getting away from the typewriter and meeting people, something could happen."

"Well, I hope so. That's the idea."

I've been writing a book, and I finally finished it, is what this is all about. But I've got a strong hunch that writing the book isn't what kept me away from people, but maybe I decided to write it in order to keep away from people. I don't know, though. In any case, I've lost the habit of sociability.

"Yeah, but other things too," I explain. "You know, liaisons amoureuses and that sort of thing."

She looks at me, raising her hither eyebrow while the thither one waits.

"You're supposed to say, 'Who is she?'" I prompt.

She sighs, looks at the stack of papers to grade, smiles with one half of her mouth as she looks back at me and says, "All right. Who is she?"

I shrug. I had this scene all worked out, even the shrug. It irks me, though, to have to feed her her lines.

"Nobody -- yet," I confess. "But if Sue Ann is going to open her legs for a man as old as Arthur, then there must be lots of nubile houris just wetting their pants for an attractive, witty, not-bad-looking freelance writer bursting with health and only forty-three."

"Can I get his box number from the New York Review? I think I might apply."

I think I'm blushing, so to cover up I laugh.

"Come to Daddy," I say, opening my arms wide.

"Wally! These papers!"

I do my hurt look.

"Is that what this was all about? Wally, did I ever tell you your seduction technique needs polishing?"

"You didn't use to complain."

"You used to be more suave."

I bow low and leer at her, waggling my eyebrows like Groucho.

"Much better," she pronounces.

"Come weez me to ze Casbah."

"Who are you now? I don't want to go to bed with Bob Hope."

"I am ze Prince of Araby."

She studies my pose, Rodolfo Valentino in profile, one hand flung across my chest, my aquiline nose points out over the desert as my eyes steal a glance at her. Except of course my nose isn't aquiline.

"The Casbah, you say?"

My left eyebrow lifts and leads my head in a clockwise roll, in the general direction of the bedroom.

She laughs and sighs.

"Well, maybe these can wait."

She pushes her hair back with one hand and looks at me slyly before getting up.

"But I'm not joining any harem."
"You are my harem," I assure her.

Often, when we make love, and it's so familiar, the contours of skin and the whiteness of the sheets, I drift.

Africa. That's what the book is about, and my mind keeps going back there. It's not about starvation in the Sahel and in the Horn, or about geopolitical rivalries, although I put something in the last chapter about those things to give it what they call relevance. It's really about consciousness.

There are green vines in Africa, you swing on them, up to your treehouse. Green and humid, and sometimes you hear a leopard roar. It looks a lot like Burbank, in fact. Renata gets to play Jane, but I think she has her own movie.

Africa in the mind. Except the book is about Africa in African minds, and how that grew, the idea of "Africa" as a place, a single place with common human and political goals, only after contact with the colonial powers. Especially, in my book, in the French and the Belgian colonies. So it's about Houphouët-Boigny, Senghor, Sékou Touré, Lumumba, and even, from further away, Aimé Césaire and négritude. I hear the drumbeats as they call their gods.

I think that means it's really about adultery. About sleeping with the other. About growing through betrayal of what one was, taking strength from the enemy. Even about becoming the enemy, maybe, in order to defeat her. Him.

We have to get up and get showered because Arthur is bringing Sue Ann over for lunch. But I don't want to let go of Renata. Perhaps she would just as soon roll around in the bed some more too, but efficiency efficiency, there's salad to make and all that. So I just bite her nipple and then when I go for her mouth she tells me again to clip my Texas-longhorn mustaches, the tip just went up her nose. Note for a future essay on mustaches: certain type good for cavalry officers, lousy for lovers; were cavalry officers lousy lovers? They're a little late, Arthur and Sue Ann, fortunately. She looks okay.

Not a movie star, but bright and cheerful and interested in adult conversation. I shouldn't say that. She's twenty-two, I suppose, since she just graduated from college. I thought I was an adult when I was twenty-two. But she sure looks young. Do they know how to fuck when they're that young? I mean really know, beyond "Insert A into B" and so on?

What really wins me over is not her long legs under the tennis skirt - - I think she's showing off, for Arthur, who likes to exhibit his prize.

What really wins me over is that she says she liked an essay of mine, on diamond-mining in Zaire. Although the legs are nice, too.

I wonder what kind of prize Arthur is. He would be attractive, I guess, despite the lenses that magnify his eyes and the skin on his throat like crumpled crêpe paper. He's old, all right, but well preserved. More hair than I have, even if it is all gray. And he's taller, and still slender and agile. And of course he knows so much. If you're bright, and have spent a good part of your life around books, and that life has lasted for a few decades, then you've got to know things. So maybe Sue Ann sees him as a mentor. I don't see Arthur as Pygmalion, more like Ponce de León, dipping into the fountain of youth.

I am being polite. I am asking this girl lots of questions, about books she reads, what she wants to do and so on. I'm glad she doesn't start talking about something like 2 Live Cru or hip-hop, I'd be lost. We keep it to literature. Renata looks at me strangely. Arthur seems hugely amused. I am impressed with Arthur's prize.

After they leave I go for a long walk. Renata stays to grade papers. As I go out the door, she reminds me it's my turn to do the dishes. Later, I say.

It's stopped raining now, but every little breeze shakes raindrops on my knees from the leaves in the trees, da-da-da. Some time, Renata, I've got to show you my Maurice Chevalier impression again, I'll do him entertaining the Gestapo in gaie Paree. Maybe I'll go get a paper.

Houphouet-Boigny would be plain old Ufwe Bwanyi but for the

French imperialists. Léopold Senghor might have been an illiterate village bard. He showed them, though. I think about things like this. Even if they don't know how to fuck, one can teach them. A woman is a foreign country. A potential colony. I am an explorer. Of the bush, as it were.

"Why, hello there!" I boom to the girl at the cash register.

"Hello," she says. Her smile is tentative, like she's wondering if I might be crazy. If somebody got her to stand up straight and to wear something more fetching than a pink sweatshirt, she could be made quite beautiful. That could be my next project. I smile. She smiles back, but frowns at the same time. I can't think of my next line. How do you talk to somebody who doesn't know anything about anything that you think people should know about? And who probably knows lots of things about lots of things you long ago decided you didn't care to know about? I take my change and smile, I think. I actually don't know what kind of grimace is on my face. She's already busy with the next customer, thank God.

No, for my first safari I should seek more traveled terrain. I'll ask Renata how to say that in French.

It's time to go home and clip my mustaches.

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