

## Bats, Houseguests and Mt. Elgon

The mother of my daughter's skating friend hands me a book.

"You have to read this." Unlike most books, this one won't fit in my handbag. It's a fat dust-jacketed hardback, the kind designed to augment your personal library, the kind intended to be kept nice for posterity. It's the kind of volume some publisher intended to be a bestseller. I smile, sort of, and hug the thing past the hockey locker stench, down the rink stairs, and all the way to my car – through the April blizzard.

*The Hot Zone* by Richard Preston is a blood and guts book about Ebola virus. In Chapter 1, no holds barred, the author gustily describes the disease's progress: what starts out looking like flu evolves, at arterial speed, into a nasty death from within. The virus co-opts the immune system and infects the blood vessel linings. Widespread clotting occurs – so much, in fact, that all the clotting factors are used up. Blood vessels become sieves; victims bleed from every orifice. Buckets of wildly noxious bodily fluids infect the next generation of victims.

So why did Jeanne give me this book? She knows I went to medical school. I never saw hemorrhagic fever in Worcester, Massachusetts, but on the oncology ward, I did have bone marrow transplant patients with no white blood cells, no platelets, and not many red cells, either. We don't notice the tiny processes that keep our bodies going until one of them – and it may be something very small – goes awry. The fact that our bodies manage to work pretty well most of the time is a miracle.

Aside from my medical training, I must also have told Jeanne this story, about myself at fourteen, living in Nairobi, 1975. One weekend, my parents and I squeezed into our Renault 5 and set out for a wedding celebration at Mount Elgon in western

Kenya. Back then, as now, on roads washed out and pothole-pocked, it took two days to reach the eastern edge of Idi Amin's Uganda.

We drove through damp, rolling highlands corrugated with soft-filtered rows of tea. Like the poppy fields of Oz, this terrain was a mesmerizing contrast to the dry savannah that makes up so much of Kenya. In the middle of nowhere sat the Tea Hotel, a British Colonial country club founded by the Brooke Bond tea company in the 1950s. The scene was this: decaying stucco, rampant jasmine, clay tennis courts with beards of weeds, a bilious pool, and silent, threadbare, starched-white-jacketed waiters still ladling cream soups from silver tureens and delivering toast in cooling racks.

Despite its decadence, I loved that hotel. It felt like a timewarp fairy land – a white lotus floating in a Bangkok *klong*, or the hotel in Lapland made entirely of ice.

It was the last outpost.

Our Scots friend, Angela McTavish, was marrying Mohammed, the Somali Chief Warden at Mount Elgon National Park. We had met Angela when she was living in the guest quarters of a house we rented briefly in Nairobi – the one with termites chomping in my sister's closet, and bats sleeping upside down in the avocado tree. Angela invited us over to her cottage for some weird stew served in gourds. I could swear the dry pulp was peeling up when I ate from the bottom of the bowl. We sat on cushions on the floor, Arab style.

Later, already living at Mt. Elgon, Angela stayed at our house for the last months before her daughter Leila was born, so she could deliver at an actual hospital. I was a little resentful, since she was taking up part of my space. My mother had a habit of inviting people to stay, which always meant some sort of eviction for me or my sister.

The last place it happened was Vienna. I was home for Christmas break, my senior year in college. The guest was Rosario, a friend of my mother's from Barbados. My parents had moved there from Bangkok while I was at school; I had never been in "my" room before, never before set foot in that Vienna apartment on Berggasse, where Freud once lived. I slept on the black leather couch that had traveled everywhere with us. I could see out the back picture window to a courtyard, an old Jewish graveyard that, according to rumor, had flooded so badly one time, bones floated up.

Rosario helped herself from St. Peter's tomb. That is what my mother christened the massive Austrian fruitwood breakfront that housed the liquor. Eventually, after the New Year's Eve pheasant-plucking incident, in which Rosario was too drunk to prepare the special birds she'd had hanging in the windows since well before Christmas, my dad took me on a ski trip. (No snow that year – we hiked.) I don't know what Mom did with her, but when we came back, Rosario was gone.

Where does hospitality end, and family obligation begin? There has to be a line somewhere. FHB (family hold-back) on the mashed potatoes, in the event of unexpected dinner guests, is one thing. As parents, we try to do the right thing. Sometimes, we blow it.

But as far as adult houseguests go, Angela McTavish was pretty cool. For one thing, she spoke seven languages. I found this hard to wrap my head around, and one of them was Arabic. She told us about riding around with fishermen on a dhow near Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. I've always admired those who have adventures like that. I like to think of myself as pretty spontaneous, but there are certain people who go wherever the wind blows, either ignoring or oblivious to any risks they might be taking. Angela was one of them.

Which is why, when she said she was marrying this guy, and could we come to the remote, wedding celebration, we were not surprised, and we went. We had never met Mohammed, but when we got to the park, the first thing I remember was being bundled into a Land Rover with other guests, and being taken on a mini safari.

It was not a shooting safari; my family never did that. We were just looking. Mohammed had the ability to see things where nothing existed. That is, until you stared long enough to pick out the buffalo tail switching in the dense understory, or the Martin Luther hat and cloak of the pygmy falcon high up in a dead tree.

The *pièce de resistance* of our tour was Kitum Cave, a 200 meter-deep dead shield volcano, where whole herds of elephants go to gouge minerals out of the back walls. It is also frequented by other living things. Well inside the stadium-like cavern, Mohammed pointed out a heap of fresh leopard spore behind a rock. High above us jostled thousands of Egyptian fruit bats. Thrilling as it was, I was anxious to get out of there.

Wincing back into the sunlight, sure enough, I felt a blob of bat guano on my head. I have never been squeamish, but certain substances seem particularly unclean. Many years later, spelunking with my husband in the Ozarks, a bat brushed my face in the flashlit dark. It was flying as only bats can, planing sideways between me and the narrow passage way. I hated being that close. But the rush of air made me wonder what it would be like to fly precisely, by radar. Make every move a fine-tuned tango.

As I checked my hair for bat guano, I remembered thinking Angela would have shampoo. But no – that was my first encounter with environmental consciousness: she used Castile soap, for everything. The residue from that soap (coconut oil and lye) leaves hair limp and sticky. Living in Africa, I might have been immune to such trifles. But I was a teenager.

Sulking about my coiffure, I spent the rest of the afternoon reading Angela's Collected Works of GB Shaw in microscopic print, on onionskin, and figuring out that *My Fair Lady* is really *Pygmalion*. Pygmalion, of Greek mythology, was the sculptor who fell in love with his statue.

Which comes first: do we create the thing we'd want to fall in love with? Or do we fall in love with the thing we happen to have made? Falling in love with our own creation – women seem to do that a lot. In our minds, we make a thing be what we want it to be, regardless of what it actually is. Or, we imagine we can change it. Maybe my mother did that with Rosario. My sister did it with rearing horses she convinced my parents to buy. I did it with Medicine. Perhaps Angela did the same thing with Mohammed. Perhaps not.

The past comes back in weird ways. Sorting through books, pending my own divorce, I pull *The Hot Zone* from the shelf. An old Christmas letter from Angela, forwarded by my mother, falls from the book. Seven pages of calligraphy on see-through airmail paper lie pressed in an envelope stamped with the Queen. I think back to that nighttime celebration at Mt. Elgon, sides of goat roasting over longitudinally severed oil drums, and realize I remember very little else about that trip.

Except at some point, Mohammed took us to see the sitatunga, a shy antelope with weirdly long hooves, whose vague white stippling helps it disappear in swamps. Sitatunga are excellent swimmers. To fool leopards and wild dogs, they lie submerged in papyrus with only their delicate nostrils sprouting from the water. That day, even Mohammed couldn't find one.

According to Preston's book, I am lucky. This is what Jeanne really wanted me to find out: Marburg virus, a kissing cousin of Ebola, was contracted by two tourists in Kitum Cave, probably via Egyptian Fruit bat guano, in the early 1980s. Today, visitors to that cave wear disposable jumpsuits and re-breather masks.

As for Angela and Mohammed, a few years later, after the birth of their son, Mohammed disappeared. He was rumored to have gone mad and/or to have gone back to his other wife, in Somalia. I'm not sure whether Angela knew where he was or not, but, alone, she had to decide whether to take their son away to England before his first birthday, so he could obtain UK citizenship.

We all have to make hard choices. For some reason, with my own impending divorce, I've been thinking more about Africa, and what it meant to leave, what it means to leave – to separate from a land to which I did and did not belong, to tear away from what I once loved. Like bone, past experiences, beautiful or painful, give us shape. We can't always go back, but we have all been fatally marked for better or worse, and this, we can share.