

**Title: How to Marry an African President**

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**Publication: adda**

**Publication address: [www.addastories.org](http://www.addastories.org)**

**Date of publication: 5 December 2019**

When you are interviewed for BBC documentaries in your palace, they will want to know how you met. Cast your eyes downward and tell them how you were a shy and hardworking secretary in the State House typing pool. Omit to mention that you were married. Lie that you were divorced and not looking. Not even for a President.

The truth is, when you meet, he will be neatly dressed. Shirt collar starched just so, shoes like shiny copper coins, fingernails trimmed and clean, hair clipped and precise as his speech. He will start by hanging around you a little too long. Your conversations will peter out and he will end them reluctantly. The other secretaries will stare. You'll pretend not to notice. Play it cool and coy. He will ask you out. Appear taken aback, smooth your skirt and shift your weight onto your other foot. He will look paternal and concerned. Explain that you are married, and he is too.

He will laugh and say he's only looking for a friend.

He will be lying.

Pay attention to his shoes. They will tell you everything.

Notice that when he comes by, he wears burgundy lace-ups. It will confuse you at first. A man like him is old-fashioned and into orthodox blacks and browns. Burgundy is his way of saying: Look! An older man like me can still

bring excitement to a young girl like you. Be sure to comment on his shoes.

Remember - we all crave approval.

Listen to him talk about his wife. Part of you will like that he is respectful - *regretful* even - that she will die from her illness and that there is nothing he can do about it. It is only a matter of time. Sympathise. But don't forget to take the opportunity. Mention how you wish you had a devoted loving husband such as him. He will probe, try to get you to say more. Grow sad and quiet. Later - drop hints about how you and your husband don't make love anymore. Say: Even women have needs. Giggle nervously, cover your mouth with your hand and apologise for being inappropriate. See his eyes brighten.

When he takes you out in the Mercedes, sink into butter soft seats upholstered in cream. He will offer you a drink that appears almost magically from a console overlaid with the grain of an exotic wood, a burnished red-brown with dark streaks so opulent, it's almost oppressive. Decline because good girls don't drink. Only later do they pretend to have acquired a reluctant palate for wine, courtesy of their husband's influence. He will signify his approval by putting his arm around your shoulders. See the watch on his wrist out of the corner of your eye: gold bezel, crocodile leather strap. Struggle to breathe. Do not panic. Money sometimes makes the air feel heavier for those who do not have it.

Stop attending night school and give up the English literature degree you were working towards. Being a consort requires being available at all hours. Like all powerful men, Presidents have options, you must maximise your time.

Hear rumours swirling of how he was tortured in the Liberation struggle and how this may affect the consummation. These rumours are never said directly. Instead, those who have already identified you as a future benefactor will talk in circles, conversations that are long, winding yet deliberate like footpaths. Finally, your aunt will tell you about modern medicine you can crush and slip into a man's tea; herbs for 'strength' that you can mix into a man's stew.

The first time you and the President make love, he will take you to an old colonial hotel with paint peeling like tears, as if it were mourning for its former glory. The doorman with the top hat will salute him, waiters will scurry and rush to bring him what he desires. When he orders high tea, think: he is more English than the English owner himself. Fail to understand the appeal of cucumber sandwiches. Murmur appreciatively as if you do. He will compliment the clotted cream that goes with the scones. The English hotelier, ruddy from the heat and frequent gin and tonics, will beam proudly. It is from one of his dairy farms, he'll say. His skin will be pink and thin, translucent like a lizard. His lips will look chapped, spittle congregating in the corners. He will mentally undress you with his eyes. Later you'll hear a snatch of conversation and the hotelier will glance at you approvingly before leaning forward to whisper something in the President's ear. You won't hear much, just something like:

*'You don't have to lie back and think of England with this one.'* The two men will laugh and the President will pat him on the back. This will only cement your dislike for the hotelier. He will go on a mental list you'll make. A list of what you hope to get, a list of people you will get back at.

It is only a matter of time.

When he finally takes you to bed, be prepared. The hotel room will have a four-poster bed and smell musty. Older women who have gone before you, who have navigated men like intrepid explorers braving unfamiliar terrain, will map out the ego of a man. They will warn you to strike a fine balance between Mary and Magdalene. They will guide you on how to signal desire while maintaining a certain reluctance that men of a certain age associate with modesty. To be too keen is unseemly. To appear disinterested can offend. Groom yourself, wear a delicate perfume and remember how much it seems to arouse him when you behave as if you are overwhelmed. Remember, he is a teacher. He'll want to teach you things. Act as eager to learn as you are to please.

Be ready to deal with the inevitable. He is four decades older than you, forty when you were born. Think: All Presidents are men, no matter how god-like they seem. As such, they must suffer from the indignities of men. Conceal your surprise that your youthful flesh is enough. Hide the rush of power this gives you.

Afterwards – discuss what you are going to do about your husband.

Approximately six months later, your husband will be transferred. Or maybe he'll meet with a car accident. There has been talk in the newspapers of a mysterious black dog that appears in front of the cars of ministers who challenge the President. Engines explode, brakes fail. Political rivals make oblique references: Be careful, make sure you don't see the black dog. Everyone knows what it means. You don't much care for your spouse but he *is* the father of your child. Feel relieved when the President tells you he's given your husband a posting far away. Years later, realise that you never saw or heard from your first husband again.

Fall pregnant. Weep. He will be ecstatic and reassure you he is looking forward to being a father. You'll have more children by him. He won't discriminate between the children you bear him and the one you already have. You'll ask for signs of your permanence in his life. He will dispense favours like tokens at an arcade. You'll be upgraded to a mansion, your relatives secured jobs without interviews, your every need met. You will be assigned a motorcade, given bodyguards. This will become a pesky problem later but in the beginning you will mock complain to your friends: Imagine someone standing outside the bathroom when I need to use it! Recount with pretend dismay how everyone needed to be chased out of the bathroom first. This will be one of the last times you remember to show a semblance of shame.

His wife will die and he will insist on some decorum. A respectable period between her passing and his remarrying. By then you are already First Lady in everything but name and to salvage your wounded pride at having his children out of wedlock, he will promise you the wedding you want. Plan it scrupulously. You'll read bridal magazines, peruse dresses by European designers, the flowers alone will cost a fortune. It's amazing how quickly you'll become accustomed to having money.

When the day of your nuptials finally arrives, you'll be legally married in front of heads of state, diplomats and dignitaries from all over the world. Hundreds will line the street to see you. Wave to the masses. Be glad you chose a tiara on top of your veil. It will seem fitting. Think to yourself: It is better than a British royal wedding. Your reception will be a who's who of powerful people in African politics. Paparazzi will describe your wedding as outrageous and over the top. You have arrived.

After the wedding, he will offer you an opportunity to redecorate. Suspect he is proud that he understands women and their petty torments. You'll pout and tell him how hard it is to live with his first wife's lingering memory haunting the house. You'll swear you've seen doors open and shut by themselves, heard footsteps but seen no-one there. Remain adamant there are ghosts. He will be exasperated in that short, sharp way you will come to learn he has but soon he'll acquiesce, ordering plans from several renowned architects to build you the palace of your dreams.

Feel relieved.

Feel his first wife's tastes were too simple.

Feel you are the President's wife.

You should live like one.

The wives of rich, well-travelled men will want to be your friends. If anybody sneers at you for being a secretary, then it will be done in whispers, behind walls. But out in the open, you will be feted. In restaurants, you'll be ushered into the VIP sections. If you want something, someone will be immediately dispatched to go and get it. And all you'll have to do is immerse yourself in charity work, open a few orphanages, kiss a few babies and accompany the President to state events.

This would be bearable if it wasn't so boring. Resent having all this money and looking like everybody else. Seem quiet and withdrawn when rubbing his feet. Remember your aunt's lesson: Better to be wily than to whine. Tell him the wife of such a Big Man like him should be better dressed. Aren't you a reflection of him and his largesse? He will agree and a series of shopping trips will begin. You will travel overseas for haute couture, local fashion will not do for you. Have a personal shopper at Harrods. Jealous journalists will give you a nickname, something alliterative. You'll be proud of the moniker. It's catchy and has a ring to it. Draw the line at photographers. Have them assaulted for taking pictures carelessly. Words will be one thing but even you suspect that pictures are a bad idea. A drought does not mean you need to give up your Dior but perhaps it's best not to give your enemies too much ammunition. And



you do have enemies, *you do*. They are powerless – for the most part - but they are there.

Eventually, he will tell you to slow down, maybe start a business. No amount of money will soothe your irritation at lying next to his decrepit flesh. You'll take his advice and keep yourself busy. In public: you'll dabble in dairy farming, try mining – you've always loved diamonds and gold. In private: you'll take lovers. The problem of the pesky bodyguards is solved easily. Their silence is for sale. You'll swear the lovers to secrecy but it won't be necessary. A choice between discretion and your life is not a choice. You have become like your husband, a purveyor of youthful flesh. You are not old but you are growing old. Pots of expensive cream and facials with fancy names cannot stop the march of time. For their sakes, your lovers pretend that you are the most beautiful woman they have ever seen. Promise them tenders; positions on the boards of prestigious multi-nationals; mining shares. One of them will give you a book. You don't read it but it is summarised for you. It is about a prince and how he should live and one line in particular sticks with you. It is better to be feared than to be loved. Agree wholeheartedly.

Demand that your lovers are at your beck and call although you cannot be with them all the time. Your lovers will also have lovers. Younger, far more attractive women. Catch one lover with his girlfriend. Scream at him. Be bitter and beside yourself. He'll be visibly frightened but recover admirably. He'll tell

you in a soothing voice that the girl is just there as a cover-up. In case there are questions.

Know he is lying.

Know you don't want to let him go.

Ask him to end it. And for good measure, have her warned off. Tell her not to call your lover again and in an ironic twist you'll be rather proud of, have your bodyguard strangle her half to death with the cord of a cell phone charger.

Meet someone. He will shower you with attention and affection. Fall harder than you thought possible. Become focused on him and only him. Exchange endearments. Fantasize about a future together. Come up with codenames so you don't get caught. You call him John.

Someone will tell your husband. He will ask you outright if you're having an affair. You deny this, your fear stuck like a lump of mealie-meal in your throat.

Know: No-one betrays the President and gets away with it.

Warn your beloved.

John will travel, planning to stay out of the way until things cool down. You'll talk on public telephones, paranoid that someone has tapped the landlines. He'll become restless and want to return. Capitulate and admit that everything seems to have returned to normal. Though you feel the opposite, say: it is probably safe.

Arrange to meet. You'll wait at the appointed place for hours and hours, expectation souring your mouth like bad milk. He will not pitch. The next day you'll hear of his death. The President will deliver the news over breakfast, fake sympathy for John's family's loss while eating fried eggs. Hear the words 'car accident'. Bite your tongue to keep from crying. Under the table, you'll grasp the knife so hard that your palm will bleed. Stop eating for three days.

Conspiracy theories will swirl like fog and you'll wander around listlessly, asking questions to uncover answers you already know. You sense the whispers as you enter rooms, the words '*love affair*', lingering in the air, the disapproval left behind like a bad stench. You'll walk around unable to mourn. The only permissible sign of your black mood will be the slow shuffling of your feet.

At your lover's funeral, neither his wife nor his brother will look at you although they're required to shake the President's hand. Adjust your dark sunglasses. Try to stem the tears without dabbing at your face too frequently. Angle your hat, taking care to tilt the round brim towards your chin to take the sharp edge off your emotions. The bad dreams will follow after his body enters the ground. Brace yourself. You'll feel scattered, emotions all over the place like flying ants after the rain. You will try to be numb.

You will see his face everywhere.

You will think you are being followed.

You will be right.

After a week you pretend to take to bed with a mysterious illness and he permits you, even entering the bedroom to hold your cool hand and enquire solicitously about your health. The look in his eyes challenges you to cry openly or confess. You do neither.

Plot: your escape, your revenge, your next move.

Return to your marital bed. Resume your conjugal duties. Afterwards lie next to him, unable to sleep. Have fitful dreams about the President's death.

Dream about your public reaction in your head. Will you be stately and stoic? Or will you pretend to be miserable? Throw yourself on the grave, women holding you back, their own tears triggered by your raw display? Dream of the Archbishop, disapproving, whispering under his breath: *Jezebel*. Wake up from your dream.

Find the President very much alive and more talkative than usual.

Develop a grudging respect for him. Your appreciation of power will grow.

This, you will realise, is what power can do: help you dispose of rivals, guarantee wealth, enforce a show of respect and loyalty. Decide that power is not too shabby.

Be an exemplary wife for months. Make cryptic comments about bad influences. Claim to have been misled. Convince him you have changed. He

will forgive you. He will not know that you will never forgive him. By the time you'll ask him to secure your position as head of the Women's League, you'll have buttered him up sufficiently, having ensured that everything will have been as he wants it, that his needs are met even before he realises what he requires.

It's not solely the women's backing that you'll need. Acquire the support of the youth leaders, mostly men. They are not dinosaurs like the sycophants that surround your husband; they are modern like you. None of them is over forty-five. Lavish them with gifts and business opportunities, let them glimpse what life would be like under your patronage. Ensure your popularity is entrenched. Speak at political rallies. Hear the applause grow louder at every one. Your ambition grows with it.

You'll do this over a matter of years. Slowly entrench your presence in the country's politics. See dawning realisation on your enemies' faces as they realise how serious you are. Your husband is no longer the authoritarian figure he was, tall, forbidding, back ram-rod straight. His shoulders droop, he falls asleep at the dinner table. Still, he is respected and revered. What he says counts and he has crowned you his political heir. Yes, there are growing murmurs of disgruntlement but your opponents are ineffectual.

It is only a matter of time.

Remind yourself of The Prince. It is better to be feared than to be loved.

Strategize: Perhaps the chaos that will come from fear is actually the best way to sow disorder and discontent amongst your foes. Decide you cannot kill your biggest rival. The uproar would not be worth it. He'll have a strong base and factions within the military may support him. However, your husband will have his stalwart allies too. You can hurt your rival enough to send a message that whoever gets in your way will be swiftly eliminated.

Poison him and as you rightly assumed - a resulting quiet will ensue, no-one will dare criticise you any longer. He'll survive but you knew he would. Out in the open, you'll commiserate, calling for the would-be murderer to be brought to justice. But behind closed doors, you'll claim a victory amongst your confidants. Your adversary will understand war-craft and opt for self-imposed exile.

In the end, it will not be enough.

In the end, it may have been the trigger.

Watch army tanks roll in an inexorable march towards the presidential residence. Hear the onerous clank, the metallic tread on tarmac and realise that this is the soundtrack to your demise. Smell the teargas in the air, the scent burning your nostrils, pinpricks of moisture scalding your eyes. It will be a hot day but you will shiver, your blood congealing in your veins. Your husband will assure you, it is all for show: *He* is the head of the armed forces;

they listen to him. Doubt him for the first time. You know how the army veterans hate you, you've heard the talk. Him - they can forgive, they know his history, his credentials but you'll be reduced to that thing between your legs, your only power that of a young woman to turn an old man's head. Chafe at this, it has always irked you but that is of no consequence now. Attempt to rally your supporters. Arm a few members of the security force still loyal to the President. Consider that people may do many things for money but they are far more circumspect about being required to lose their lives. There will be no battle. Instead - a half-hearted resistance as you hole yourselves up inside State House.

They will take over the national broadcaster, their hateful faces beaming into homes. They will claim it is not a coup. In truth, your husband will be ousted by the army generals who once enjoyed his favour. They will convene a meeting with him, treating him with deference, maintaining the illusion that they are 'negotiating' but it won't change the fact that there will be gunshots around your home, that you and your children will be crouched down in the kitchen, huddled and humiliated. One officer, bolder than the rest, will tell your husband, that while they are sorry for betraying him, they could not allow you to ascend to his position. Even during the meeting, they will look around and you'll imagine them as vultures assessing your collection of expensive furniture as if it were carrion, calculating what they will take. Envisage corrupt Swiss bankers wondering when they can siphon the cash you have stashed away. You've heard the stories. You know what happened in the Congo.

It is only a matter of time.

You'll be spirited away in the dead of night, concerns for your safety finally upending your pride. He will call you from time to time; inquire about the children; meet you continents away when he has to travel for medical treatment but they will not chase him from his country like a dog.

They will invoke witchcraft to explain your influence over him. You lured him; you are a siren; you dashed his legacy on the rocks. There will be calls for retribution, people will want you to do penance. You will not be just an African President's wife, you will be Eve and Delilah. You will be every temptress that ever lived, every bringer of bad things. They will absolve him of responsibility, his sins washed away in history, receding from memory the way waves retreat from the shore. He can stay, they will say, but you must leave.