**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and from PRX this is Israel Story ­ Ancient Land, Modern Tales. Israel Story is produced together with Tablet Magazine, where some of you might have heard our first season. But if not, don’t worry! You can catch up on our brand new feed on iTunes ­ or anywhere else really that you get your podcasts ­ all under Israel Story. So… after many months of travelling up and down the country, chasing down stories all the way to Malta, England and Nepal, even Nova Scotia, ​*we are back*​!! With more life­size, human interest stories from a place which, let’s face it, usually serves up narratives, news really, of a very different kind. We have some great stories planned for this season, and because of that we thought that, you know, once a month just wasn’t enough anymore. So from now on, we’re gonna have a slightly shorter episode for you, every other Wednesday. So subscribe to our feed, and you won’t miss a single episode.

Alright, so here we are starting our second season, and you know, it’s funny, but when you think about Israel you think about the Middle East, maybe about Europe. You think about ties with America. What you most definitely ​*don’t*​ think about is Africa, even though, basically, we’re right around the corner.

So in today’s episode that ​*is* ​what we’re gonna think about… “Out of Africa... and Back Again.”

For most Israelis, at least in the last few years, the phrase ‘Out of Africa’ has nothing to do with Robert Redford and Meryl Streep. It’s synonymous with this guy.

**Yuval Noah Harari:**​ My name is Yuval Noah Harari, I don’t know… I come from a small provincial town near Haifa, at the hub of the petrochemical industry of Israel. And I’m a lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at the Department of history.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ In 2011 he wrote a book.

**Yuval Noah Harari:**​ Ahmm… I’m now known mainly for writing “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,” which is a survey of human history from the Stone Age to the Silicon Age.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ And ever since it came out, A Brief History of Humankind has been at the top of the best­seller lists.

**Debra Harris:**​ Everybody has read this book!

**Mishy Harman (Narration):** ​That’s Debra Harris, the international literary agent for Yuval’s book. And she’s right— it’s kind of​​rare to walk into a house and *not*​​ see it on the shelf.

**Debra Harris:**​ Yeah, I think it’s up to about 150,000 copies. I mean it’s really unheard of. This is by far the most successful non­fiction book ever published in Israel and certainly from Israel abroad.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ And just to make sure we didn’t think that was an exaggeration of a happy agent, Debra started listing off some of the translations…

**Debra Harris:**​ US, UK, France, I’ve just done Estonia,

Indonesia, all of Scandinavia, we don’t have Iceland yet.

Korea’s coming up soon. Japan is coming up soon.

**Mishy Harman:** So is there a movie in the future?​

**Debra Harris:**​ I’m not handling the movie rights. Sadly.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ What all these people (minus the Icelanders, that is) are so excited about, is the tale of how humans came out of Africa.

**Yuval Noah Harari:**​ All humans are African in origin.

Both our bodies and our minds evolved in adaptation to African environment. To the savannah of Africa, they didn’t evolve in adaptation to living in Scandinavia or in California. So no matter where you are, or who you are, in a very deep sense, you are African.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ In case you weren’t listening in high school bio, here’s Yuval’s brief history of humanity, in just under thirty­five seconds:

**Yuval Noah Harari:**​ Humans evolved in East Africa around 2.5 million years ago. And then you had a wave of different species of humans spreading out of Africa and settling Europe and Asia, about two million years ago. And then you had the second coming out of Africa, about 70,000 years ago, when one human species ­ ​*homosapiens*

­ spread, from East Africa and basically conquered the

entire planet, driving to extinction all the other humans around the world.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ Now, somehow Israel has a way of ending up in the middle of everything. GOP presidential debates, for example.

**Donald Trump:**​ Israel? I love Israel, oh by the way… **Carly Fiorina:**​ On day one in the Oval Office, I will make two phone calls. The first to my good friend Bibi Netanyahu to reassure him we will stand with the state of

Israel…

**Chris Christie:**​ But I absolutely believe that Israel is a priority to be able to fund and keep them strong and safe…

**Ted Cruz:**​ Imagine a President who stands

unapologetically with the nation of Israel. ​

**Mishy Harman (Narration):** But in the whole complicated ‘Out of Africa’ story Israel​ actually *does*​ ​ play a central role. MUSIC ­ Imperial Tiger Orchestra ­ Che Belew Mae Goder is a post­doctoral fellow at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. She’s a prehistoric archaeologist.

**Mae Goder:** ​Somewhere between sixty and fifty thousand years ago, modern humans start taking over the world. Now, how does Israel connect to this big story? Because we are the only land­crossing from Africa into Eurasia.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ That’s right, if we completely simplify matters (and I can just imagine how all the scholars we talked to are wincing right about now) the first *homosapiens*​ ​, the forefathers of us all, were... sort of Israelis… Of course, there are many different theories and dating schemes, various waves of migration, multi­regional co­evolution, early hominids, Homo­Erectus, Neanderthals, but what we do know, Yuval says, is that…

**Yuval Noah Harari:**​ It is quite certain that at least many of the initial immigration waves out of Africa passed through Israel. And also, in Israel we have the clearest evidence for Sapiens and Neanderthals living side by side for several thousand years. And there is a good chance that at least some of the sexual interbreeding between Sapiens and

Neanderthals also took place in Israel, or more broadly in the Levantine region.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ So, you might know about the Land of Milk and Honey, but I’m just gonna go ahead and propose a whole new branding campaign: Israel, the Land of sex between Neanderthals and Sapiens. Anyway, those original migrations weren’t a one time thing. People have been journeying between Africa and Israel ever since. There was Joseph, who showed his jealous brothers by becoming a hot shot advisor to Pharaoh. There was, of course, this guy.

**Charlton Heston:** ​Let my people go.

**Yul Brynner:** ​The slaves are mine…​.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ A bit more recently, there were waves of immigration from

North Africa ­ Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria ­ and then, starting in the 70s, also of Ethiopian Jews.

So we go way back. And today on Israel Story, we have two tales, of people going in completely opposite directions, continuing in this grand migrational tradition. **Act One**​ , ‘​​*How Do You Say Anne Frank in Tigrinya?*​’ Yochai Maital brings us the story of one member of the latest group to cross the Sinai.

**Yikealo Beyene:** So this is my bag, where I have all my​ precious things.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​I’m sitting with my friend Yikealo Beyene. We’re in a

more­or­less empty classroom near Tel Aviv’s dingy central bus station, talking about literature.

**Yikealo Beyene:** Amm.. I… I don’t consider myself as a​ writer, but I do write some poetry. Actually you see that poem? That's my favorite.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​The classroom’s​​in a run­down, one­story building. There arecracks running along the walls, and a few rows of cheap plastic chairs that all face an ancient­looking whiteboard. Other than some chirping birds perched on the windowsill, it feels pretty depressing. Outside there’s a small yard with a distinct smell of urine.

**Yikealo Beyene:** First I wrote two poems, one was​ really you know, was a reaction to what happened to me.

I was talking with time, I told time to stop.

# [Yikealo reading in Tigrinya]

**Yikealo Beyene:** Stop and wait for me. Because I was​ lagging, you know. Behind.

**Yikealo Beyene:** I shall be telling this with a sigh,​

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

**Yikealo Beyene:**​ That was by Robert, Robert Frost.

‘​*The Road Not Taken*​,’ it’s my favorite.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​We’re here because Yikealo runs an after­school program out of this place. It’s for the children of Eritrean refugees, like himself. Yikealo’s in charge of English and Tigrinya ­ the mother tongue that many of these kids are rapidly forgetting.​ ​But today, aside from the random kid running in or yelling in the hallway, the place is empty. Yikealo told his students to stay home.​​There's a demonstration forming outside ­ the local residents are protesting against the African migrants who have flooded their neighborhood. They claim that the illegal infiltrators, as they call the Africans, are responsible for the recent increase in violence, and just general neglect of their neighborhood. The crowds haven’t yet arrived, but looking out the window, I can see that one guy’s already holding up a handwritten sign that says “South Tel Aviv is a refugee camp.” Another, with big block letters says “Yesterday it was my daughter, tomorrow it’s gonna be your’s.” A bunch of recent gatherings like this one have turned violent, and Yikealo didn’t want his students anywhere near if, or when, this goes down. So we’ve got the place to ourselves. We pull up a couple of plastic chairs to talk.

**Yikealo Beyene:** you see that poem. that's my favourite. robert frost. the​ road not taken.

​I shall be telling this with a sigh,

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​Who’s Yikealo? That's a tricky one. I've known him for a few years now, we've become friends, and I know he doesn't particularly care for labels. I guess I could present him as some sort of a maverick ­ finishing both a BA *and*​​ MA in psychology, an unusual feat for an asylum seeker in Israel. Recently he was even offered a spot in a PhD program.

I could also tell you he’s a teacher. And educator. That he works so hard that he barely sleeps. That he’s poor. That he shares a one­room flat with three roommates ­ all of them also Eritrean refugees. That he’s a survivor ­ of civil war, of torture, of interrogations, extortion, and displacement from his family, from everything he knows, really. And he's also a poet, with an Anne Frank obsession. An obsession that started long before he ever even heard of Israel. But we’ll get back to that in a minute.

Yikealo was born in rural Eritrea. By the time he began university, he was a young idealist with a big mouth. He said what he thought, and in Eritrea that isn’t such a good idea. He was put under surveillance by the secret police, interrogated, tortured, and eventually released. But Yikealo knew that next time it would be much worse, so he made arrangements, and slipped across the border to Ethiopia. In order to protect his family, he didn't even say goodbye.

**Yikealo Beyene:** It wasn't an easy decision. But that​ time I thought, in a manner of years… some years, then I will be back to Eritrea, that's what I was thinking. You learn from like... from life. I learned that I can never go to Eritrea while the ruling party is still there in power. But I learned this when I crossed the border you know.

**Yochai Maital (Narration)**​: Once he crossed into Ethiopia, he was picked up by the border patrol, and sent to a nearby refugee camp, where he joined thousands of other Eritreans refugees. They were all penned in a large, contained camp. It was hot, dusty, lonely and dull, but Yikealo found his place. Not among people, but among books.

**Yikealo Beyene:** So there was a library. It was full of​ books actually, it was really nice library, although it was extremely hot.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** The days came and went, weeks seemed to creep by slowly. And​ Yikealo sat in the library — which, even though he remembers as nice, was really just a couple of shelves, a ragtag collection of tattered books, each with their own travel story.

**Yikealo Beyene:** I didn’t have many friends, so I had​ only books that were my friends. And you make the

characters in the books your friends.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​And these new friends carried him far away from his confined existence. They took him to Osho’s ashram in Pune, India.

**Osho:**​ You will be surprised to know that the word devil and the word devine have the same root.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​Or to Robinson Crusoe's ‘Desert Island.’

**Robinson Crusoe:**​ For the first time in my life I am utterly and completely alone.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​All the way to packed arenas in the U.S., with passionate self­help gurus like Tony Robbins.

**Tony Robbins:** This could be the best time you ever​ lived. It could be the best financial time, the best emotional time, the best spiritual time of your life, but you better take control of your state.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​And then... he stumbled upon this little diary.

**Anne Frank**​: Saturday, 20 June 1942.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​The ‘​*Diary of Anne Frank*​.’

**Anne Frank**​: It’s an odd idea for someone like me to keep a diary, not only because I've never done so before, but because it seems to me that neither I nor for that matter anyone else, would be interested in the unbosoming of a thirteen­year­old schoolgirl.

**Yikealo Beyene:** When I read it, I mean, the end, I​ couldn't help crying. I didn't know about the story, I didn't know anything about Jewish. I know about the Second World War a little. But not specific about Jewish or Anne Frank. I thought she would be freed at the end, but she died. So she was a friend, and I felt like as if I

lost a friend. It was very very painful.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​After reading it over and over again, Yikealo decided to translate the diary into his language, Tigrinya. So between teaching at the camp’s school, and playing his flute (this is him, by the way),

he sat down with a small pocket dictionary, a new notebook, a couple of pencils and an eraser, and began. It took him two years to translate the book.

But just as he was finishing, the situation in the refugee camp changed dramatically: Militant opposition groups turned up, and started threatening the residents.

**Yikealo Beyene:** And some of these groups are groups​ that we don’t like. Like they are… Some are Jihadist.

**Yochai Maital (Narration)**​: Daily life in the camp became dangerous.

**Yikealo Beyene:** At some point they kind of… my​ friend was kidnaped, like a good friend of mine was kidnapped.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​This friend, also a teacher at the camp’s school, was nearly beaten to death.

**Yikealo Beyene:** So I said oh… then tomorrow is my​ turn.

**Yochai Maital (Narration)**​: ​Once again, ​Y​ikealo had to flee. First he headed to Sudan, then to Cairo. Along the way, smugglers, human traffickers really, forced him to give up his belongings, including his handwritten notebook, which contained what was probably the world's only translation of Anne Frank's diary into Tigrinya.

**Yikealo Beyene:** The smugglers told us that we should​ not carry anything, even a paper, a piece of paper with us, and that they would bring all our things to Cairo with a car, like by car, and I trust them, and I gave all my stories, my diaries, my certificates, my… like the

translation of Anne Frank

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​Once they got to Cairo, Yikealo begged the smugglers to give him his things back. But no one was listening.

**Yikealo Beyene:** They didn't give it a shit. It wasn't​ meaningful for them but it was meaningful for me. I didn't want people to see me crying but I was crying during the nights. I couldn't sleep. Three weeks in Cairo and I was… I was crying almost all night, I mean, all the nights.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​Three weeks later, Yikealo joined a group that was smuggled into Israel. They all piled onto a cramped Toyota Hilux and sped through the Sinai Desert.

**Yikealo Beyene:** We didn't know where we were​ heading. We were heading to the unknown. We didn't know anything about Israel. All I knew was Gaza, the war in Gaza.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​Actually, there was one other thing Yikealo knew about Israel ­ he knew it was a land full of Jews, and he couldn't help but wonder about his old literary friend.

**Yikealo Beyene:** I was thinking of Anne Frank. If​ Anne frank was, I mean, famous in Israel, maybe if I arrived safely in Israel then I was thinking of talking to her relatives maybe.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​The truck arrived at the border. ​It was the middle of the night, and Yikealo jumped over what was then just a low barbed wire fence marking the border between Egypt and Israel. A patrol squad of Israeli reserve soldiers noticed them, and picked them up.

**Yikealo Beyene:** The first question I asked the soldier​ was if he knew Anne Frank by the way.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​The surprised soldier said yes, he did know about Anne Frank. But when Yikealo asked if he could put him in touch with some of her relatives, the soldier just smiled and offered him water, bread and jam instead.

This all took place in the winter of 2008. Since then, the attitudes and policies toward asylum seekers in Israel have changed. If it were today, Yikealo would have been detained, at least for a year. But back then, the procedure was different. After being kept in a military barracks for a couple of days, he was dropped off at a bus station. Yikealo made his way to Jerusalem, where he landed a construction job. With his first paycheck in hand, he immediately set out to look for an English­language bookstore.

**Yikealo Beyene:** I asked him if he had Anne Frank​ story, and I found this, so I bought this book and I started translating again.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​That’s right. He started translating Anne Frank’s diary all over again. That was seven years ago — at the very start of a massive wave of immigration from Sudan and Eritrea. And while it’s hard to say that Israel was waiting for Yikealo with open arms when he showed up, he basically got by OK. Yikealo was accepted to a private college, finished a BA, then a Master’s. Now he runs the after­school program.

But others, especially those who came after him, weren’t as fortunate. Once the numbers started building up ­ different reports estimate that about 60,000 refugees made it out of Africa and into Israel ­ the public outcry became loud. The government reacted quickly and decisively. They built a huge, and expensive, fence along the Egyptian border, which reduced the flow of migrants to a trickle. Most of those already here, people who ran away from war and genocide, corrupt regimes, abject poverty and harsh dictatorships, live ­ like Yikealo ­ in Tel Aviv. Or, more accurately, in three, very poor, neighborhoods in South Tel Aviv. These neighborhoods were crowded and neglected to begin with, even before about 35,000 African refugees moved in.

And, probably no big surprise here, many of the local residents felt (and still feel) threatened.

They blame the refugees for everything, rising crime rates, high unemployment, you name it. One particularly vocal activist, a guy called Baruch Marzel, set up his headquarters in the same building where Yikealo and his roommates live. Most of the anti­refugee activity is organized in those offices. So whenever he goes in or out of his apartment, Yikealo looks around and kind of bows his head. So far it’s been fine, But many of his friends have been deported, or ­ as the government copywriters coined the term ­ “willfully expelled.” A lot of them are scared to walk around on the street, because they could be detained at any moment.

Back in the classroom, it started to become noisier. The demonstration was picking up, so we stepped outside to check things out. It didn't look like a very big rally, I could tell that the agitated organizers were disappointed by the turnout. When we tried to get closer to record some of it, one of the protesters walked up to confront us.

מה אתם דואגים להם לנבלות האלה?הם חיות. אז מה את ​**local:**

מצלמת חיות? לתכי לספארי ברמת גן שמה תצלמי. שונאי מדינת

.ישראל. שובר לך תמצלמה היית שובר לך

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​“You’re worried about these animals?” he yelled. “If you want to record animals go to the zoo, in Ramat Gan.” He called us “Israel haters” and threatened to break our equipment. So we walked back inside, finding some refuge in Yikealo’s classroom. It was late, and Yikealo wanted to get home before things heated up. But before we left, we asked him to read us some of the translated diary.

**Yikealo Beyene:** Here…​

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​J​ust, really, ​for the music of it.

**Yikealo Beyene:** 12​ June, 1942.

**Yochai Maital (Narration):** ​And as he went on, I thought about what a surreal situation this all is. Here we are in Israel. Yikealo, from Eritrea, is reading the chronicles of a Dutch Jewish teenager in hiding in Amsterdam. In Tigrinya. And while all this is happening, a steady chant blends in from outside.

“Go home to Sudan,” they all scream together, and then break into a spontaneous “​*Am Israel Chai*​” ­ Long Live the People of Israel.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ Yochai Maital is a senior producer on our show. As the heated debate surrounding the African migrants/asylum­seekers/infiltrators continues, Yikealo is busy at work trying to grow his after school program. If you want to hear more about it, contact us, and we’ll make the connection.

So not all the movement is coming out of Africa and into Israel. Our next story is about the opposite journey. Danna Harman is a staff writer at Ha’aretz, the Israeli daily, and also, just happens to be... my sister. **Act Two** ​ ​­ ​*White Suzuki Days*​. Just a quick note that his story might not be ideal for young children.

I had just turned 30​​and in some ways, a lot of ways, my life was amazing. I had a rooftop apartment in north Tel Aviv, with no kitchen, but a lot a lot of light, and the perfect neighborhood café directly downstairs where I signed for my cappuccinos. I was the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Post, which was a big old job, and I was also having a big love affair with the diplomatic correspondent from Haaretz, the rival paper. So Big love. Big stories. Lots of excitement.

But somehow, and at some point, I started wanting out. It was 2000, the Camp David peace summit had just failed. As had the peace talks before that, at Wye and Shepherdstown. The Israeli­Palestinian story I was covering ­­ and living ­­ felt heavy. Like it was going to be serving up the same plots and same quotes from unnamed high level sources in the Prime Minister’s office, forever.

It was summer and it was too hot.

I knew there was a world outside of here – other storylines, other people with totally different problems tied up in totally different knots ­­ And I was just young enough, and adventurous enough, or maybe just dumb enough, to easily give up everything familiar – and set out in search of things I knew almost nothing about.

And that is how I got a one way ticket to Nairobi. My parents were not impressed. Neither was my newspaper. Nor was the boyfriend. But for reasons no one, including, really, me, totally got, I had what I can only describe ­­ and I know how cliché this sounds – but, a totally burning desire to go roam Africa, and try to understand and write about that continent.

And when I got there, I was so thrilled to be under those African skies, and also so relieved to be out of the Middle East with everything that I loved but was sick of– that nothing fazed me.

Not the hovel of a room that I rented. Not the electricity that flicked on and off. Nor the so­called “rape gates,” I was supposed to lock at night, to stop anyone who might be attacking the compound from attacking me. Not getting sick and being on my own, throwing up into a bathtub with no running water. Not my lack of Swahili, or even my new, demoted, freelancer status, which had me pitching stories as often as I was writing them.

Nairobi was violent and a little dangerous, and the stories I started writing around Africa were often shocking, and sad. At the time, AIDS was raging, nearby Somalia and Sudan were burning, Congo was a war zone and hunger was unabating across Ethiopia. Really upsetting. And yet living there, in Kenya, was also moving and inspiring and... fun. I loved the way people spoke, the cadence of their language, the way they said “pole, pole” slowly­slowly, when you tripped, and the funny small unlikely and unfamiliar tales they told me.

Early on, I realized I couldn’t do reporting, or living there, without a good way to get around, and, considering both how great a driver I am in the best of circumstances, and how much everyone was always scaring everyone else, with good reason, about car jackings in so called Nairoberry, I realized I needed both a car. And a driver.

And that’s when Robert entered my life.

I found him through the Israeli embassy. He had applied to be a driver there a few months earlier, and didn’t get the job. But when I asked for some advice on how to go about finding a driver for myself, the ambassador’s secretary handed me a pile of rejected resumes, and told me to have a look.

I wish I could find that CV of Robert’s today – and I have looked for it – but I remember that it made me smile, maybe because under HOBBIES he put ‘talking to people,” or maybe because he also listed “listening to Dolly Parton music.” He showed up for the interview in an ill fitting suit and tie, and was nervous and seemed very serious about car stuff, and I liked him, and that was that.

From then on, we were a team. The first order of the day, after I hired Robert, and got a real job, as the bureau chief of the Christian Science Monitor in Africa, was to buy a car for him to drive. Robert was in charge of the search, and we went from garage to garage peering under hoods and checking gear boxes and kicking tires. I am going to wager that he knew as little about it all as I did. We ended up with a rattling white Suzuki Samori, which I thought was super cute, and my serious Landover type journalist friends made endless fun of and called a sorry excuse for a four wheel drive.

We spent almost three years together, Robert and me, cris­crossing the country, as well as driving over into Uganda and Tanzania and even once, all the way to Rwanda and the border with Congo. Me, doing interviews, writing stories and trying to find a decent internet connection. Robert, checking the maps, giving me advice, waiting to get my visas, helping me translate sometimes, and both of us singing Dolly Parton along the way.

He told me about life on the shamba, the farm, in Kisi and his dreams of buying more land and settling there someday. I told him all about the Israeli­Palestinian conflict and about my different friends and boyfriends. He was protective of me. When we were out in the bush, he would often come jogging alongside me, even though he didn’t much see the point in, or like, jogging, just to make sure I stayed safe. Once, when I was writing a story about the spread of AIDS along a trucking route, and we were sleeping overnight in, basically, a brothel, he stayed up until the morning, sitting outside my room like a guard.

I got to know his family over time – his wife and daughter who tended the family farm up north and his sister­in­law who he lived with in the city, together with his younger daughter and son ­­ all of them getting by mainly with the help of the meager ­ but apparently normal ­ salary I paid him. 100 dollars a month at first, and then, by the end, 200.

I had never had anyone work for me before, and I never really got the hang of acting like a boss, especially in the way white bosses typically acted in Kenya: I felt uncomfortable if Robert had to wait for me in the Suzuki for too long; If I was at a dinner party and he was parked outside I would make him a plate and take it out to him or try to leave on the early side. If I was sitting at home writing, and he was on standby, I wouldn’t really be able to focus until I let him go home. We were friends, in a way. And the same age. I had gone to Harvard and then gotten a masters at Cambridge, and he hadn’t finished high school, so, that’s a big difference. I was white and he black, obviously, and I had the money and the power and he was working for me, also obviously. But then again, we really did share a curiosity about many of the same things and we found a lot to discuss.

And in the context of Africa, and things tribal and African, he often knew more than me, although just as often, he couldn’t frame what he knew. When he told me he wanted to be a journalist like me, I got him a few notepads and pens and encouraged him to do some writing. I said maybe my paper could publish something of his, say about Kisi traditions. He tried, but it never held together: his sense of narrative was different, and he never got the habit of marking beginnings and endings of stories. I encouraged him to keep practicing.

My best friend in Nairobi, Stuart, watching my relationship with Robert, would often tell me I didn’t know what I was doing: That, basically, by becoming “buddies,” of sorts, and encouraging Robert to think his world and my world were not that far apart, and that he should give stepping into mine a whirl, I was messing with the way things were done. It would end badly, he would warn me. “You don’t understand Africa,” he added sometimes.

Stuart is what’s known as a KC. It stands for Kenya Cowboy – that’s what they call the White Kenyans who grew up there: macho, adventurous, hard living and hard partying kind of guys, who typically live in beautiful homes, slightly fraying at the edges, on lots of land, speed around in big Landovers, run fancy safari outfits, fly their little planes out to the coast for weekend parties, and speak to their staff – who they are most definitely not friends with ­ in perfect Swahili.

I basically thought Stuart was racist, and dismissed any advice he had on how I should or should not behave towards Robert. Or, towards the two and then three and then four other staffers who started, somehow, working for me: There was Mary, Robert’s second cousin, who cleaned my house and Cyrus, a cousin by another mother, who guarded my gate, and then Silas, a friend of Robert’s from Kisi, who was my gardener, and who tried to convince me I needed his brother­in­law, I don’t even remember his name, as a deputy gardener.

One thing I can say for sure about the KCs, without getting into the question of racist or not, is that they are not suckers. I, on the other hand, ​*was*​ a sucker. Soon, I had Mary’s sister also working for me, and somehow was paying part of the school fees for most of my staff’s kids and funeral funds when any of their relatives died, which seemed to happen on a regular basis. Once, Cyrus told me he had to buy a cow for his mother’s funeral and I gave him some money for it. Then, seven months later, he told me his mother – but another mother – had died and he needed to buy a cow all over again.

And if I was a sucker, my dad, who came, with my mom, to visit me a year and a half after I moved to Nairobi, was an even bigger sucker. He felt so uncomfortable with Robert waiting around for him and driving him and opening doors for him, that he would tip him practically every time he got out of the car, even though I told him again and again that he didn’t need to, and shouldn’t, because actually, that was just his job. Robert, in return, loved my gentle dad. And when, one rainy day a year later, Robert’s wife gave birth to another baby son, Robert told me they were going to name him little David, after my dad, David. I told him I was really touched.

Of course I paid into the fund for the baby naming party, and I went to Kenyatta hospital to see the kid and kissed his fuzzy head when Robert’s wife, Rachael, put him in my arms. But, when the baby came down with Malaria a few months later and went back to the hospital, I didn’t go visit. I actually didn’t even think much about it. Later, my mom would ask me why I didn’t pay to move little David to a better hospital, but honestly the thought had not even occurred to me. Everyone in Kenya got malaria at some point, it seemed. I figured they knew what to do.

I was down at the coast celebrating New Year's with friends when Robert called and said: “David is no more.”

At first I didn’t know what he was talking about. Then I realized the baby had died. Robert wanted me to come up to Kisi for the funeral. And I wanted to, too. Some cousin of his got my Suzuki and picked me up, and then, picking up and packing in more and more relatives into the car along the way, we headed up to Kisi.

The child’s body was in a tent, and Robert asked me to partake in the Kisi tradition of sleeping in the tent too. I did. I also helped the family purchase a cow for the funeral and was the one who gave the eulogy. My parents called and relayed their condolences to all those gathered, as well. Robert was proud that we were all involved, but not everyone up there was as sure about it. And I also started wondering if maybe I was overdoing it.

I heard some whispering that the reason little David had died ­­ was that Robert had called him

David. Robert’s ancestors were angry, one of his older uncles later explained to me­­ because Robert had not named the child for one of them. The old man told me that I was taking Robert away from his world and leading him to believe he could join mine. “You don’t understand,” he told me.

Things changed after David died. On a few occasions when I was out of town, friends told me they had seen Robert speeding around in my Suzuki, drunk. I asked Robert, who denied it. He was a Jehovah’s witness, this I knew. And he never drank, he assured me. I was not sure who to believe.

And then Robert started, I think, stealing money. One day I sent him to my place to get something. Later I found 200 dollars missing from a bedroom drawer. But weirdly, 150 more were still there.

“What tribe is Robert from?” my friend Cole asked me when I told him the story. Cole and his wife had been living in Kenya for over 20 years. They weren’t Kenya Cowboys, but UN workers who’d fallen in love with the country and its people, and stayed. “Kisi,” I told him. “Then it was him,” Cole said, without a doubt. “He took the money. Kisi’s are wily that way. If he had been a Kikuyu, he would have taken the whole sum. A Luyha wouldn’t have done it at all. This was a definite Kisi move.” Cole was racist too, I decided. I asked Robert and he denied it. again, I wasn’t sure who to believe.

When I got my bank statement and saw someone was taking money out – 20 dollars here, 30 dollars there — adding up to hundreds – I knew I had to face what was happening. I confronted Robert ­­ who had access to my bank card when I was away on work trips so he could pay my electric bills on time. He looked so sheepish, and seemed not to understand how he had been caught. I’m not sure he realized I could look up my bank statements. But he admitted he had taken out the money; he said he didn’t have it anymore, as he had used it to buy some land and pay off a debt. He said he thought I might not notice. He promised to pay me back.

I should have fired him. But that very day he admitted he had taken the money, he drove me to the gym, and when I arrived I realized I had forgotten my sneakers back home. I asked him to go fetch them for me. And then I sat there, thinking about what a strange a world we live in; that I should be in the position to send a grown man away to pick up my sneakers, or be able to get away with paying him a monthly salary lower than my gym membership and still think we were friends.

I didn’t fire him, and the problems continued. On one occasion, when I let him drive the Suzuki back to his own home on a rainy day, he skidded and rammed into a busy kiosk, almost killing someone. The crowd then turned and attacked him, taking away money I had just given him for Christmas and battering his face.

I travelled more than usual that winter. I was busy, but was also just avoiding a man who was clearly in trouble, and a situation I did not know how to handle. “I told you so,” said Stuart, even before it all got more horribly, unimaginably bad.

I was in Uganda covering the elections. When they were done I called Robert to tell him I was flying back to Kenya, and to ask him to pick me up at the airport the next day. He didn’t pick up the mobile I had bought him; instead a relative got on the line and, without much explanation, told me that Robert was unavailable, and that there was a problem he would explain when I returned.

I returned the next day. To a nightmare.

The car, I quickly learned, was in the police compound and Robert was in jail. When I went to retrieve it, I found my white Suzuki covered in mud, with blood stains on the seats. The police chief told me that Robert had been caught in the forest, in the Suzuki ­­ raping his 16 year old daughter. Ruth. [Do you want to give one detail of her here, to make her more knowable to us? Or does that seem gratuitous?] I knew her well.

Now, it IS possible that the accusation was false. I don’t know. And I guess I never will. The police in Kenya were, and are, notoriously corrupt and it’s possible someone might have framed Robert for some reason or another. But it’s more likely that he ​*did*​ do it. That he raped his 16 year old daughter.

A week later, Robert was allowed to place a phone call, and he called me and asked me to pay his bail. I was away again, this time in Zimbabwe, on a farm, covering a story about the land grabs there. He cried into the phone and I could hardly hear what he was saying, and, I felt physically sick. Maybe a little freaked out. Being far from Kenya gave me an out. And I did nothing.

I only saw Robert one more time in my life. He had been released after a month or so since his daughter refused to press charges. He came over to my place. He had lost a lot of weight in jail and his fingernails were long and his eyes were haunted. He sat on the corner of my couch and looked down at his feet. I told him that I had loved having him work for me, and that he had been a big part of my life during those years, but that I could no longer have him as my driver.

I said that part of his job, kind of, had been to take care of me in Africa. It was not supposed to be me taking care of him. He nodded but did not say much, as I remember it. He did say he was sorry, although I think he also said, or maybe mumbled, that he was innocent. It’s strange how little details I remember. I mainly remember his deep embarrassment. I wanted to say a lot more to him that day, and ask a lot more questions – I’m a journalist after all ­­ but I didn’t.

He asked me for a letter of recommendation, which, zombie­like, I later wrote, mentioning his smarts and his ability to take initiative and his sense of humor. I didn’t mention the rape accusation. Again, I don’t know why I did that.

We said goodbye, and he walked out the door. It was drizzling. A moment later, I heard his voice below my window, calling up to me. He told me he had no money at all, and could I help him with bus fare to get back to town. That broke my heart.

In the years since, I have rolled all that happened, and how it all ended, around in my head, a lot. I’ve replayed that scene: Robert, thin and stooped over, heading to the bus stop and me, paralyzed, basically, and confused, looking down from the window. In time, the image has faded, but I still wonder what became of him and where he is. I wonder about Ruth, his daughter, too. And I wonder whether I did something wrong. Was I to blame, in some way, for what transpired? For interfering with his life, and messing it up? For ignoring my friends, and what I felt were their racist warning about the rules of the land? I had a lot of good intentions, but nothing here ended up good. Of all the difficult stories I heard and witnessed and wrote in Africa, this one was the saddest for me. And it was sad, in part, because I knew I had a role in it. I just couldn’t understand what it had been.

I spent another year­and­a­half in Africa after that day I waved goodbye to Robert, and had two other drivers, neither of whom were that much fun, and neither of whom became my friends. I didn’t even try. And when the son of one of them asked me to help with his university fees, I explained that it would be difficult for me.

When I finally left, I donated my Suzuki to a home for street kids, called Shangilia: It means rejoice in Swahili. I still get newsletters from them sometimes, and I think they still have the car.

**Mishy Harman (Narration):**​ Danna Harman.

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Hertzliya. Our staff includes Yochai Maital, Shai Satran, Roee Gilron, Maya Kosover, Benny Becker and Shoshi Shmuluvitz. Rachel Fisher and Sophie Schor are our new, and fantastic, production interns. Julie Subrin’s our Executive Producer. I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back in two weeks with a brand new episode of Israel Story. Yalla bye.