

The Eight Cow Woman

When I sailed to Kiniwata, an island in the Pacific, I took along a notebook. When I got back, it was filled with descriptions of flora and fauna, native customs and costumes. But the only not that still interests me is the one that says, "Johnny Lingo gave eight cows to Sarita's father."

Johnny Lingo wasn't exactly his name. But it was the name tourists could pronounce. It seemed like anything I wanted to do, I should talk to Johnny. If I wanted to spend a few days on the neighboring island of Nurabandi, Johnny Lingo would put me up. If I wanted to fish, Johnny could show me where the biting was best. If it was pearls, I sought, Johnny would bring the best buys. The people of Kiniwata all spoke highly of Johnny Lingo. Yet when they spoke of him, they smiled oddly, almost snickering.

"Get Johnny Lingo to help you find what you want and let him do the bargaining," advised the man at the bait shop. "Johnny knows how to make a deal."

"Johnny Lingo!" A boy seated nearby rocked with laughter.

"What goes on?" I asked. "Everybody tells me to get in touch with Johnny Lingo and then breaks up. Let me in on the joke."

"Oh, people like to laugh," the bait man said. "Johnny's the brightest, strongest young man in the islands. And for his age the richest."

"So what is there to laugh about?"

"Well, five months ago, at a fall festival, Johnny came to Kiniwata and found himself a wife. He paid her father eight cows!"

I knew enough about island customs to be impressed. Two or three cows would buy a fair-to-middling wife, four to five a highly satisfactory one. "Good Lord!" I said. "She must have beauty that takes your breath away."

"Sarita is not ugly, but the kindest could only call Sarita plain. Sam Karoo, her father, was afraid she would be left on his hands."

"But then he got eight cows for her? Isn't that extraordinary?"

"Never been paid before."

"And yet you call Johnny's wife plain?"

"I said it would be kindness to call her plain. She is skinny. She walkans with her shoulders hunched and her head ducked. Her eyes are dull. She is scared of her own shadow."

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"Well, I guess love is blind."

"True enough," agreed the man. "And that's why the villagers laugh when they talk about Johnny. They get satisfaction from the fact that the best trader in the islands was beat out by that old fool, Sam Karoo."

"But how? Why?"

"No one knows and everyone wonders. When Johnny Lingo started to see Sarita during the fall festival, all the cousins were urging Sam to ask for three cows and hold out for two until he was sure Johnny would pay one. Then Johnny came to Sam Karoo and said, "Father of Sarita, I offer eight cows for your daughter."

I wanted fish. And I wanted pearls. And I wanted to meet Johnny Lingo and his eight-cow wife. So the next afternoon I beached my boat at Nurabandi. I noticed as I asked directions to Johnny's house that his name brought no sly smile to the lips of these islanders. When I met the handsome, friendly young man and he welcomed me with grace to his home, I liked him right away. I was glad that he had the respect of his own people. We sat in his house and talked. Then he asked, "You come here from Kiniwata?"

"Yes."

"They tell you of me on that island?"

"They say there's nothing I might want that you can't help me get."

"My wife is from Kiniwata."

"Yes, I know."

"They speak of her?"

"A little."

"What do they say?"

The question caught me off balance. "They told me you were married at festival time."

"Nothing more?" The curve of his eyebrows told me he knew there had to be more. And I was burning with curiosity.

"They also say the marriage settlement was eight cows. They wonder why."

"They ask that?" His eyes twinkled. "Everyone in Kiniwata knows about the eight cows?"

I nodded. "Oh, yes."

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"And in Nuriandi everyone knows it too." His chest expanded with satisfaction. "Always and forever, when they speak of marriage settlements, it will be remembered that Johnny Lingo paid eight cows for Sarita."

So that's the answer, I thought. Vanity.

And then I saw her. I watched her enter the room to place flowers on the table. She stood still a moment to smile at the young man beside me and greeted me in her own language. Then she went swiftly out again. She was the most beautiful woman! The grace of her movements, the sparkle of her eyes, her radiant smile: all spelled a well-deserved pride. I turned back to Johnny Lingo and found him looking at me.

"You admire her?"

"She's glorious, but she cannot be Sarita from Kiniwata."

"There's only one Sarita. Perhaps she does not look as they in Kiniwata say she looked?"

"She doesn't. I heard she was plain. They said you let yourself be cheated by Sam Karoo."

"You think eight cows were too many for that woman?"

"No. But how can she be so different?"

"Can you think what it must mean to a woman to know that her husband has argued for the lowest price for which she can be bought? And later, when the women talk - as they always do - they boast of what their husbands paid for them. One says four cows, another maybe six. How does the woman feel who was sold for one cow? This could not happen to my Sarita."

"They you did this to make your wife happy?"

"I wanted Sarita to be happy. But I wanted more than that. You say she is different, and it is true. Many things can change a woman. But the thing that matters most is the way she thinks about herself. In Kiniwata, Sarita believed she was worth nothing, not even one cow.

Now she knows she is worth more than any woman in the islands."

"So you wanted - "

"I wanted to marry Sarita. I loved her and no other woman"

"But - "

"But I wanted an eight-cow wife. And that is what I got."