

# Tin Chairs, Part One



by [Jillian Becker](#) (March 2022)

**“A seventeen-course breakfast.** For five people. In his private suite at the Ritz. Five people to eat it, six to serve it. I was one of the six. The table was laid with his own silver. This was in nineteen fifty-three and he was in his late fifties then, one of the richest men in the world. His valet hated him. One of his duties was to spray his master’s balls with scent when he got ready to go to bed with his wife in the adjoining suite.”

The long breakfast was served in London, years ago. The speaker, Alex, is in an African desert, seated in a tin armchair, at night, early in the southern winter of 1980. He is grey-haired and in daylight looks older than his fifty-four years, but now in the light of a campfire his features are indistinct, his spectacles ablaze with reflection in the rimless lenses. His listeners, four men and two women, make sounds of astonishment and amusement. One of them, Gaby,

shifts his gaze from the twin fires in Alex's glasses to the stars, multitudinous and brilliant, and cries out, "Look!", stretching up an arm and a finger, and they all look up just in time to see a falling star.

They loll against their rolled-up sleeping-bags, all except Alex and Giet the guide. Giet too sits in a tin chair. He's a tall, lithe, darkly tanned blond, a white native of this land. In his late thirties he still looks boyish. He wears army fatigues and boots, though he has never been in an army. The chairs belong to him. Their legs and arms are made of iron wrapped in tin; the seats and backs are square sheets of tin pierced with little holes in the pattern of a flower: a small central circle with radiating petals. He told them when they were loading the vehicles that he always "takes them with".

One, he informed them, was exclusively for his own use, the other, "for a lucky client".

"Depending," he always says.

"On what?" they always ask.

"My favour." He sounds authoritative but good-humoured, as they expect him to be, he supposes. "I know they take up too much space – which is cheeky of me when I tell you not to bring anything bulky – but the chairs always come with me. So if you come with me, you come with the chairs. If you object to the chairs, I'm not the guide for you."

Seven persons including himself are the fewest Giet will take on a nine-day excursion in the desert. He prefers parties of ten with a planned route and destination. No destination has been stipulated for this group, only a direction. They came up from Cape Town to assemble in Maun from where they started out. Time alone will determine how far they'll go and how long they'll linger in the limbo of their choice. Such vagueness would not be allowed by the authorities if they were going without a known professional guide. The rules are, inform the

police in the town you leave from, describe your route, name the town, farm, or hostelry you are aiming for, report your arrival there. If too much time passes after your departure without a report of an arrival, the police send a search party to find you. But tourists are reckoned safe with Giet.

It is the first night of the “expedition to nowhere and nothing” as Alex calls it. Since he is the organizer, it seems to him only right that Giet should have offered him the second tin chair when the fire had been lit and the food set down on two large tin cases, along with a pile of enamel plates and mugs, a few spoons, a sheathed knife and three can openers. No forks. “No knives, please. Just the one that I bring. And no guns, only mine. For protection. And no forks. We eat with our fingers. You can clean them with sand when you’ve finished. Your plates too. And wipe them off with your toilet paper. Every morning before we move we’ll dig a hole to bury the litter,” Giet had instructed them back in Maun.

Water, he told them, would be strictly rationed. It was not to be used for anything but drinking and the radiators of the vehicles. “Sorry, but we’ll all soon start stinking. And we’ll grow beards – except the ladies, of course. Every evening we make camp. We unload just about everything except the fuel store and vehicle spares. Every morning we re-load. It takes close on an hour to unload and get the fire going, and longer than that to reload in the morning. There’ll be hours and hours of travelling. We’ll stop for our animal needs whenever necessary. We have a whole desert for a toilet. What I’m getting at is, *expect not to be comfortable.*”

And he’d told them – warned them – what they would be eating. “Not much variety on the menu. None really. Bully-beef and biscuit like the British army in the First World War. What was good enough for them is good enough for us, hey? They won the war on it, right? Nothing else. Except coffee. Oh – and oranges. About three hundred in two crates.”

Before they'd set out from home he'd advised them, through Alex, to wear garments with pockets to carry their things. "Only one backpack each," he'd stipulated. "Extra bags and unnecessary paraphernalia cannot be accommodated." Then he'd added, kind and considerate after having to be firm and stern, "And tell them to bring hats and a warm jacket – it can get cold at night."

They'd travelled less than two hundred miles, having left later in the morning than planned because, after everything was loaded and Giet had completed a final inspection of the vehicles, he'd ordered all the tyres on the rented Landrover, including the spares, replaced with new ones – "no retreads" – and they'd had to be searched for in the town.

When at last they got underway, Giet leading with his truck, they had a smooth ride on a dirt road. They found out why it was smooth when they had to go off the road for a few yards to overtake a felled thorn tree, with branches as wide as the road itself, being dragged slowly by a noisy tractor to rake the dirt. The raised dust made it hard for Giet and the driver of the Landrover to see ahead. Their own vehicles bequeathed clouds of dust to the tractor driver sitting high without the protection of glass. He raised bare arms to shield his eyes, so he did not see the woman's hand waving through the back window of the Landrover, signalling "Sorry!"

"That's how they keep these roads from piling up dunes, and it works well," Giet remarked to Alex and Gaby who were riding with him. "But at the height of the wet season they become rivers of mud. The tractors are new – until quite recently oxen pulled the thorn branches."

"Why don't they equip their drivers with goggles?" Alex, always annoyed by incompetence, wondered aloud rather than inquired. "It's plainly predictable that dust will rise into the driver's face."

Giet could think of no defence so he made no reply.

After some minutes of silence Gaby told Giet he envied him his job. "What a great life, riding round Africa."

"I like it," Giet said, "But I don't plan to do it forever. Is this your first time?"

"My first time here, yes, but not my first time in the back of beyond. Alex and I went to Lesotho once. Years ago. It was called Basutoland then. We rode for days on small ponies ... we ... you remember, Alex, when we came over the top of that mountain what we saw? It was really something, Giet! A whole valley filled from side to side with blue gladioli lilies in full bloom. Other colours too, but I remember mostly blue. It was a lake of flowers ..." Gaby's voice became indistinct because of a hoarseness from dust or emotion.

Alex did remember the lilies. It was because of that long-ago ride on the ponies in no-longer-existing Basutoland that he'd wanted Gaby with him on this trip. Gaby was the first person to come to his mind when he conceived the idea and the first he invited to join him. They could once again, together, explore a swathe of Africa.

Gaby had not changed his unconventional ways after leaving the school where he and Alex had become friends. He had not needed to, working as a typesetter. Alex is not sure whether he admires or disdains his old friend for remaining so much the same, still wearing his hair long as in his late teens, though now it has grey in it. His clothes always smell of raw weather. Alex visits him occasionally, at least once every summer, in a holiday shack Gaby part-owns on the cold Atlantic shore. They play chess and listen to Alex's tape-recordings of baroque and classical music. Alex still thinks of Gaby as one of his best friends while yet secretly dreading the possibility that he will turn up one day at his hotel, perhaps ask for a table in one of the restaurants or introduce himself

to guests in the lounge, but he tells himself it is unlikely.

On the road today Alex felt certain that having Gaby with him was one of the reasons he felt happy.

Giet's judgments of him and his friend are of no concern to him, but had he known what they were, he would not have found them objectionable or wrong.

Giet "knows the types". People like Gaby and Alex are drawn to this country and use his services to experience "the real Africa". Each in his own way. These two? They aren't at all like each other. In fact, it's quite strange that they're friends. You wouldn't think they'd belong to the same social circle. Gaby is a "soft" man. Not necessarily weak or cowardly, just not forceful, for all his daring to look and talk ... unconventionally. Alex? A complicated personality. The sort who can all too easily afford to buy a taste of hardship for a few days. Pining for a brief bout of poverty. Feels it is good for him, like a cold shower. He'll endure deprivation but never insecurity – so he'll never know what poverty really tastes like. I bet he's paying Gaby's share of the costs.

In less than an hour the windscreens became spotted and smeared with the corpses of dead insects. Wipers only spread the smears into almost opaque grey fans, so when they had their "pit-breaks", Giet cleaned the glass of both vehicles with sponges kept damp in a long black vinyl bag ("as smooth and shiny," Gaby said to Alex, "as a wet seal").

They were stopped briefly by a file of ten elephants crossing the road, a huge bull in front and a small calf at the rear holding on with its trunk to the tail of – presumably – its mother. All the travellers except Gaby were wearing dark glasses and they lifted them or took them off to watch the elephants, as if they wanted no barrier between their eyes and the procession.

Alex offered to take a turn at the wheel but Giet said no,

unless in an emergency he alone drove the truck. Its sky-blue doors announce in mustard-yellow letters, "Rasmus Potgieter Co. Ltd.", and under that "Safari Tours", and under that "Maun, Botswana" and a telephone number.

An hour before sunset, since darkness falls quickly, Giet signalled the stop for the night. They emerged into a golden refulgence and the dead smell of ash. For miles around the earth was black. There was no grass, only the charred stumps of scattered trees.

"We'll camp here. Where there's been recent bushfire and the earth is still warm, it's safe to camp. No animal will come here. We may not be so lucky every night. Now we must make our own fire. We need sticks."

There was plenty of half-burnt kindling on the ashen ground or still hanging on the scorched trees. All the adventurers were eager to show they understood what they had chosen to commit themselves to, so they hurried to gather each his share in the fast-fading light, and laid their offerings at the feet of their guide.

Giet built the fire and set a giant can of coffee to boil on it.

After the austere meal and the "cleaning" of the plates, as the red sparks darted and wavered upward, Alex said he'd like to explain to them why he'd wanted to make this trip – for which he'd needed to recruit the rest of them. He asked if anyone else wanted to tell their reasons for coming. Those he'd invited to join him could, he joked, take the opportunity to "blame" him.

Tilly was the only one to reply. "I will tell," she promised. "But not tonight. I must say I'd rather we sang than talked. I offered to bring my button accordion but Giet said no, it's too bulky, he could allow nothing bigger than a mouth organ. I don't suppose anyone has brought a mouth organ? No."

Alex began, "Will it sound too dramatic if I say that from time to time I simply crave the wilderness? I suppose all of you must also feel sometimes you've had a surfeit of luxury? My father couldn't understand why I didn't enjoy it as he did. He wanted me to be like him, but I just wasn't. When I came out of the army he had a call girl waiting for me in the bridal suite of one of his hotels. He'd ordered a feast to be served to us, with champagne, and this woman told me straight off that my dad had hired her to spend the night with me. I had a hard time getting rid of her. I finally got her to go away by telling her she was beautiful, but I would not be able to make love to her that night. Coming back from the war the last thing I wanted was rich food and a perfumed woman. I didn't want the sports car he'd bought me. He took it back and buzzed about in it himself. I went on a climb with some friends in the Drakensberg and after that I lived for a while on a farm in the Little Karoo. The chap who owned it had been in the army with me. He'd been badly wounded. He lost half a leg. I asked him to put me to work on the farm and I had a year working outdoors. Then my old man sent me to Europe to learn the hotel trade. I could tell you hundreds of anecdotes about my apprenticeships in a series of hotels, but what sticks out in my memory now is a seventeen-course breakfast ..."

"Why so many courses?" Peter, Tilly's husband, asks when the falling star has vanished. The light tenor voice identifies the speaker for Alex.

After some moments of thought, he offers an explanation. "To keep them there, I suppose, Peter. I mean, they were kept there. Eating. For hours."

"But why? Keep them there for what?" Tilly asks impatiently.

Alex goes on, exploring his theory. "Those four men were from the Foreign Office. We were told they were from the Foreign Office. And he was an oil man. And a Muslim. They must have wanted him to help them make an oil deal with some Islamic



state. To be their broker. But he wasn't the sort of man to just do what he was told. He'd insist on working out his own deal with the British before he'd take their proposal to his contacts in the Middle East. He knew that would take time. And negotiations had to be on his turf. To give him the advantage. You see what I mean? To be host was to be master. It was a way for him to ... to exercise power."

"Seventeen courses, six waiters, heavy silver, hour after hour. Yep. I *do* see. Cunning fellow! No wonder he was rich," Peter comments amiably.

A deeper, more vigorous voice speaks from the other side of the fire. "And ensuring he got the highest fee he could possibly milk out of the British government could be expected to take quite a few hours."

That voice, Alex knows, is young Rian the scientist's. A realist. What he has said makes sense. It needs neither agreement nor denial, and no one takes it up.

But Peter wants Alex to come to the point. "So, Alex, explain what the obscenely lavish breakfast at the Ritz had to do with your decision to organize this venture."

"I chose it as an example of the sort of thing that I want a change from. But maybe it's not the best example I could give. It was exceptional, not typical. But we do live soft lives. I probably more than the rest of you. And sometimes I need a break from it. Just occasionally I *need* the wilderness. D'you see?"

"You need to escape from what's called 'conspicuous consumption'." Peter's tone is sympathetic, as a nod would be.

"But you can't have a *moral* objection to luxury!" Rian calls accusingly but with laughter, "Crikey, man, you're the chief provider of it to the nation!"

They all, except Giet, know that Alex owns a splendid hotel on the Cape peninsula. Only Gaby knows that he'd sold the six hotels he'd inherited to build the new one (which Gaby has seen only from the outside and would never want to enter).

Alex alone joins in Rian's laughter, taking his words not as an accusation of hypocrisy but as a flattering exaggeration. He laughs to reassure them that he is not offended. But Lopie, Rian's wife, exclaims "Rian!", quietly but audibly.

"No, no!" Alex replies. "That would be absurd. Hypocrisy in spades! As you say, I make my living providing luxury. I like doing it. It makes people happy. It's just that – I don't absolutely have to have it myself, though I live in it, and sometimes, occasionally – because I live in it – I want a certain amount of ... a kind of ... *hardness*. *Bareness*. I mean, the soul has its needs. Can't you see what I mean? Don't you have the same need sometimes? Isn't that why you're here now?"

"No more confessions to-night, please," Tilly pleads. "I'm going to sleep." She sets about unrolling her sleeping-bag and spreading it on one of the two stretcher beds Giet has brought for her and Lopie.

Even when they know they're safe from animals, Giet tells them, watch must be kept. Tonight, he will take the first four hours, Alex will relieve him. (They will contemplate the stars. Brew coffee. Giet will clean the gun and prowl about. Alex will ruminate and drink coffee.) Who, Giet asks, does not know how to handle a shotgun? Peter and Gaby. In the morning, Giet tells them, he will teach them how.

Giet – they have all heard from Alex who heard it from a hotel guest – is a crack shot. He knows bush-lore, how to track prey by following its spoor. He examines, sniffs and feels the turds of beasts to identify the species of the one that dropped it and how long ago, which tells him how far away it is. He can name desert plants and tell if they're edible or

poisonous, and what some are good for He reads weather-signs. He imitates birdcalls. He speaks Tswana and two Bushman languages. He can mend cars and other machines, improvise traps, skin and butcher. He has sucked snake-venom out of bites in human limbs and carried sick or wounded men on his back for miles. They can depend on Giet.

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Alex and Gaby take their turns driving the Landrover on the second day. The road they're on now is a pair of ruts on either side of a raised spine and progress is slow. Giet has invited Rian and his pretty wife Lopie to ride in the truck. Her soft-looking hair, he finds, has a flowery scent. She holds a sketch-book on her knees, now and then takes a pencil from a pocket in her denim shirt and makes small drawings or jots down a few words. When the first stop is made ("pit-stop for animal needs", Giet shouts out), Rian and Lopie and the four from the Landrover seek sheltered spots among the clusters of small trees, and the book is left on the seat. Without picking it up, Giet opens it. "This book belongs to" is printed on the first page, and "PENELOPE" is written in capital letters in red ink, aslant from low on the left to high on the right. On the next page in long hand, in pencil, "*Elephants walk in slow motion as if through water. Stately. Their ears wave. An elephant's head looked at full on is almost the shape of Africa.*" Giet sees the resemblance, which he's not noticed before, in the pencilled sketch under the written words.

He finds a page where she's drawn buck horns and written: "*Horns. Springbok – the pair outline the shape of a shield. Kudu – spirals spread high and wide apart. Gemsbok – gently curved like sabres. Oryx – can be straight as a pair of rapiers, parallel as a pair of rails.*"

"Gently curved," Giet repeats aloud. "Yes, gemsbok horns are *gently curved*." He wonders whether she has made the drawings

from photographs or has been on safari before.

When Lopie and Rian return to the truck, they find Giet chatting to someone over a two-way radio. He signs off and starts the engine.

"I was letting the police in Maun know where we are. I have to keep them informed every twelve hours."

Lopie says, "I saw a big wild cat. I know it wasn't a leopard. It had different spots. Like this." She takes a pencil from her pocket and opens the sketchbook to a blank page. "Look, Giet. What is it?"

He glances at the page. "That's a cheetah. You've got it right. A cheetah's head is small compared to a leopard's."

"I'd have liked to shout out to Rian to bring the camera, but I thought if I did, I might startle it and it would run away and hide."

"Or run at you."

"Would it attack me?"

"If you frightened it, it might."

"I hope we won't need to shoot anything."

"This isn't a hunt. But we need to have the gun for protection. Where'd you learn to draw?"

"I've never been taught. Not since art classes at school. I've got a bit of a knack and I like doing it."

She is the first to spot a line of springbok.

"Stop, Giet! Rian, take pictures. Look, they're springing – over a fallen tree – see *that*, see *that*!"

The springbok come to the fallen trunk in single file. " ... in

*their uniforms," Lopic will write in her notebook, "tan on the back, white underneath, broad brown stripe on the sides. They do not break step but move without pause into the leap. As each rises slowly its back legs stretch while its front legs are folded under its chest, until at the apex the front legs stretch out too, so for a second it lies full length on air, then the back legs fold while the forelegs reach out for the descent and the landing. As one of them lands in front another rises at the back, and seven are springing at the same time, forming a perfect arc."*

She laughs aloud when the last springbok lands and continues on its way at the back of the file, its white hindquarters the last they see of the troupe. All the travellers have watched the performance in silence. When it's over, they smile at each other. Alex, intending to compile memories, imagines captioning the moment: "We were all struck by that sight, united in a shared response." Giet, though for him the leaping of springbok is no novelty, stares with as much pleasure as the rest. Peter resolves to see more of Africa, take his wife away more often. Rian regrets that he didn't bring a movie camera in defiance of the "nothing superfluous" order. He will display the best of his photos framed and protected by glass. Tilly lets loose the tight fists she clenched while she watched. For Gaby the arch of antelope will remain as consoling as the lake of flowers.

Neither in the truck nor the Landrover is there any talk about the springbok. They feel calm and content in the shine of the day, the harmonious quiet. They don't talk much at all until the sun throbs in its descent. Then, tasting dust, they ask for water. Giet grants the stop and fills enamel mugs from porous bags he keeps tied to the front of the vehicles to be cooled by the wind of their motion. When they have all drunk without stopping until the mugs are empty. Giet refills the bags from the tank and restores them to their places. They drive on in a dramatic light of long low beams. Giet calls a

halt to the day's journey when he judges that daylight will last just long enough for the unpacking.

The tin chairs are again set down a few feet apart. Giet waits while the others fetch their food. They carry the heaped plates to patches of grass on which they'll sit. Rian hungrily starts on his bully beef as he walks. Tilly makes her way towards the second chair but Giet stops her. "No, no! No, Tilly. I'm letting Lopie have the chair tonight."

Tilly is surprised, aggrieved. "But it's my turn," she says, "to tell why I've come."

"Sure. You can do that from the ground," Giet says. "Everyone wants to hear your story."

"But I thought ... I mean, last night Alex ..."

"Yes, Alex sat in the chair while he told his story. That doesn't mean everyone will."

Lopie, comes to stand beside Tilly and says cheerfully, "It's okay, Giet. Tilly can have the chair, I don't mind. You take it, Tilly."

"No, no, no," Giet insists. "I decide who has the chair. Not you tonight, Tilly. If Lopie doesn't want it, Rian can have it."

"Then I'd like Rian to have it," Lopie says. "Rian, the chair's yours. Giet says."

"Glad to," Rian says, and takes the chair.

"Ridiculous," Tilly exclaims with a short laugh. "Making such an issue of it." From now on she will not like Giet, but won't let it matter.

Alex thinks, "She must feel slighted but she's putting a good face on it. Giet is ridiculous the way he carries on about

those crummy chairs.”

Gaby watches the reflection of flames in the chairs’ dull silver legs. “Chariots of fire – not quite,” he mutters, not expecting anyone to hear. But Tilly, nearest to him, does. “Not quite but sort of,” she murmurs. And they smile at each other.

Everyone except Gaby and Giet knows that Tilly’s a national celebrity as the host of a long-running weekly cooking show on television and that she disappeared from it. They do not know that when she turned forty this year, the producers replaced her with a younger blonde. “Do I suddenly look old?” she’d asked them. “Oh, no! Absolutely not! You still look stunning,” they’d insisted. “It’s just policy.”

When the time comes for her to tell her tale, she proclaims, “I was a TV cook and I’ve been fired for getting old. To tell the truth, I’m not sorry. I mean, I miss the pay, the money was good, sure, but I don’t miss the job. It might come as a surprise to you, but I can tell you, the television world isn’t a happy place to be. In fact, to be completely honest with you, I’ve had enough of it. I told Alex when he asked me if I wanted to come on this trip, I said yes because I want a real break, a total change. But I told him, don’t expect me to cook. Right, Alex? I said we’ll eat what people eat on these trips, whatever it is. Didn’t I? I said it and I meant it. So okay, I didn’t expect it to be quite as horrible as it is, but it’s a change alright, isn’t it just!” All or some of them laughed. “But it’s fine, Giet,” she calls to him. “If we can keep it down it’ll keep us alive. No offense intended.”

“None taken,” Giet says. He supplies bland food because he has learned to give his customers what they feel they ought to eat. He wonders about Tilly, “Is that really why she came – not to cook? She could have not cooked at home.”

The talk becomes an exchange of opinions about television

shows. Lopie tells Tilly she'd enjoyed watching her show and had "really learned" quite a lot from it. "Though even when I followed a recipe exactly, my whatever never looked as scrumptious as the one you made, Tilly."

Now Tilly can forgive Lopie now for being offered the chair. She liked Lopie as a neighbour. "Seems a nice cheerful girl," she'd said of her to Peter. And she'd thought Rian "rather good-looking and and rather dull" but kept that opinion to herself. She hadn't hesitated to suggest to Alex that he might try inviting them to join the expedition when he said he needed a few more. "Preferably enthusiasts for wild Africa."

"She told me her husband spends quite a lot of time in Botswana. I gathered he's doing some sort of scientific research. So he must be an enthusiast of sorts. I think she'd like to go. She's never been there, she says."

She'd done the girl a favour and now her reward has been another humiliation. But it's not really the girl's fault. And besides, she has come to the point, Tilly tells herself, where she doesn't care. The point at which hurt rests.

Gaby says, "I'm sorry but I must tell you I don't have TV. I've never had it. I don't want it. I'm sure every one of you can tell me about something I'm missing, right? But don't, please. Really. Nothing you say will make me change my mind."

The change Tilly most wants and cannot confess to is a return for a few days to the single state she'd eagerly emerged from two years earlier. She'd intended to come alone, to leave her husband behind. She assured him when she told him she was going with their neighbours Rian and Lopie on a "drive through the Kalahari", that she did not expect him to ask for leave from work at such short notice just because she was indulging a whim. She would not, she said, be so selfish. He thanked her for her consideration, told her he'd miss her, and added – because he loved her – a palliative for her conscience. Such a



trip, he assured her, was not his idea of pleasure.

But here he is, calm, corpulent, middle-aged, accustomed to being instantly liked and trusted. He brought a heavy black case which all of them welcomed and Giet happily found space for in the Landrover.

Peter gives his explanation after his wife's. It is simple. "I'm here on duty," he says smiling, spreading his arms. "Alex informed me that my presence as a physician was nothing short of essential."

Tilly had let slip to Alex, over a pre-lunch cocktail in his bar, that her husband was a doctor. He had asked why he never came with her though – he was gratified to notice – she often lunched with friends on the terrace.

"He's dreadfully overworked at the hospital. They think they can never spare him."

At once Alex had determined to have him join the expedition. They wouldn't have to practise administering snake-bite serum by injecting pillows as Giet had advised (quickly adding, "Although the yellow cobras will be asleep by then.")

"Do we have a destination in mind?" was Peter's first question after his consent had been won – easily enough since he liked being with his wife.

And Alex had confessed over the telephone, amused at himself, "If it has to have a name it's "Nowhere", hey? Okay, let's rather say *some wide emptiness somewhere*."

Rian turns his chair a little so that he can see the form of Giet in the darkness and address him in particular. Giet is one of the only two who know nothing about him. The other is Gaby. Rian prefers Giet.

Giet feels, if a little reluctantly, a new respect for Rian when he learns that this fellow, who is younger than himself

by at least ten years and at first seemed too darned sure of himself, has after all good reason to be ... self-confident. He is working as part of a government-paid team of three trying to discover why the waters of the Okavango swamps irrigate so small a strip of land around them and so quickly drain away into the sand – a matter of national concern.

“We’re hydrologists. We’ve been working out of Maun on and off for a year.”

The only one in Rian’s audience who is interested in what he tells them is Peter. His questions, Rian says, are the right ones to ask but hard to answer. They give him a reason to go on talking.

“We know there are also small lakes and waterholes that appear in the south and simply dry up. But we were never sent further south than the confluence of the Shashe with the Limpopo. Travelling south-west with you gives me a chance to see those lakes. With luck. It would’ve been better if we could have gone a week or two earlier. You know the territory south of Ghanzi, Giet. Have you seen small lakes there?”

“Sure I’ve seen small lakes.”

“At this time of year? Not yet dried up?”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Many, would you say?”

“Hell, man,” Giet exclaims, but amiably, “I haven’t covered every inch of the ground.”

“Shall we sing something?” Tilly asks loudly.

“No!” Alex calls. “Please not, Tilly!” he adds hastily, with a laugh to show he means no rudeness. He fears she will sing a pop song, not an aria from Don Giovanni.

"I sing nicely," Tilly says. "You can choose the song. Something you can join in."

No one responds.

"You could vote on it," Giet suggests.

"It's okay," Tilly says rising. "Time to sleep." Tonight she will not get into her sleeping bag; not again endure its restriction of movement; she will use it as a cover, and her rucksack as a pillow.

Giet advises them to rub themselves "all over" with orange peel. "The mosquitoes are asleep," he says, "but spiders and scorpions are awake. They don't like the smell of orange."

"Oh jeez! Scorpions!" Tilly groans.

It is Peter's turn to watch. He asks, as Giet puts the gun in his hands, "What might I need to use this against, Giet?"

Giet smiles and shrugs. "A lion," he suggests.

"Can this kill a lion? Shouldn't we use a rifle?"

"The shotgun's good enough with slugs in it," Giet says a little impatiently, moving away.

Peter, rubbing his arms, face and neck with orange peel, ponders how he can stay awake and alert for four hours. He can sit in a tin chair, he can stroll about the fire, revive it when it sinks too low, brew fresh coffee and drink it.

By the time a half-moon rises, all the others are asleep.

They are woken hours later by a gunshot. Peter apologizes, explains in a hoarse whisper out of the dark. "I heard something moving about. It sounded big. A big beast. I fired the gun to frighten it away. I'm pretty sure I did frighten it away. Don't worry, Tilly darling. It won't come back."

Gaby takes over the gun, and Peter spreads his sleeping bag beside his wife's stretcher. She lies awake and after an hour or so rises and goes and sits in a tin chair which she moves close to Gaby's.

"What do you do for four hours when you're on watch?"

"I listen to the owls. They're easy to hear now in winter when the crickets have gone. Sit here for a while and you'll hear them. There! Did you hear that whistling noise? That's an owl."

"I thought they went te-whit te-whoo."

"They do that too. Listen."

Tilly reaches two fingers into a pocket and brings out a small tin and papers folded in a wrapper. She never lets her husband see her smoke marijuana. Not that she expects him to be angry. He is never angry with her. She just doesn't want it to trouble him. This is a perfect time for it. She is so sure that Gaby will say nothing to anyone about it that after a draw or two she confidently holds out the joint to him, its end flattened and a little moist. He takes it from her without hesitation and puts it to his lips.

For a while they smoke and listen for the noises of owls.

"But when we get there, wherever it is, what will we do?" she demands to be told.

"Just *be*," Gaby says.

That sort of talk annoys Tilly. She gets up abruptly, goes back to her stretcher and falls into a deep sleep until dawn. Waking, she loses a dream she was enjoying, and is sorry to find herself where she is.

\*

The heat is greater today. There is little talk as they ride. At the end of this third day, wherever they may stop, they will have reached Alex's "nowhere and nothing". They look forward to it, though all but Giet and Gaby have moments of wondering if they might regret this venture.

Peter and Gaby sit silently in the truck with Giet. Alex drives the Landrover and Lopie falls asleep on the back seat. Curls stick to her damp forehead. Rian, beside her, has his camera between his feet. He gazes at the passing desert hour after hour, but sees nothing to photograph, just red earth, clumps of yellow grass, occasionally a small lone flat tree with branches longer than the tree itself spread out straight like stretched arms. In the late afternoon, he and Tilly watch the shadow of their vehicle moving along beside them, stroking earth and grass and stones.

They stop for rations of water, but only feel restored when the heat abates, and the shadows of the trees are taller than the trees themselves.

The landscape is now colourless but for long green vines, on which green melons the size of footballs grow, emerging from clumps of tall pale grasses that – Gaby observes – only become beautiful when the late sunlight sets fire to their tips.

Almost no daylight remains when Giet signals that they have reached journey's end, the non plus ultra of their journey, the place to stay for four nights and three days. It is a space surrounded by trees, some crowded together. In the dusk Lopie can make out thorns and baobabs, and others she will ask Giet for the names of tomorrow. Because there are so many trees, Rian says, there must be water somewhere near.

When all is unloaded, the bundled and bound sleeping bags in place, each with a toilet roll beside it, and a fire lit, they all stand looking towards Giet seated in one of the chairs, waiting for him to say who may enjoy the other one.

"Lopie," he says, "come, sit here." And Lopie takes the chair, in obedience but not in triumph. It is not in her nature to enjoy triumph over others. She dreads anyone's hurt. At least tonight, she tells herself, she is not depriving anyone particular of the privilege – though in a way all of them. And she knows they're as aware as she is why their guide and leader chooses her repeatedly. That too is through no fault of hers. She believes she loves them all, and needs their love, but above all she loves Rian, so if she must lose the love of either Rian or Giet, it will have to be Giet's, as Giet – and Rian – must surely understand.

They are all hungry and they eat in silence. The moon has risen and is bright when the moment comes for Alex to say, "Now *you* tell us, Lopie, why you came. We're happy you did, and we want to hear your story."

"No story really," she says. "I came because for once I can be on a trip with my husband. I mean, he's away from home so much I sometimes don't see him for weeks on end. He told you *his* story, why he came."

"Isn't it also because you want to make drawings of wild animals?" Giet asks her.

"Oh yes, sure, this is a great opportunity. I want to make lots of drawing of animals. I plan to write books for children and illustrate them myself. I used to be a nursery-school teacher in Port Elizabeth. That's where I was born. I had to leave my job when I married Rian and we moved to Cape Town. I haven't found a new job yet, so I'm trying my hand at writing. Just for children."

She leaves it at that. She doesn't expect anyone to be very interested.

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[*To Be Continued*]

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**Jillian Becker** writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter*, *The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is [www.theatheistconservative.com](http://www.theatheistconservative.com).

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