

# No Ordinary Woman – Thelma Gutsche: a fond memoir



Young Lady with Gloves by Tamara de Lempick

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

*Dr Thelma Gutsche (1915-1984), for many years director of the documentary film department of African Consolidated Theatres in Johannesburg, South Africa, was the author of meticulously researched histories and biographies. They include a life of Arnold Theiler who founded an important Veterinary College, and a life of Florence Phillips, whose husband Sir Lionel Phillips was one of the great gold-mining magnates of the Witwatersrand. 'No Ordinary Woman' is the title of her biography of Lady Phillips – a description this author thinks is even better suited to Thelma Gutsche herself.*

I first met Thelma Gutsche, filmmaker, historian, biographer, in Johannesburg, the city of my birth, in 1944. I was eleven or twelve and she was twenty-nine. One afternoon, during my school holidays – in what season I do not remember – there she was in our long chintzy lounge, ‘taking’ tea (as she would have said) with my mother Lulu, and talking in a small high-pitched voice which was to become very familiar to me. When my mother introduced me, probably as ‘my daughter Jill’, she greeted me ceremoniously: ‘How doo you doo, Miss Friedman?’ The double ss was slightly hissed: the lady had a slight lisp.

☒ She was then, and she remained, the most fascinating person who ever chanced into my *Bildungsjahre*. She was tall, slender, elegant. In dress, gesture, manner, atmosphere, she was like nobody else. Beautiful? Yes. Her beauty was not in the mode of the forties, which was a lipstick, page-boy, shelf-shouldered style, glitzy if Hollywood, all too English-rose if Borehamwood, but beautiful she undoubtedly was. The thirties had been more her style.

Style was of great importance to Thelma. I soon got to know her clothes, the ensembles of weekdays, of Sundays, and of party evenings. She did not have many (she was never rich), but they were all well cut and well made, and of very good quality. Weekdays she wore tweed skirt-and-jacket ‘costumes’ in shades of light tan, burnt orange; Sundays long trousers, and on all days silk shirts and soft brogues. Her full-length evening dresses were satin, in colors of chestnut or caramel, hung from the finest of spaghetti straps, narrow to the thighs, then flaring to the pointed toes of high-heeled shoes. With them she wore the longest pendant earrings, lobe-to-shoulder, a jewel or two on a thread, and clear to be seen because her cropped, honey-colored hair was brushed back and tapered into her nape.

She smoked a lot. It was the vice that killed her. In her lizard handbag, or the small purse of the evening which

depended from her wrist on a filament of gold, she would carry cigarette case and holder. That holder typified her – its eccentricity, its elegance, its drama. She would stand, many an evening, in front of the fireplace, set down her hand-warmed glass of cognac on the mantelshelf, light a cigarette, fix it in the holder, then, with a graceful flourish, start to smoke. And sometimes, if my father Barn should be standing there conversing with her, she would insert the cigarette unlit, put the holder to her lips, and he (also then a smoker with matches in his pocket) would light it in a practiced way without pausing his talk.

Thelma did not speak of ‘smoking’; the word she used for it was ‘fuming’. ‘Do you mind if I fume?’ she would ask, frequently to the surprise of some slow-witted new acquaintances, who thought she might be asking permission – formal as her manners were – to fly into a rage.

She did not speak of ‘handbags’ but of ‘reticules’: not of ‘shoes’ but ‘bottine’. A housewife was raised to instant nobility as ‘chatelaine’. In our house she often addressed me as ‘deputy chatelaine’.

☒ ‘I ran all the way to the newsvendor with my tickey [threepenny bit] clutched in my hot little handy,’ she would say, bringing my father a newspaper carrying a report on one of his political speeches. For my mother she brought flowers, or rather, usually, a single flower, one rose, one tulip (Lulu’s favorite), or something indigenous, wild, thorny and flamboyant. ‘A blommetjie [little flower] for the chatelaine,’ she would say, as she descended the wide stairs from the front door to the hall, where Lulu waited to greet her. She chose to pronounce Afrikaans words as if they were English – though she was fluent in Afrikaans – so they sounded *outré*, exotic as her French and German selections. ‘I am expecting guesties, and must hasten to my kombuis [kitchen] to brew a birdie.’

A ‘thank you’ would be met with a dismissive ‘Pish!’, her

near-lisp most noticeable on that 'sh'.

'And good-evening to yooo, Mrs So-and-so [or Miss or Mr or Dr]' she would greet any other visitor. She would go on calling them Miss or Mrs or Mr or Dr for years and years, and some resented it, feeling themselves obscurely and inexplicably mocked. Yet she was kind-hearted, and never willingly wounded anyone's *amour propre*. She might even have felt that she was treating people with extra, not diminished respect by her formal politeness. There was slight self-mockery in her affecting of elaborate manners, the irony by which the fastidious protect themselves. It invited others to play the game with her. She hoped, not to annoy or provoke, but to surprise, to arouse curiosity, to amuse. For all her oddness, she was conservative. She had all the sterling virtues: probity; industriousness (she was an extreme 'workaholic'); generosity; staunch loyalty; courage and endurance; pleasure in the achievements of others. Her faults? Stubbornness, and a reluctance to let someone else be the giver. But she was never petty, and as devoid of jealousy or envy as any human being could be.

She enjoyed the company of intelligent men, and there grew up between her and my father a very firm and lasting friendship, full of humor, mutual respect, and, though with difference of degree and quality on each side, admiration. This despite his telling her many times that the opening sentence of her biography of Lady Phillips, the wife of a South African mining magnate, was 'the worst opening sentence of any book I have read'. (The sentence: 'At the time when the world stood poised on the edge of one of its great climacterics, the Widow of Windsor was not unaware of the scene of its occurrence.') She laughed every time he said it. He, a surgeon, businessman and member of parliament, was famous for his word-power as an orator, and Thelma took it on herself to paste his press-cuttings in leatherbound albums. Models of order, they are now in the Museum at the Johannesburg Public Library.

But it was for my mother that she formed the stronger attachment. And it became much more than that: an intense passion. All Thelma's closest and most intimate relationships were with women, and I suspect that my mother was the object of her deepest and most lasting love. My mother did not reciprocate the kind or degree of feeling. My mother did not love her, nor, I think, did she ever love anyone. But she expected to be the object of men's passion, and believed all through her life that she was, even in her last days. (When she was dying at the age of seventy-three, and her hand could not control a pen, she dictated to me at a typewriter the teasing letter of a nubile girl, addressed to a foreign diplomat of whose partiality for her she was convinced. One of her favorite poems was Heine's *Die Lorelei*, about the Rhine maiden who entices sailors to their deaths by shipwreck.) With women she did, however, have close friendships, which would pass through seasons of tropical warmth, and then of arctic cold. The summer of her friendship with Thelma lasted longer than any other. It went on past my schooldays, and my years at university, and as far as I knew or can now remember no frost was yet in the air between them when I sailed for Europe in 1960. I now see it as strikingly symbolic, and perhaps darkly portentous, that Lulu bought Thelma a mink coat at the height of that emotional summer.

Several times every week Thelma would join us for the family dinner. When there were no other guests, the three of them – Barn, Lulu and Thelma – grew into that kind of intimacy which develops an esoteric language of its own: allusions, coded ways of referring to incidents and ideas, joke words. They composed a parody of the first quatrain of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. So,

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe

...

became –

'Twas Thelmig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the Barnacoves,  
And the Lulubird outgrabe.

They often used these names when they were together, but Barn and Lulu never used them for each other if Thelma wasn't there. No such closeness was displayed by my parents without her; but when she was present they both called her "Thelmig", and the three of them became absorbed in so close an intimacy it was as if an invisible circle were drawn about them, and anyone else had to feel excluded.

While I was usually content to look on and listen, my brother Jonathan, as ill at ease in this world as if he had been made for quite a different one, would try in vain to attract the attention of our parents from Thelma to himself. 'Er ... Mommy? Er ... Daddy?' he would try; or he would make a provocative comment, preferring even angry attention to none at all. He did not often succeed, but once he did spectacularly. He realized (we could hardly fail to) that Barn and Lulu valued wit above all other virtues. Wit was a family talent, and Jonathan had inherited the knack of it along with the rest of his share of genes, which for him had been mostly a pretty vitiating lot. Well, he saw his chance one night when my father was talking about the tax advantages of owning a petrol station. This must have been in the early days of the trio's friendship, when the war was still on.

'Something new, eh Thelmig,' mused my father, 'for me to become a garage owner?'

He paused. They all three viewed this unromantic prospect without excitement. Surely there was an irony to be discovered in it, a *bon mot* to attach to it and redeem it from banality?

In that moment Jonathan saw his chance and seized it:

'You can't really say it's something new to deal in petrol and oil when you've always dealt in gas and unction.'

Three astonished faces were turned towards him where he sat at the bottom of the table. Then they looked at each other. Then all three relaxed into smiles, and they laughed. My father guffawed; my mother's shoulders shook and she had to pluck her hanky from her belt to dab her eyes; and Thelma stretched her long throat and laughed until she coughed, and she had to smooth back her hair and recover her breath. It mattered not a jot that the jibe was barbed; it was sharp, it was funny. For a moment Jonathan was let in. How he bloomed, almost visibly grew; how his face shone.

My mother's wit was not just cutting, it was maiming, it was murderous. But I cannot recall her ever stabbing Thelma with it. Quarrel they did. Even in the early days there was intermittent coolness. But I think her offenses to Thelma in the early years of their friendship were more in the line of oversolicitousness, of Lulu's wanting to interfere in Thelma's eccentric ways, to take liberties of possessiveness rather than to abuse. 'Thelma can be so difficult,' Lulu would complain. And Thelma, leaving early, would climb the stairs to the front door with an air for which her own description would have been 'hoity-toity'. And next evening, Thelma would not appear. As we went in to dinner, and before the 'houseboy', who waited at table, was ordered to remove the place laid for 'Miss Gootsh', Lulu would go to the telephone. She would dial in her quick impatient way – zzzip, zzzip, zzzip... – and then we'd hear her ask in a tired voice, offering no greeting first, 'I suppose you're going to dine on a boiled egg and sit up working till three in the morning?' And Thelma's small high voice might be imagined replying, as sometimes she had been heard to reply when present, 'How kind of you, Mrs Friedman, to be so concerned about me, but I have made my arrangements, thank you.' But another evening would come, and, perhaps because there had been other phone calls, Thelma would descend the stairs holding a single rose.

'A blommetjie for you, Madame la Chatelaine.'

'I thank you, Miss Gutsche!'

'Pish!'

It must have been a few years after the war that Thelma, who was working for African Consolidated Theatres at the time as head of the Documentary Film section, was awarded her doctorate by the University of Cape Town. Her dissertation was on the history of cinematography. We celebrated with champagne, and from then on she was 'Dr Gutsche' when she wasn't just 'Thelma' or 'Thelmig' – 'Dr Gootsh' to the servants.

Sometimes she came to stay for a few days. My mother went to some trouble to recarpet and curtain the spare room in my parents' wing of the house. At that time the two women didn't seem to quarrel much or at all. They went into the publishing business together, with two other partners, men who knew rather more about the book trade than they did. 'Silver Leaf Books' was launched one night at a hotel, on or near the date of my parents' silver wedding anniversary, my mother wearing a silver dress and silver earrings in the shape of silver leaves. She had chosen the name because she 'loved' the silver trees of the Cape Peninsula. The venture was not a success. Only two titles were issued, one of them the first published book by Nadine Gordimer, a collection of short stories called *Face To Face* which came out again later in New York retitled *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*.

When I left school, Thelma invited me to dinner at the Country Club, in order, she said, to teach me about wine, and how to hold my liquor. She fetched me in her small open sports car, with the hood down. In my memory it is upholstered with real leather and has a polished wood dashboard – but I might be confusing it with other veteran cars I have admired. I think it had a horizontal gear, but again I could be mistaken. I do distinctly remember her gloved hands driving. The gloves were short, of a brown and wrinkled business-like leather with a



design of little holes punctured in them. Anyway, her car seemed to me at the time to be very much one of Thelma's Things; it suited her the way her tweeds and cigarette holder and long earrings and book-lined flat suited her. Of the evening itself I remember that she made me feel like a grown-up guest whose company she enjoyed, though I must have been little more than a pair of ears and a chewing mouth. I'm sure the wine she ordered was a good one, and I'm sure I would have pretended to adjudge it as fine as she said it was.

My father used to work most evenings in his office next to the kitchen, and when he finished at about eleven o'clock he would go out through the back door into the garage, and drive off to Killarney, where Thelma lived in a two-room flat. It became a regular ritual, late evening coffee together when he was finished with paperwork for the night, and she was in the midst of it and needing a pause. Lulu went sometimes but not often. She was usually in bed by eleven.

When the winter of her relationship with Thelma set in – and a very long winter it was, an ice-age – Barn still kept that regular rendezvous, at least for some years.

Long before the coldness came, my mother and I went to Rome to join Thelma, who was coming from a meeting in Athens of the International Council of Women. We went on to Florence, and I remember sitting at a table in a street just off the Piazza della Signoria, and the waiter putting things down on the table, including some plates, which Thelma distributed among the three of us. There were not enough of one sort or another, and Thelma said, 'There appears to be a paucity of platters', which made me laugh until I choked. We flew to Paris, where a friend of Thelma's who had some official position in the Museum of Modern Art came to breakfast at our hotel, and then took us round her museum, and I thought what a woman of the world Thelma must be to know such people. When I announced that, as we had so few days and there was so much to see, I would spend a day walking round Paris with a map and guide

book, Thelma told my mother on no account to let me, as I would almost certainly be abducted for the white slave traffic. My mother saw nothing in that to trouble her, and I walked – unaccosted, unmolested, and unchloroformed – for six hours.

We returned to South Africa, I got married, Jonathan was sent to America for psychiatric treatment, and I saw Thelma much less often.

*'Dearly beloved Lulu,'* Thelma wrote on a Monday 24 July, sometime in the early fifties, I think:

*'This is perhaps silly and childish but your letter of tonight from Cape Town has touched off so profound a longing for you that I cannot resist the impulse to write to you quickly and seek some solace for a gnawing loneliness. I am so very glad that something you cherished turned out even as you had hoped. You knew I had a mortal terror of the contrary – perhaps I know better than you the full horror of aloneness when one had longed for and stood supported by a companionship suddenly withdrawn. Cherish it dearly, Lulu, and let me be glad with you.'*

What Lulu had hoped and was advised to cherish is hinted at later in the letter:

*Barn took me to the Criterion to dinner. We had a half-bottle of Chianti and feeling better, were engaged in the artless badinage with which Barn and I can spend endless hours, when he suddenly said – 'Am I to lose my wife to M- B-? [I omitted the name when I copied the letter because the man was well known and for all I knew still alive, and now I have lost the original.] To which I replied no, I don't think so... . Never underestimate Barn. He has always been my good kind percipient friend, especially at difficult times, and I have always seen him as yours. But it is perhaps not my business. I just thought I ought to tell you this.'*

After such proof of the unselfishness of her affection, and of her knowledge of the 'horror of aloneness when one has longed for and stood supported by a companionship suddenly withdrawn', it seems very sad to me that Thelma lost Lulu's companionship utterly and permanently, even though I cannot understand her love for Lulu. (And surely, also, Lulu deprived herself – and Barn to an extent – of a source of amusement and delight, of enrichment of every day existence, of which there cannot be so many in anybody's life that we can afford to discard even one of them.) The break came when I was far away. I do not know the circumstances; what, if anything other than my mother's whim, brought it about; nor what *Sturm und Drang*, if any, ensued.

I did not see Thelma then for many, many years. I lived in watery England, raised my children, and wrote books about imaginary and contemporary events; and she wrote biographies in the bright south of Africa which she loved with an abiding passion – or more accurately, most of which she loved, especially the Cape Province. 'Ek is 'n Kaapse meisie,' (I am a Cape girl) she would say, meaning not only that her heart was there, but that she had been born in the Cape. She never did like Johannesburg, and towards the end of her life 'abominated' it. She knew it well. She wrote *Do You Know Johannesburg?* with a co-author before I left home; it lay about on coffee-tables and window-seats in our house. Much later, long after their publication, I saw her books on Bishop Gray's wife and on the veterinary surgeon Theiler, and her biography of Lady Phillips titled *No Ordinary Woman*. Fat books, most of them, packed with the most meticulous and thorough research. In 1979 or 1980, she sent a copy of her Theiler biography to Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, who had befriended Thelma when the Earl was Governor-General of South Africa – and had known Theiler. My father, when he visited me in London, acted as emissary. The Princess invited him to a sumptuous tea at Kensington Palace, and talked happily to him, *tête-à-tête*, about Thelma and South Africa.

Her memories of both were vivid and affectionate.

In January 1977 I visited my parents. I slept in my old room, still much as it had always been. Thelma did not appear. Her name was not mentioned, and I did not ask about her. My mother was very ill, almost unable to swallow, and while I was there she went into a nursing home for an operation. One afternoon when I was visiting her in her private room, she whispered hoarsely, 'Look what came in the post for me today.' It was a letter from Thelma, gently affectionate and concerned. I do not remember many of the words she used, but I know she said that she very much hoped neither the illness nor the operation would impair Lulu's voice, because it was, she said, a lovely voice. And so it was, unless one had dread of it – it was cool, light, musical. (Yet an instrument of terrible destruction!)

'Shall I telephone her for you, and thank her?'

'It makes me furious. It is so typical of Thelma.'

'Why does it anger you?'

'Because it is self-abasement!'

What, oh what, had their relationship become, I wondered. What resonances sounded under the spoken or written words that only they, or perhaps only one of them, could catch! My father no more than I found 'self-abasement' in that kind letter. I never found out what the final decisive quarrel had been about. Both Barn and Thelma, when I asked them what had happened, gave me answers that casually waved away my question. It was not anything important. Relationships come to an end. Something like that. I don't remember their words, but I got the message that the story was not to be told – or anyway not to me.

My mother died some four months later. The day before she died (as it turned out) she agreed to see Thelma. I never

discovered if Thelma had asked to see her, or it was Lulu's own idea. My father was not with them – whether by choice or chance I don't know. I was back in England. It was years later that my father mentioned the meeting.

They must have found each other much changed. Lulu, propped up on many frilled cushions, was dressed night and day in caftans which hid her very wasted body, and wore an auburn wig just lightly streaked with grey. Her always strong feminine vanity was with her to the end. She had insisted on wearing the wig during her operation – tied it on – for under it her hair was so thin that the scalp was plain to see. She continually wore rouge and lipstick, and penciled her eyebrows. Her blue half-blind eyes had a natural violet shadow round them. When I last saw her she looked aged, raddled, malign, and brave. Her pink bedroom with its thirties Jean Harlow furniture was so full of flowers – stiff, ugly, florists' arrangements with extravagant bows of wired looped ribbon – that the scent was overpowering; yet it intensified rather than obscured the other sickening smell, of the cancer which was killing her.

And Thelma – I was to see for myself – had become gaunt. Her cheek-bones stood out, hectic, her cheeks were cavernous below them. She breathed with some difficulty. I do not know what they said to each other. Thelma did not choose to tell me.

After my mother's death, Thelma visited my father often. Several times a week she would call in for half-an-hour or so before lunch. She would not stay for a meal unless she had been invited in advance. She usually walked the half mile 'for the exercise'. When my father suddenly found he could not walk one day in May 1981, it was Thelma who phoned to tell me, and to reassure me that he was 'otherwise fine'. Between that time and his death three years later I flew to Johannesburg to stay with him two or even three times a year, for periods of three weeks to three months, and it was at that time that Thelma and I began a slowly-developing friendship, though in the last months of Barn's life both he and I saw less of her as she

retired and moved to her last home, a Victorian house in Montagu in her beloved Cape. He missed her sorely. He telephoned her frequently, late at night, at the old coffee hour. For his birthday in December 1982, Thelma, frail as she was, drove up to Johannesburg by herself in an aging Peugeot, and arrived just in time to be one of only three guests, all close women friends of his (I think Nadine Gordimer was one of them), at a celebratory lunch. That was the last time they saw each other.

Thelma had long planned her retirement in Montagu. 'I'll not leave my bones in the Transvaal,' she had told me. She had set her heart on a typical old Cape house with pressed steel ceilings, wood plank floors, a bay window, galvanized iron roof, and a stoop fronted with slender columns. When she'd heard, before her retirement, that there was one for sale, she'd rushed down south to buy it, only to find that a hotelier in the town had already acquired it. She talked him into re-selling it to her. She filled the front garden with masses of flowers and planted rows of vegetables at the back.

I went to stay with her for a few days at the end of 1983. I would see her in the late afternoons in trousers, shirt, and a most stylish though battered straw hat tilted over one eye, standing among the 'blommetjies', assiduously watering every inch. The house had no effective heating. As I knew how cold the winter nights of the Boland could be, I had taken her an electric blanket. She worked as always late at night, sorting research notes, typing letters, at her desk in the big middle room. The house was warm enough then in December, but it was equipped with only a small electric bar-heater against the months of frost, tempest, hail and flood.

While I was with her, she received an invitation to give the Theiler Memorial Lecture at Pretoria University in September 1984. She was very pleased, and her mood lightened at the rather far-off prospect.

One room housed her library of Africana and her extremely valuable archive. She would unlock it and take me in there, but never let me browse freely. She would not admit me to her 'kombuis' at all. She did not brew any birdies for me, but she did make me a savory casserole which she called a "ragutsche". She had planned to take me on long drives to see all the wonders of the region, but she was often too weak to go further than the town center, and would need to lie down for most of the day. She would not hear of me driving her, or cooking for her, and would only allow me to pay for a lunch or dinner in a restaurant if I issued a formally worded invitation to her a full day in advance.

She drove me to the beautiful Koo valley, and the Worcester museum (how she valued museums!), and to a cactus nursery. She introduced me to the first families of Montagu. The ladies of the town had quickly taken her to their hearts, and, noticing how frail she was, had quietly, out of sheer goodness, assumed a responsibility to keep a discreet eye on her and see that she was fed. They worried about her living alone. She employed a part-time 'bediende' (servant), a poor toothless illiterate 'colored' woman of quite indeterminable age, whom Thelma tried to teach the stately ways and customs of a European butler, including the formal announcement of visitors. Even if the bewildered soul knew how to cook, Thelma would not let her. She kept very few provisions in her larder. But every day one or more of her neighbors called with a basket of fruit or something from the oven. Almost every time we got back from an outing we would find a gift of apricots or cakes lying at the door. To the people of Montagu, even the highly educated and much travelled, she must have seemed something of a curiosity, a *rara avis*. I suspect they – regular Calvinist churchgoers that they were – accepted, tolerated, perhaps at times forgave rather than enjoyed her strange manners and mannerisms, forms of expression odd enough to be shocking, her often iconoclastic anecdotes and recondite allusions, her sophisticated jokes; while respecting her erudition and

protecting her as far as they could from the worst consequences of her own cranky, obstinate, willful, self-sufficiency.

One Sunday we were invited to a 'braaivleis' [barbecue] in the garden of a retired judge and his wife, Steve and Deleine Terblanche, whose elegant modern house stood on a hill with a wide view of the valley. Thelma, enjoying the company, the food and the wine, and canvassing especially the attention of our host and two male guests, told a story of how an English cabinet minister, finding himself seated next to the wife of the President of France at a banquet, thought to make conversation by asking her what she most valued in life. 'He was much taken aback,' Thelma declaimed, 'when the lady replied that she wished everyone "could have a penis".'

There was a second of stunned silence, then the men laughed, glancing uneasily at their wives, but they laughed too. They were all too polite to show anything but appreciation of a guest's contribution.

'Of course,' Thelma went on, after she'd had the tribute of their laughter, 'what she meant to say was "happiness".'

Upon which the laughter was renewed more heartily, and this time, I thought, with relief.

At the end of my stay Thelma drove me up to Johannesburg. She said she had some business to see to there, probably, I surmised, to do with the Committee of the Friends of the Art Gallery, which she had created and to which she had devoted a lot of time and energy. (The Art Gallery itself has been founded by Lady Phillips, the 'no ordinary woman' whose biography Thelma had written.) Relishing the prospect of the journey rather than the arrival, she put me and my suitcase into the Peugeot, and set off at a great rate, wearing her stylish old straw hat. We drove through storms with crippled windscreen wipers. More than once I thought we were about to



meet our doom together as she overtook blindly and headlights smeared their yellow over our windscreen and hooters rose deafeningly and died away. She said she was a good driver, and I suppose she must have been. At least she didn't attempt to drive through the night.

We took the greater part of two days for the journey. She had booked rooms at a hotel she liked at Richmond. (She had got to know the Karoo well during the years when she criss-crossed it in her search for places, relics and reminiscences of her biographees.) When we arrived, hot and dusty, the woman proprietor greeted her warmly. In each of our rooms we found long-stemmed white rose-buds, garden fresh, images of coolness in thin-necked glass vases, to welcome us. Later, after sleep and shower, I called for her next door, and we went down together to the dining-room. Thelma, descending the narrow stairs ahead of me, was carrying one of the white rosebuds, and I remembered the single roses she had brought to my mother – and how she had often worn a rosebud in the lapel of her jacket. 'Did you find roses in your room too? Oh, I must go now and thank her!' she said, and stopped suddenly and turned to look up at me with a delighted smile. 'But isn't this what one enjoys about life?' Her voice shook with emotion. She went on down a step or two and turned again to share another thought with me. 'This IS life!' she proclaimed.

In Johannesburg she left me at the door of my temporary home near her old flat in Killarney. She would not accept my hospitality, the use of my spare bedroom even for a single night, but took herself off at once to a hotel.

After that we talked on the telephone ('belled' each other, as she put it) several times before I returned to England. And we wrote to each other through the months that followed. Her health was deteriorating. She had emphysema but would not stop smoking. There was little the doctors could do for her. She told me she'd had a body scan and been 'enraptured' by the sight of her own inner organs throbbing on a screen. 'In the

*long run,' she wrote, 'one does it all by oneself. Barn was a shining example.'* She wrote about the hurricane which hit Montagu that winter and 'lashed the town to bits'. Her 'poor garden' was 'laid flat'. Not until June did she have recourse to the electric blanket, but then she was delighted with it. *'I had such a phobia of being electrocuted,'* she confessed in a letter of July, *'I vowed I would rather die of cold. Well, I nearly did (my bedroom windows froze on the inside) and forgot all my scruples. Now I wonder how I ever managed without it! In my enfeebled state I have not much resistance so you may consider yourself a life-saver.'*

I had a new book out that year, sent her an inscribed copy, and also some reviews. She wrote back that she was 'overcome with joy and pride'. It was what I wanted to hear. I took my success to Thelma as to an ideal parent, and she responded as one.

Stoic though she was, her letters revealed that her health was declining rapidly. Still, she was determined to drive herself up to Pretoria to deliver the Theiler Memorial Lecture. *'When it rains,'* she wrote as the date approached, *'I am almost as right as a trivet; but I rather fear what the dusty Transvaal is going to do to me. The alleviating specifics take a long time to act and I shall feel a proper Charlie if struck down in the middle of my speechifying.'*

She was not struck down, but it was a miracle that she was not. On the drive up to deliver the lecture, the Peugeot rebelled, went off the road, struck an obstacle, and was smashed beyond repair. Thelma climbed out unscathed except for a scratch on a little finger. The letter telling me all about it was typed, late at night as usual, at her desk in her austere house on the back of a photocopied letter of thanks from the Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science. He wrote that she had had the 'first ever standing ovation' after her lecture. Never one to blow her own trumpet, she chose this modest way of returning the compliment I had paid her by

letting me share her pleasure in a well-deserved triumph. My letter of congratulations reached her. In it I also said that in going through my parents' papers I had come across a letter she had written to my mother when I was in my late teens, in which she had championed me against Lulu's denunciations, and I thanked her belatedly. She replied for the last time. She wrote that she did not remember the particular letter to my mother, but yes, she had often pleaded my cause in those days. (So she had known the Cruella De Vil in Lulu.) She went on to say that she was glad to be back home. She had 'nearly died of suffocation' in the Transvaal. *'Many of our friends have died of emphysema which is not improved by smoking; but it is possible to arrest which I am now doing.'* She regretted the loss of her car. *'It was as if I had lost one of my best friends and I still grieve. By the grace of God who was with me the whole way, the local DRC [Dutch Reformed Church] dominee put his 1981 504 Peugeot on the market, and being unable to walk now I saw no alternative to buying it. Such a vulgar car by comparison with its predecessor!'* She promised to drive me in it to see many things I had missed the last time, and implored me not to change my plans to visit her in December.

She never read my last letter to her. But by good chance I sent a letter by the same post to Deleine Terblanche, and it was from her that I got a reply.

*'13 Nov, 1984. Dear Jillian . . . Our dear Thelma was found in front of her desk early on Tuesday morning, the 6th, but they gave the date of death as the 5th.'* On that one day of all days, nobody had been able to call. She had probably died in the small hours of the morning. (She was only sixty-nine. It was right that she should die at her desk – but Oh, let it have been easy, not a gasping for air!)

A Johannesburg friend had let them know in Montagu that Thelma would not have wanted a minister of the church (which I think is true, whether she believed or not that 'God had been with

her all the way'). So, 'Tomorrow we have a small service for her at the museum,' Mrs Terblanche wrote. 'I as a friend have been asked to say a few words, and then we lay her to rest.'

Looking over Thelma's last letters as I write this, I see she ended one of them with the words, 'more power to your plume': a blessing which I hope has had effect in this memoir.

Thank you, Thelma. You were marvelous, unique. I miss you still and always will.

'Pish!'

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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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