

Tin Chairs, Part Two

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



African Landscape (for American Natural History Museum),
William Leigh

They are woken by the screeching and chatter of birds. The west is still dusky but the eastern sky is streaked horizontally with yellow, orange, blue.

Alex takes deep audible breaths of the cool air. He feels proud of causing this expedition.

Giet who has been on watch in the small hours, has brewed the coffee. They all stand looking thoughtfully into the low fire, still a little sleepy, warming their hands round coffee mugs.

“Every African dawn is a promise,” Gaby says, tilting his head back and closing his eyes.

“Isn’t dawn everywhere always a promise?” Tilly asks, intending criticism. Yet again what she thinks of as Gaby’s “wetness” irritates her. She takes in a mouthful of coffee, turns her head to one side, leans and spits it out.

"Something wrong with the coffee?" Giet inquires.

Tilly's only answer is to swipe the back of her hand over her lips.

"Not in Europe," Alex says, who has not been watching Tilly. "In Europe dawns are grey. At least in cities."

Giet says, "Listen please everyone. My first and very strong advice to you is, wear a hat through all the hours of sunlight." He holds out a broad-brimmed Australian slouch hat, puts it on, pulls the front of the brim down well down over his forehead and feels the back of it to make sure it is shading his neck. "If you want to drive about, stick to the tracks or you could easily get lost. Then I'd have to bring a search party out here from Ghanzi. It could days to find you, hey? A lion might find you first. I'm not joking. Stay in the car and keep your windows up."

No one speaks. Soon, wearing their hats – Alex a red baseball cap, Tilly a snow-white panama with a black band, Peter a straw, Lopie a green-lined tennis shade over a white cotton scarf, Gaby and Rian khaki bush hats – they disperse. Most of them only to the edge of the clearing.

Lopie observes that Giet's beard is little more than a fuzz. Her husband's is a dark curling growth, as she expected it to be. At home he often shaved twice a day. Alex, Gaby and Peter's stubble was greyer than their hair. How long would any of us survive in the wild, she wonders. Giet would last, she is sure. And yes, Rian. He would survive and even perhaps enjoy the struggle. "The rest of us – not long," she tells the morning, and a little later again the stones, the grass, and the trees on the edge of the clearing where they are not close together, among which she walks quietly. She intends to stay within sight of the others. She carries her sketchbook and looks for birds. She spots one, alighting on a branch for a moment, whose feathers are many brilliant colours, and she

regrets that Giet isn't near to tell her its name. She recognizes starlings. "Their glossy black," she writes, "is shot with emerald and sapphire." A small flock of them fly about her head, and some land near her feet, unperturbed by her presence. She finds tightly built nests of weaver birds made of dry grasses, some hanging singly from the tips of branches, stomach-shaped with a large round hole at one end. "They hang like Christmas tree decorations." Other weavers have built enormous structures which cover many branches of thorn trees. They have dozens of entry holes. "Apartment buildings for communal living. But all the nests seem to be deserted." She comes upon hard structures made of sand, some taller than herself, dotted with a multitude of tiny holes. Nothing stirs about them. Later in the day Giet will tell her they are termite mounds in which termites store their food. "He called them 'termite storage facilities'," she will write. "He says the termites themselves live below them deep in the ground. 'In the basement. You can find them if you dig for them.' But if I dig for them I'll destroy their home, so I won't do that."

The day grows hot and ordinary.

Alex sits on his folded sleeping-bag apart from the others and thinks about what his life might have been if he hadn't let a glidepath carry him smoothly along the route his father had set for him. But no alternative presents itself. This will not after all be a time and place of revelation. When Gaby comes and lolls on a patch of short rough grass in front of him and places a very small chess set between them, Alex feels relief and gratitude, and he smiles ironically to himself for his inability to make better use of a sojourn in the wilderness from which he has envisioned a renewal. He eagerly helps peg the tiny pieces into the holes for their starting positions. If Gaby understands him, he conjectures, it must be with forgiveness. They play several long games, and afterwards sit together in silence, both looking into the almost featureless

wasteland, until Alex's eyes close and Gaby wanders off.

Peter, having built himself a narrow couch with his sleeping bag and two rucksacks, reclines on it to read a book of Chekhov stories.

Rian, clutching his camera, comes to Giet who is squatting beside the fire, arranging sticks to keep it smouldering.

"Could I take the Landrover? I want to see if I can find any waterholes or lakes. I'll stick to the tracks – they were probably made to pass close to water."

Giet rises. "I should come with you."

Tilly comes up behind them and says softly to Giet. "There's a man standing over there watching you."

"A man? Where?"

"There." Tilly's eyes and lifting chin point to the place.

Rian sees no one, but Giet makes out the figure of a man standing in the shadow of a baobab, cloaked in a blue and yellow blanket, clasping a tall stick with both hands.

Giet raises his right arm, a greeting that the man – still as a statue – does not return. Now Rian sees him. He and Tilly watch Giet walk slowly towards him, stop while still some distance away and call a word or two in Tswana. This time the man responds. Keeping the distance between them, they converse.

Rian and Tilly wait for Giet to come and tell them who the man is and what they've been saying to each other.

When Giet turns and starts walking back, the stranger does not go away.

Giet tells Rian, "He's a goatherd. He says there is a lake near here but the water's getting low. He stays here with his

goats until the lake is dry. He says he'll take us to it. His name's Philip."

"Philip?" Rian repeats in surprise.

"That's the name he wants us to know him by. Fair enough. He's being considerate actually. He probably reckons that you won't find it easy to pronounce his Bamangwato name. Anyway, are you ready? Let's go." He turns to Tilly. "Coming with?" he asks her.

She hesitates, but shakes her head.

Giet debates with himself whether to take the gun. No, he decides, the man might feel threatened by it. The fact that he's herding his goats round here probably means the region is not a habitat of big predators. If *he's* safe here, *we're* safe here. In any case, I'd better leave the gun with my people.

He had shown them all where the gun was kept; put away in the day, but easy to get at in a special compartment behind the cabin seat of the truck.

When the goatherd sees Giet and Rian walking towards him, he turns and strides off, leading the way to his shrinking lake. They follow him at a little distance, and Rian observes the pattern of blue airplanes between blue stripes on the yellow of the blanket, and the bottoms of khaki trousers showing below it, and dusty somewhat misshapen veldskoene. "So," he thinks, "he is not a wild man. Not *a man of the wild*. He uses money, he buys from stores."

"How old would you say he is?" he asks Giet. "I can never tell. Their faces stay smooth almost into old age."

"About forty, I'd say. Could be more but not much less."

After a few minutes they come suddenly upon a pair of quite large square huts, built side by side about six feet apart among tall baobabs. They are helped to invisibility from a

distance by the matching of their walls' colour with the earth on which they stand and of which they are made. The roofs are thatched, roughly and thickly, with desert grasses. There is no stirring of life about the place, of person or beast or bird, and Philip passes between the huts without slackening his pace.

In a few more minutes they come to the lake. The full extent of its pan can be seen, the outermost circle dry, hardened and cracked, surrounding a much wider circle of mud, and in the middle, water. The mud shines, the water reflects the sky. Rian takes photographs. He puts his camera down in shade and searches for a fallen branch. He finds one, long and light, and carries it cautiously over the hard edge of the pan, squelches on through the mud until it rises over his ankles and he stands at the edge of the water. He pushes his measuring branch along the floor of the pool until the water reaches his hand. The lake is even shallower than he'd supposed. It will soon – in two or three weeks, he reckons – be dry. He takes a test tube from a pocket, scoops a sample, corks the tube, holds it up in the sunlight, shakes it a little, stares at it intently.

Giet watches him, wondering how it happens that a person becomes fascinated by water, and some time passes before he notices that the goatherd has gone.

"Philip!" he calls, and adds something more in Tswana, in a tone that – Rian thinks – could be either pleading or ordering. Whichever it is, it does not bring the man back.

Rian pockets his sample and plods back to dry ground, his legs weighed down by the mud on them. He sits on a hump of green grass to remove his thickly caked shoes. "We'll wait," he says, "until the mud dries and I can get it off. It won't take long in this heat. No walking barefoot since there are scorpions."

"Philip!" Giet shouts again. "Damn him. He's playing tricks on us. He must know we need him to lead us back."

Rian is surprised by Giet's agitation and annoyance. Could he be afraid, this leader they've all been looking up to with trust (if not, in every case, liking)? Is he fearful that they could be lost, just ten or fifteen minutes' walk from their camp? Of course he knows the risks, so perhaps there really is danger, but he hadn't seemed anxious on the way down to the lake.

"Do we need the fellow?" Rian asks. "We know the direction of the huts, and from there it's not far to our camp."

"We *think* we know the direction," Giet says. "Dammit, why did I trust him?" He puts his hands on either side of his mouth and again yells "Philip!"

They wait some time for the shoes to dry, and for Philip perhaps to return. But Philip has not appeared when Rian succeeds in pulling on his dry but stiff shoes.

"I've got a pretty good sense of direction," Rian says. "You too?"

"Not bad."

They move back among the trees, back along the way they are both fairly sure they came. A huge goat stands in their way, staring at them while working its jaws on something. They turn aside and crane round the sides of a broad baobab trunk to peer at the beast. "One of Philip's perhaps," Rian says.

"Could be. But it could be wild."

They keep their voices low.

"So they can be dangerous? Hell, man, it's almost as big as an ox!"

“Wild ones have attacked people. But I don’t think this is a wild one. He didn’t look at us as if he felt threatened by us. He’s used to people.”

‘To the extent that they bore him probably,” Rian says, and they both laugh silently, glancing at each other.

As if confirming Rian’s suggestion, the goat loses any interest he ever had in them and ambles off towards the lake. The men press on, looking about them cautiously as they go.

They both feel relief, though neither says so, when they reach the huts. Giet stops between the two walls, again shouts out to Philip and again gets no answer.

“We’re obviously on the right path,” Rian says. “We just need to keep straight on.”

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Alex and Gaby are opening cans, piling plates, aligning mugs.

Rian, looking round the clearing as he comes towards them, asks, “Have you seen Lopie?”

Giet also scans the grassy area on which the vehicles are parked beside the track, sleeping-bags are placed at intervals in a wide circle, and Peter and Tilly are sitting on their improvised couch, hatted heads bent over open books. “Where are my chairs?” he wonders aloud.

Gaby hears him and points with a can opener.

About a hundred feet away, in the shade directly under the spread of a lone thorn tree, the tin chairs are placed side by side, arm against arm. In one of them Lopie sits, holding a naked baby, in the other a Bantu woman with a little girl on her lap.

“Who are they?” Rian asks.

"While you were away we had visitors, two of them very small," Alex says.

Rian strolls off to fetch his wife.

"Let's get our lunch," Peter says to Tilly.

"Aagh no, Peter, I can't! I'm sorry but I just can't eat that stuff. You get yours. Bring me an orange."

"Okay, as long as you have a more substantial meal tonight."

Rian returns carrying one of the chairs. Lopie is close behind him with the baby in her arms, and the woman follows with the other chair on her head. She walks with a straight back and a dignified air as if ceremonially crowned with the thing, keeping hold of the front legs. The little girl clutches a handful of her mother's skirt.

"They'll have lunch with us," Lopie says as soon as she is near enough to be heard without raising her voice. "We borrowed your chairs, Giet. You weren't here to be asked so we just took them to the shade. Her name's Elizabeth. She doesn't speak English but we manage to understand each other. Her daughter's name is Sarah and the baby's name is Charles."

She doesn't tell him that Elizabeth sat in first one chair then the other as soon as she saw them. She'd put her baby down in the dust while she visited the chairs. When she rose, she turned and picked up the chair, so Lopie, smiling at her, picked up the other and started towards the shade under the tree, indicating with movements of her head that the woman should follow her. There they had sat and learned each other's names, and Lopie the names of the children. She took her sketchbook and coloured pencils out of her pockets and showed the little girl how to put colour on the pages. The child picked the red and made a streak with it on page after page, those with sketches and script on them and those still blank. Lopie watched her, and she and the mother looked at each other

and laughed.

Giet assesses the woman's age to be little more than twenty, the girl four, the baby about eighteen months. This must be Philip's family, their home the huts near the lake. Saying nothing, he takes the chair from Lopie and sets it down where he'd left it. He comes back for the other which the woman has abandoned in the sand. It lies on its back. He jerks it up on to its legs as though to restore its dignity before picking it up again and bearing it off to join its companion. Lopie half expects a rebuke, but he says nothing to her. He goes to Alex.

"Does their presence spoil things for you? Do you want to move on? We couldn't go much further – unless we start the drive back sooner."

'No," Alex assures Giet and himself. "This is fine. They make no difference. They don't spoil anything for me."

Elizabeth sits on the grass with her legs spread, the baby seated between them. Her daughter stands beside her. Lopie has brought her a plate of bully beef and biscuit.

Tilly, slumped beside Peter, watches the woman feed the beef alternately into her own and her daughter's mouth with bunched fingertips. She wonders why, if the woman can acquire a dark blue knee-length cotton skirt she could not also have got hold of a blouse. Her breasts are covered by a ragged-edged piece of what Tilly supposes to be animal skin hanging from a wire round her neck. Her feet are bare, careless of scorpions. Her neck, forearms and ankles are adorned with circlets of coloured beads and chips of white ostrich-eggshell such as are sold in Maun shops as handcraft of the Bushmen. The little girl has a strip of skin tied under her belly with short flaps hanging from it behind and in front, and ornaments like her mother's. The baby has nothing on but a few beads round his neck and wrists.

The little girl vomits up the beef and cries. Tilly watches

the tears clearing two bright pathways through the dust on the child's face, and looks away. Everything about the little drama of Lopie with the woman and her children – the fact that they could not understand each other's speech yet pretend to be instant friends, the mother's hand stuffing the nasty red beef into the little mouth, the vomit and the howling – annoys her. She thinks, "What must it be like to live with someone like Lopie? How long will Rian put up with it? He deserves someone more ..." She fails to summon up the word she needs.

Giet fetches a wet sponge from his long black bag and puts it in Lopie's hands to clean the child.

"A cup of water *please*, Giet," Lopie says. "Just one cup."

Giet shakes his head.

The woman picks up her baby, takes the hand of her daughter, and starts towards the trees. Lopie calls to Rian, "I'm going with. I want to see where she lives."

Rian nods. He thinks he knows the area now and believes it is safe. "If it's safe enough for those children then it's safe enough for ourselves."

Giet is less sure. "You can't go alone," he says, and starts after her.

Rian watches Lopie as she hurries to catch up with Elizabeth. When she does, he sees that Giet stays some yards behind them.

"Did you find a lake?" Peter asks Rian.

"Yes. It's there. It'll be dry in two or three weeks."

"Does it tell you anything you want to know?"

"Nothing really. But it's interesting that it dries up later than I'd have expected."

"Is the water clean?" Tilly asks. "Can we drink it?"

"No! You can't drink it, darling," Peter says. "You'd get very ill. It's okay for animals, not humans."

"Could I bathe in it? Is it clean enough for that? I'd love to have a cold bath in a lake."

"No, you mustn't bathe in it either," Peter says.

"This lake's not clean," Rian says. "I don't yet know what's in it, but I'd guess it's not clean enough to bathe in. Running water's safe. Rivers. Except in South Africa. A lot of South African rivers have bilharzia worms living in them. Here in Botswana the Limpopo is safe. I swam in it last month. The only thing to fear there are the crocodiles." He laughs, and so do Alex, Peter and Giet.

Tilly covers her face with her hands, rocks backwards and forwards. But she is not laughing, she is groaning.

"Did I say something ... ? Rian asks, bewildered.

"What's wrong, darling?" Peter quietly asks his wife. Getting no answer, he puts his arms about her. She presses her face to his chest and murmurs, "You stink, Peter darling. I stink. We all stink." Then, raising her head, she calls out, loudly and fiercely, "Why did I come on this dreadful trip. What the hell was I thinking? I must have been mad."

Alex says calmly – soothingly, he hopes. "I'm sorry you're disappointed, Tilly. But no one deceived you. We told you how it would be."

'It's true, you did," Tilly says, recovering composure. "I'm not blaming you or anybody. I blame myself. I should have known better."

"Let's go for a walk," Peter says. "Just a short one along the track."

Rian lies supine on a patch of short grass and pulls his hat

over his eyes.

When Lopie and Giet return an hour later, they stand beside him, and though he doesn't stir and is probably asleep, she tells him that Elizabeth let her see inside her "house".

"It's so clean and neat," Lopie says enthusiastically. "Swept and orderly. Their things are put against the walls – sleeping mats and sacks of mielie-meal and jars and folded clothes and blankets. But they have very little."

"They would keep most things in the other hut," Giet says.

"Well, very little that I could see," Lopie says, settling down on the grass beside Rian.

Giet wanders off, thinks he will see to the fire.

Lopie goes on, to Rian, "She knows the word 'doctor', Elizabeth does. She told Giet she thinks Sarah may have something wrong with her because she brought up the bully-beef and biscuit."

Tilly hears her and calls. "That's because something's *right* with her." But she forces a laugh as she says it. She has no wish to pick a quarrel with Lopie.

"We told her," Lopie continues, "that there's a doctor with us and she said 'doctor, doctor' and clapped her hands – I think to say 'please'."

"Yes, I forgot to say – she wants the doctor to see if anything's wrong with her daughter," Giet says.

"Where did they get those names I wonder," Rian mumbles from under his hat.

"Giet," Lopie says, "Rian wonders where they got their names from."

"Isn't it obvious?" Giet says. "From the royal family. This

country is a member of the British Commonwealth. The Queen of England is our queen.”

“Why ‘Sarah’ then?” Tilly asks.

“There was a queen of the Bamangwato whose name really was Sarah,” Giet says.

“So they like royalty as such rather than specially British royalty. They could have called the girl Anne,” Tilly comments.

“Perhaps,” Lopie suggests, feeling obliged to speak for them, “they don’t know about Anne. Perhaps she gets shown and talked about less. Now where have *they* been?” She means Peter and Tilly who are coming past the parked vehicles, Peter carrying one of the big green melons they had seen on the journey.

“Is this edible?” Peter asks Giet.

“Drinkable,” Giet says. “Those things are sponges inside their shells. They’re called tsamma melons. You can squeeze water out of them. Desert animals get water from them.”

“And people?” Tilly asks.

“The Bushmen, yes.”

“So it’s safe for people?”

“Must be.”

“Why didn’t you tell us? Get the knife Peter. Let’s get at this water.”

“It’s hard work,” Giet warns. “You have to chew hard on the stuff inside.”

“Oh, I’m ready to chew,” Tilly says.

Alex and Gaby join them as Peter cuts the fruit in half. Soon they all have chunks of the white stuff from inside the melon and are squeezing and chewing. The water is water, fresh sweet water. They laugh. They are happy again. Alex tells himself to remember this.

Lopie asks Peter if he will come with her to see if there is anything wrong with Sarah.

“Just out of interest,” Peter says to Giet, “if there is something seriously wrong, what could be done about it? I mean, if one of them had to be hospitalized, how could it be organized?”

“There’s a helicopter ambulance service,” Giet says.

“But how would it be summoned?”

“I would ask for it on the radio.”

“But if you’re not here?”

“You mean if it’s urgent? Critical? Well, then it would be tickets,” Giet says, shrugging, and briefly spreading one hand.

“Well, let’s go and see the child,” Peter says. “Giet, I’ll need my bag. And you’d better come with me to interpret.”

“I’ll come with,” Lopie says.

Giet offers to carry Peter’s bag. He respects Peter.

“Thank you, no, I always carry it myself.”

The shadows grow long and the light rich. By the time Peter, Lopie and Giet have returned (and Peter has reported that both the children are “fine, nothing wrong with them, they’re in good health, the child just couldn’t stomach bully beef”, and Tilly has commented “Who could?”), the low sun is making everything beautiful, their faces radiant, the long grasses

alight, and hidden birds to cry and chatter and shriek.

None of them, this evening, regrets coming. It is a good adventure. Feeling it to be so is cause for pride. Something worth transcending has been transcended, something needing to be conquered has been conquered.

Giet tells Alex, "I radioed Maun that there's a Bamangwato family living here. They said they knew. I reminded them that I'd told them I was bringing you here to camp because it was far from any activity."

'What did they say to that?'

'They said they're sorry. They said they should have told me about goatherds coming here.'

"So they know about the lake?" Rian asked. "How come they never told us? We've asked them often enough for reports. They know what we need to know. I wonder how much else they're holding back from us. I'll phone them when we're back in Maun."

Listening to Rian, Alex thinks the busy world hasn't been, and perhaps cannot be, left behind. It's not the goatherds it's the hydrologists who keep it with us.

Greyness thickens and soon darkens to blackness, birds fall silent, the small flames lick the air hungrily and the burning sticks crackle and sputter. The sojourners in the vast desert, their heads bare to the light breeze, eat their bully beef contentedly enough. Afterwards Alex asks Tilly to sing.

"Sure," she says, and stands up. "I'll sing 'Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man' and you can join in with any words you know or pick up."

She sings musically, she enchants them, and in her imagination the music she is making sounds far over the wide wild plain. Rian's baritone, Gaby's tenor, Lopie's soprano join softly in

the refrain: "Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me, I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to ..."

Alex, who is surprised that Gaby knows and likes the song, is even more surprised when he feels touched and soothed by some of the words: "Evening's empire has returned into sand ... left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping ... it's just escaping on the run ... but for the sky there are no fences facing ... it's just a shadow ... let me forget about today until tomorrow."

They applaud her. Gaby's clapping goes on longer than the others'. He says, "Yes, he's the poet of desolation. Of loneliness and lostness and longing. He's forever reaching for beauty that will only be found in a tomorrow that's always retreating."

Tilly shakes her head impatiently. But because it is Bob Dylan that Gaby is praising, whose songs she can sing so well and often does (accompanying herself on her accordion), and because she has sung and shone, her voice has sounded over the desert, and the faces were turned to her rose-pink in the firelight, she resolves to overlook his "over-sweetening" for once, on this rather lovely night, cool now though its stars are blazing.

Before the moon rises they are all asleep except Alex. He sits in his padded jacket on the tin chair Giet beckoned him to at dinner time, the gun on the sand beside him. Now he will have aloneness whether he wants it or not. To ward off sleepiness, he occupies his thoughts with composing menus for banquets. Tilly told him today that she had attended "a sarcastic banquet" in Brussels given by a billionaire in honour of a famous chef at which the guests were served with clingfilm-covered airplane meal trays. He laughs again at that. He tries to visualize the pictures of desserts shown to him in a crimson taffeta-bound photo album – wound round when shut by a gold cord with a tassel – by his master pastry chef. He always

enjoys making a selection from the pictures for a special occasion. He savours again his success at luring their creator out of Germany. It's a lasting triumph. The price of employing a talent much in demand cannot but be high. And the man has proved himself worth the expense of a first-class flight and an exorbitant salary. His reputation – to which he fully lives up with his signature confections – has much to do with the lengthening wait-times for a booking in any of the four hotel restaurants. Tilly, he remembers, complimented him on the acquisition when he announced it in a television interview with her.

He becomes aware that he is hungry. What he would order if he could choose from one of his own menus now? He starts composing a menu, and wonders whether to offer a job to Tilly. "Menu manager. Create the post for her. Mmm – no. Unnecessary. And the chefs wouldn't like it. Anyway, she probably cares more about being a TV star than about food. She must have been earning a mint. Much more than she'd be worth to me. She says she's glad to be out of that environment but she'll probably go back to it. Nobody gives up celebrity willingly. Once having been in the public eye ... On top of which, she's ... moody. Could be difficult to work with."

He peels an orange. "Luckily," he murmurs aloud, "hunger is keeping me awake. In addition, and more important, being hungry sometimes is good for me. Were there desserts at the seventeen-course breakfast at the Ritz? Sorbets perhaps, as mouth fresheners, but they don't count as courses." He sets himself the task of trying to recall what the seventeen courses were or think what they might have been. "Grapefruit, stewed fruits, fresh fruits, hot and cold cereals, sausages, kidneys, fried eggs and scrambled eggs, eggs Benedict with muffins and ham or smoked salmon, fried potatoes, kippers, kedgeree, toast with everything, Dundee marmalade, Danish pastries ... What was the valet's name? Raoul, was it? ..."

He is startled by a desolate barking. A hyena, he supposes.

But it comes from far away and soon stops. He takes a deep breath, glad that he will not need to snatch up the gun. He is not sure he can use it effectively.

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"I can't say I'm getting to like this stuff, but at least I'm getting used to it," Rian says of his bully-beef breakfast.

"Good, Rian," Alex says. "Will you show me your lake today? Giet, your voice woke me very early. Who was it you were talking to? I didn't hear anyone else.'

"Philip," Giet replies.

"Philip's rematerialized?" Rian says, amused.

"He appeared at daybreak and asked me to sell him my chairs."

Just as Giet's watch was coming to an end and he was about to put the coffee on to boil, the goatherd called a greeting. There the man was again, beside the baobob as before, wrapped in his blanket, leaning on his staff.

'He wants to buy them? How? With what?" Alex wants to know.

"Did he say why?" Rian asks.

"He said his wife likes them so he wants to buy them for her. I don't think it's true. She put one on her head yesterday and tossed it away when she'd finished playing with it. She left it lying on its back. I think he wants them for himself."

"So what did *you* say?" Lopie asks.

"I told him they're not for sale."

"You won't let them have the chairs?"

"No."

"Those people have almost nothing," Lopie says, not to Giet

alone but to all of them.

Giet fills a mug and takes it with him to a chair. There he sits, sipping coffee. There's nothing more he wants to say about his conversation with the goatherd.

Lopie comes and stands in front of him.

"How much did he offer you for the chairs, Giet?" Lopie asks.

"He offered me a goat. A kid, actually."

"It's not enough?"

"What would I do with a goat?"

"We could eat it," Tilly calls.

"*You* could eat *my* kid?" Giet says, smiling. "If you fancy goatmeat you could try buying one of his kids yourself. Did you bring money with you?"

"Goat meat is good," Tilly tells anyone who may be listening. "It's a stronger flavour than mutton. The nanny is tastier than the billy."

"Is there any price at which you would sell the chairs?" Lopie asks Giet.

"If I needed money and had no other way of getting it, yes, there's a price I'd sell them at."

"If they were mine," Lopie says, still standing in front of Giet and looking at him with , waiting for something, "I would *give* them the chairs."

"I believe you," Giet says, thinking there's no sense in being sorry that this pretty woman now dislikes him.

"They have so little!"

"He's got thirty goats, or so he says. If that's true, he's

quite a rich man – in his society.”

“Thirty goats!” Rian exclaims. “And we saw only one. Where are they? There’s nowhere in this landscape where thirty goats could be hidden.”

“Oh, there are more than thirty. He’s in charge of other herds along with his own.”

“But if they’re domestic animals why are they here?” Alex says. “The goats I mean. I know there are wild goats in this desert, but you’re talking about farm beasts.”

“The ranchers in the Ghanzi region overstock and their farms get overgrazed and overbrowsed. So they send some of their livestock here where they can still fatten on evergreens like camel thorn. They pay Philip to guard them, and he hires Bushmen to keep the predators away.”

“How do the Bushmen do that?” Peter asks.

“With bows and arrows. They poison the arrows.”

“We haven’t caught a glimpse of Bushman archers,” Gaby says.

“Where are they?” Alex wants to know. “These herds of goats and their Bushman guards – why can’t we see them?”

“There are more trees beyond the lake. They must all be in among them,” Rian suggests.

“Mysterious,” Alex says.

“Creepy,” Tilly says.

“When will the goats go to market?” Alex asks.

“Soon now.”

“Philip and the Bushmen will drive more than thirty goats all the way to market in Ghanzi?”

“There’ll be many more than thirty. They’re breeding while they’re here. There’ll be more than a hundred of them I’d guess.”

‘Wouldn’t it take more than four drovers to get them – how many hundreds of miles is it to Ghanzi?’

“A fleet of lorries will come and get them. In mid-winter there’s a lot of traffic round here. More fleets of lorries will come to get the sand of the termite mounds. It’s used to make tennis courts.”

“Philip and his family will go with the lorries?”

“He probably has a brick house in Ghanzi. His children will go to school there. They must have chairs in their house. And tables. And beds. And probably a sofa and a TV set.”

“And a folding baize-topped card-table for bridge parties,” Tilly says. “And a small bust of Beethoven on the piano.”

Peter and Rian laugh. Lopie turns away from Giet and hangs her head.

“If they have a TV set they would speak English, wouldn’t they?” Peter suggests.

Lopie turns again to Giet and asks quietly, “Don’t you feel any compassion for them at all?”

Peter, Rian, Alex and Gaby move nearer to Lopie to receive Giet’s answer.

“You mean pity them?” Giet says. “Why?”

“For the barrenness of their lives?” Alex suggests.

Provoked, Giet will tell them more to dent their illusions. “They probably do speak English. They probably watch documentaries about the British royal family.”

“No,” Lopie says, shaking her head. “I don’t think that’s true. She wasn’t pretending not to know English. In any case their lives *here* are ... just so empty.”

“You think a pair of tin chairs will make all the difference?”

Without taking her eyes off Giet, Lopie call to her husband, “Rian, do you think it’s unkind of Giet not to let them have the chairs?’

‘No, I don’t think it’s unkind, Lopie. He likes the chairs, he doesn’t want to sell them. There’s really nothing unkind about it.”

Still bravely confronting Giet, Lopie feels lonely, despised by all of them – most of all by Giet and Tilly – for pitying the woman and her children who have almost nothing. She feels her pity as an ache in her face and throat.

“What do you think, Gaby?”

“I think their lives here are beautiful. Those tin chairs would be out of place in their hut. Ridiculous.”

Tilly blurts out impatiently, “Well, of course the chairs are ridiculous. They’re also ugly. Ugly and uncomfortable – though they pass for luxury here. But I don’t see why he should give them away if he doesn’t want to.”

Lopie appeals to Tilly’s husband. “But ... Peter ... what do you think?” She cannot control the quaver in her voice.

Peter is all for acquittal of the man in the dock. “Well ... you see ... Lopie ... a deal can only be reached if it makes both parties happy. There’s no deal to be made here because there’s no chance of mutual satisfaction. Philip and Elizabeth must simply be disappointed. I understand you feel that’s regrettable, not as it should be. But no blame to Giet!”

“Alex?” To Alex, their organizer, she finally appeals. “Alex,

what am I to *do*? What should we do? What ... *what sort of people are we?*" Her words are tight in her throat, hard to sound out.

Alex, seated by Giet's invitation in a tin chair, leans forward, elbows on knees, hands extended. "Lopie, listen. Please listen. Lopie, you are beautiful and your feelings for Elizabeth are beautiful, but there is nothing that *needs* to be done. Not by us, anyway ..."

Frustration overwhelms her. She flings up her arms to cover her eyes. She tries – but soon gives up trying – to suppress the sound of her grief. Let them hear her cry!

Rian goes to her and puts an arm about her shoulders. He asks. "Why does this upset you so, honey? Why is it so important to you?" She becomes calmer, but does not answer.

Tilly clicks her tongue. Peter frowns in sympathy with both his wife's irritation and Lopie's misery. He deplores the scene.

Gaby turns his back on them all, walks off a few paces with his shoulders hunched to his ears, stops suddenly, drops his shoulders and looks up at the sky. To the watchers his performance spells exasperation. But he only wants to move away from discord.

Alex takes off his dark glasses, pulls out a handkerchief and vigorously polishes the lenses. He turns to Giet slumped in the other chair in a posture of – Alex thinks – exaggerated indifference "D'you know, Giet" he says, not loudly, in an easy chatty tone, "I think we've got everything out of this trip that we can get. I think ... maybe ... we should start back. No. I *really do* think we should. My feeling is, we've all had enough."

Giet sits up straight. "You want to return a day early? Cut your trip short?"

“Yes. If everyone else is willing.” Alex looks round for responses, but no one says anything. “I ask all of them. Tilly? Should we give this up now and start back?”

“I ‘m willing alright. More than willing. Keen. I yearn for filet mignon on mashed potato and a crisp lettuce salad.”

Alex squeezes his eyes shut for a moment and swallows hard.

“Rian?” he asks next.

“I don’t need more time here.”

“Peter?”

“Whatever Tilly wants is fine with me. And I *must* say,” he adds, smiling, “I’d enjoy a filet mignon too.”

“Gaby?”

Without turning round to face them, Gaby shrugs; lifts his shoulders and holds them up a for a few moments before dropping them again and strolling a little further away from them. He feels sorry for Alex, for his failing to be the man he’d like to be.

“Well! Now, *I* don’t want to stay here!” Lopie says, wiping her face with the backs of her hands. “The sooner we go the better. I ... I...” She fetches her roll of toilet paper and the others wait while she tears off a piece and blows her nose in it. “I ... don’t feel I can even go and say good-bye to Elizabeth. I don’t think she’ll want anything more to do with ... any of us.”

“Then it’s decided,” Alex says. “Let’s pack up.”

“I can’t give you a refund,” Giet says. ‘We agreed ...’

“That’s alright, Giet,” Alex says.

*

Lopie will keep her notebook with the red scorings on its pages, as a souvenir of an adventure that was both exciting and irreparably saddening. She will not show it to anyone. A parade of elephants and the arch of springboks will appear in her books for children, and they'll be proudly shown to three of her own. She will neither write nor speak of her accidental meeting with people who were living in that far strange emptiness.

Rian will analyse the water in his test tube, but to no useful purpose. He will record the existence of the small lake and note that it dries up by the end of June. But he has nothing consequential to report to the team.

Tilly will forget almost everything that has happened here, and Peter will not remind her. He will say to colleagues, when occasion arises, that they may be interested to know – and he “speaks from personal experience” – that the Bantu who live on the land in Botswana have a healthy diet and are not undernourished.

Gaby will remember what he has done and felt and seen: the elephants' procession, the falling star, the leaping springbok, the calling of owls by night and the chatter of weavers by day, Tilly singing that song, the dawns, the light that turned the dull world to gold in the late afternoons, the surprising goatherd and his wife and children who saved them from loneliness and Lopie's hopeless longing to gratify them with those absurd tin chairs, and playing chess with Alex, out there “in the back of beyond”. He'll never forget the names and faces, though he'll not see any of his travelling companions again except Alex. The two of them will still, on a rare summer evening, meet to listen to music and the sound of breaking waves, but neither of them will want to talk with the other about those days in the desert.

To certain others, Alex will relate edited memories of his “Kalahari venture”. He will not, after all, describe how his

companions dealt with each other in the exigencies of the wild, but will say the trip was an extraordinary experience, all that he'd hoped of it; and he might add, if his listener is the right sort, that the hardship and simplicity purified his soul.

Giet will mark this location on the wall map in his office with two small crosses to remind him that it is not a good place for hunting or camping.

[Table of Contents](#)

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.

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