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Whites

STORIES

NORMAN RUSH

WHITES

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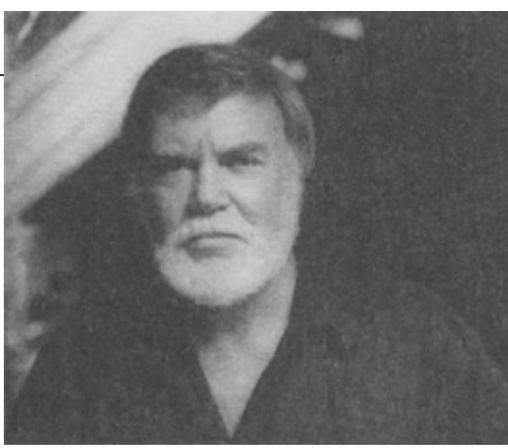
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Mating



NORMAN RUSH
WHITES

Norman Rush was born and raised in the San Francisco area, and was graduated from Swarthmore College in 1956. He has been an antiquarian book dealer, a college instructor, and, with his wife, Elsa, lived and worked in Africa from 1978 to 1983.

His stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, and the *Best American Short Stories* of 1971, 1984, and 1985. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including an NEA grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. His first novel, *Mating*, was awarded the National Book Award for fiction.



WHITES

Stories by
NORMAN RUSH

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*For Elsa, beautiful and good,
perfect friend, with gratitude*

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Poor Bruns. They hated him so much it was baroque. But then so is Keteng baroque everything about it.

Probably the Boers were going to hate Bruns no matter what. Boers run Keteng. They've been up there for generations, since before the Protectorate. When independence came, meant next to nothing to them. They ignored it. They're all citizens of Botswana, but they are Boers underneath forever, really unregenerate. Also, in Keteng you're very close to the border with South Africa. They still mostly use rands for money instead of pula. Boers slightly intrigue me. For a woman, I'm somewhat an elitist, and hierarchy always interests me. I admit these things. The Boers own everything in Keteng, including the chief. They wangled him to the head of the queue for petrol, which he gets for free, naturally, just like the car and liquor they give him. They own the shops. Also they think they really know how to manage the Bakorwa, which actually they do. You have to realize that the Bakorwa have the reputation of being the most violent and petulant tribe in the country, which is about right. All the other tribes say so. And in fact the Boers do get along with them. In fact, the original whites in Keteng—that would be the Vissers, Du Toits, Pieterses ... seven families altogether—were all rescued by the Bakorwa when their ox wagons broke down in the desert where they were trekking somewhere. They started out as bankrupts and now they own the place. It's so feudal up there you cannot conceive. That is, it has been until now.

I know a lot about Keteng. I got interested in Keteng out of boredom with my project. Actually, my project collapsed. My thesis adviser at Stanford talked me into my topic anyway, so it wasn't all that unbearable when it flopped. At certain moments I can even get a certain vicious satisfaction out of it. Frankly, the problem is partly too many anthropologists in one small area. We are thick on the ground. And actually we hate each other. The problem is that people are contaminating one another's research, so hatred is structural and I don't need to apologize. At any rate, I was getting zero. I was supposed to be showing a relationship between diet and fertility among the Bakorwa up near Tswapong, in the hills. The theory was that fertility would show some seasonality because the diet in the deep bush was supposedly ninety per cent hunting-gathering, which would mean sharp seasonal changes in diet content. But the sad fact is you go into the middle of nowhere and people are eating Simba chips and cornflakes and drinking Castle lager. The problem is Americans, partly. Take the hartebeest domestication project, where they give away so much food and scraps and things that you have a kind of permanent beggar settlement outside the gate. And just to mention the other research people you have encumbering the ground—you have me, you have the anthropologists from the stupid Migration Study and the census, and you have people from some land-grant college someplace following baboons around. By the way, there were several baboon attacks on Bakorwa gathering firewood around Keteng, which the Boers blame on the Americans for pestering the baboons. Or Imiricans, as the Boers would say. America gets the blame.

The other thing is that Keteng is remote. It's five hours from the rail line, over unspeakable roads, through broiling-hot empty thornveld. In one place there's no road and you just creech over red granite swells for a kilometer, following a little line of rocks. So the Boers got used to doing what they wanted, black government or not. They still pay their farm labor in sugar.

and salt and permission to crawl underneath their cows and suck fresh milk. It is baroque. So I got interested in Keteng and started weekendng. At my project site, camping was getting uncomfortable, I should mention, with strange figures hanging around my perimeter. Nobody did anything, but it makes you nervous. In Keteng I can always get a room from the sisters at the mission hospital and a bath instead of washing my armpits under my shirt because you never know who's watching.

The place I stay when I descend into Keteng is interesting and is one reason I keep going back. I can see everything from the room the sisters give me. The hospital is up on the side of a hill, and the sisters' hostel is higher than that, on the very top. My room is right under the roof, the second story, where there's a water tank and therefore a perpetual sound of water gurgling down through pipes, a sound you get famished for in a place so arid. Also, in tubs on the roof they have vines growing that drape down over the face of the building, so you have this green-curtain effect over your window. The sisters have a little tiny enclosed locked-up courtyard where they hang their underthings to dry, which is supposed to be secret and sacrosanct, which you can see into from my room. You can also see where Bruns stayed—a pathetic bare little shack near the hospital with gravel around the stoop and a camp stool so he could sit in the sun and watch his carrots wither. At the foot of the hill the one street in Keteng begins at the hospital gate and runs straight to the chief's court at the other end of town. Downtown amounts to a dozen one-story buildings—shops—with big houses behind them. You can see the Bakorwa wards spreading away from the center of Keteng—log kraals and mud rondavels with thatch, mostly, although cement-block square houses with sheet-metal roofs held down by cobbles are infiltrating the scene. Sometimes I think anthropology should be considered a form of voyeurism rather than a science, with all the probing into reproductive life and so forth we do. I'm voyeuristic. I like to pull my bed up to the window and lie there naked, studying Keteng. Not that the street life is so exotic. Mostly it's goats and cattle. I did once see a guy frying a piece of meat on a shovel. The nuns have really hard beds, which I happen to prefer.

Poor Bruns. The first thing I ever heard about him was that there was somebody new in Keteng who was making people as nervous as poultry, as they put it. That's an Afrikaans idiom. They meant Bruns. He was a volunteer from some Netherlands religious outfit and a conscientious objector like practically all the Dutch and German volunteers are. He was assigned to be the fleet mechanic at the mission hospital. He was a demon mechanic, turned out, who could fix anything. Including the X-ray machine, for example, which was an old British Army World War I field unit, an antique everybody had given up on. Of course what do the Boers care, because when they get even just a little cut it's into the Cessna and over the border into the Republic to Potgietersrust or even Pretoria. But other people were ecstatic. Bruns was truly amazing. People found out. A few of the Bakorwa farmers have tractors or old trucks, and Bruns, being hyper-Christian, of course started fixing them up for free in his spare time. On Saturdays you'd see Bakorwa pushing these old wrecks, hordes of them pushing these three or four old wrecks toward Keteng for Bruns. So, number one, right away that made Bruns less than popular around Du Toit's garage. Du Toit didn't like it. He even got a little mean, with some of Bruns's tools disappearing from his workroom at the hospital until he started really locking things up.

The other thing that fed into making people nervous right away was Bruns physically. He was very beautiful, I don't know how else to put it. He was very Aryan, with those pale-blue eyes that are apparently so de rigueur for male movie stars these days. He had a wonderful physique. At some point possibly he had been a physical culturist, or maybe it was just the effect of constant manual work and lifting. Also I can't resist mentioning a funny thing about Boer men. Or, rather, let me back into it: there is a thing with black African men called the African Physiological Stance, which means essentially that men, when they stand around, don't bother to hold their bellies in. It might seem like a funny cultural trait to borrow, but Boer men picked it up. It doesn't look so bad with blacks because the men stay pretty skinn usually. But in whites, especially in Boers, who run to fat anyway, it isn't so enthralling. They wear their belts underneath their paunches, somewhat on the order of a sling. Now consider Bruns strictly as a specimen walking around with his nice flat belly, a real waist, and, face is a very compact nice little behind, and also keep in mind that he's Dutch, so in a remote way he's the same stock as the Boer men there, and the contrast was not going to be lost on the women, who are another story. The women have nothing to do. Help is thick on the ground. They get up at noon. They consume bales of true-romance magazines from Britain and the Republic, so incredibly crude. They do makeup. And they can get very flirtatious in an incredibly heavy-handed way after a couple of brandies. Bruns was the opposite of flirtatious. I wonder what the women thought it meant. He was very scrupulous when he was talking to you—it was nice. He never seemed to be giving you ratings on your secondary sex characteristics when he was talking to you, unlike everybody else. He kept his eyes on your face. As a person with large breasts I'm sensitized on this. Boer men are not normal. They think they're a godsend to any white woman who turns up in this wilderness. Their sex ideas are derived from their animals. I've heard they just unbanned *Love Without Fear* in South Africa this year, which says something. The book was published in 1941.

On top of that, the Dutch-Boer interface is so freakish and tense anyway. The Dutch call Afrikaans "baby Dutch." Boers are a humiliation to the Dutch, like they are their ids set free in the world or something similar. The Dutch Parliament keeps almost voting to get an economic boycott going against South Africa.

Also it wasn't helpful that Bruns was some kind of absolute vegetarian, which he combined with fasting. He was whatever is beyond lactovegetarian in strictness. You have never seen people consume meat on the scale of the Boers. As a friend of mine says, Boers and meat go together like piss and porcelain. Biltong, sausages, any kind of meat product, pieces of pure solid fat—they love meat. So there was another rub.

Bruns was so naïve. He apparently had no idea he was coming to live in a shame culture. Among the Bakorwa, if you do something wrong and somebody catches you, they take you to the customary court and give you a certain number of strokes with a switch in public. They wet it first so it hurts more. This is far from being something whites thought up and imposed. It's the way it is. The nearest regular magistrate is—where? Bobonong? Who knows. Bakorwa justice is based on beatings and the fear of beatings and shame, full stop. It's premodern. But here comes Bruns wearing his crucifix and wondering what is going on. The problem was he had an unfortunate introduction to the culture. You could call wife beating among the Bakorwa pretty routine. I think he saw an admission to the hospital related to

that. Also he himself was an ex-battered child, somebody said. I'm thinking of setting up a course for people who get sent here. I can give you an example of the kind of thing people should know about and not think twice about. The manager of the butchery in one of the towns caught two women shoplifting and he made them stand against the wall while he whipped them with an extension cord instead of calling the police. This shamed them and was probably effective and they didn't lose time from work or their families. You need anthropologists to prepare people for the culture here. Bruns needed help. He needed information.

Bruns belonged to some sect. It was something like the people in England who jump out and disrupt fox hunts. Or there was a similar group, also in England, of people who were interposing themselves between prizefighters, to stop prizefighting. Bruns was from some milieu like that. I think he felt like he'd wandered into something by Hieronymus Bosch which he was supposed to do something about.

The fact is that the amount of fighting and beating there is in Bakorwa culture is fairly staggering to a person at first. Kids get beaten at school and at home, really hard sometimes. Wives naturally get beaten. Animals. Pets. Donkeys. And of course the whole traditional court process, the *kgotla*, is based on it. I think he was amazed. Every Wednesday at the *kgotla* the chief hears charges and your shirt comes off and you get two to twenty strokes depending. Then there's the universal recreational punching and shoving that goes on when the locals start drinking. So it's not something you can afford to be sensitive about if you're going to work here for any length of time.

Bruns decided to do something. The first thing he tried was absurd and made everything worse.

He started showing up at the *kgotla* when they were giving judgment and just stood there watching them give strokes. He was male, so he could get right up in the front row. I don't understand he never said anything, the idea being just to be a sorrowful witness. I guess he thought it would have some effect. But the Bakorwa didn't get it and didn't care. He was welcome.

Maybe I'm just a relativist on corporal punishment. Our own wonderful culture is falling apart with crime, more than Keteng is, and you could take the position that substituting imprisonment for the various kinds of rough justice there used to be has only made things worse. Who knows if there was less crime when people just formed mobs in a cooperative spirit and rode people out of town on a rail or horsewhipped them, when that was the risk you were running rather than plea bargaining and courses in basket weaving or some other fatuous kind of so-called rehabilitation? I don't.

Bruns convinced himself that the seven families were to blame for all the violence—spiritually to blame at least. He was going to ask them to do something about it, take some kind of stand, and he was going to the center of power, Deon Du Toit.

There's some disagreement as to whether Bruns went once to Du Toit's house or twice. Everybody agrees Du Toit wasn't home and that Bruns went in and stayed, however many times he went, stayed talking with Marika, Du Toit's slutty wife. The one time everybody agrees on was at night. Bruns started to turn away when the maid told him Du Toit wasn't there. But then somehow Bruns was invited in. That's established. Then subsequently there was one long afternoon encounter, supposedly.

Bruns was going to blame the families for everything—for making money off liquor, which leads to violence, for doing nothing about violence to women and not even appearing at *kgotla* for women who worked for them when they were brutalized by their husbands or boyfriends, for corrupting the chief, who was an incompetent anyway, for doing nothing about conditions at the jail. I can generate this list out of my own knowledge of Bruns's mind; everything on it is true. Finally there was something new he was incensed about. The drought had been bad and Du Toit had just started selling water for three pula a drum. You know drought is bad when cattle come into town and bite the brass taps off cisterns. A wildebeest charged an old woman carrying melons and knocked her down so it could get the moisture from the melons.

We know what Du Toit did when he came back and found out Bruns had been there. First he punched the housemaid, Myriad Gofetile (her twin sister also works for Du Toit), for letting Bruns in or for not telling him about it, one or the other. And Marika wasn't seen outside the house for a while, although the Boers usually try not to mark their women when it shows when they beat them.

Those are two people I would love to see fighting, Deon and Marika Du Toit, tooth and nail. It would be gorgeous. Both of them are types. He's fairly gigantic. Marika has skin like store dummy's. She's proud of it. She's one of those people who are between twenty-five and forty but you can't tell where. She has high cheekbones you can't help envying, and these long eyes, rather Eurasian-looking. She wears her hair like a fool, though—lacquered, like a scoop around her head. Her hair is yellowish. She hardly says anything. But she doesn't need to because she's so brilliant with her cigarette, smoking and posing.

Deon was away hunting during the time or times Bruns visited. The inevitable thing happened, besides beating up on his household, when Deon found out. This was the day he got back, midmorning. He sent a yard boy to the hospital with a message to the effect that Bruns is ordered to drop whatever he's doing and come immediately to see Deon at the house.

Bruns is cool. He sends back the message that he's engaged on work for the hospital and regrets he isn't free to visit.

So that message went back, and the yard boy comes back with a new command that Bruns should come to Du Toit's at tea, which would be at about eleven. Bruns sends the message back that he doesn't break for tea, which was true.

Suddenly you have Deon himself materializing in the hospital garage, enraged, still covered with gore from hauling game out of his pickup. He had shot some eland.

"You don't come by my wife when I am away!" He ended up screaming this at Bruns, who just carried on fixing some vehicle.

He now orders Bruns to come to his house at lunch, calling him a worm and so on, which was apropos Bruns being a pacifist.

Bruns took the position that he had authority over who was present in the garage and ordered Du Toit to leave.

Then there was a stupid exchange to the effect that Bruns would come only if Du Toit was in actual fact inviting him to a meal at noon.

Throughout all this Bruns is projecting a more and more sorrowful calmness. Also everything Bruns says is an aside, since he keeps steadily working. Deon gets frantic. The su

is pounding down. You have this silent chorus of Africans standing around. There is no question but that they are loving every moment.

It ends with Deon telling Bruns he had better be at his house at noon if he expects to live and have sons.

Of course, after the fact everybody wanted to know why somebody didn't intervene.

Bruns did go at lunchtime to Deon's.

The whole front of Deon's place is a screened veranda he uses for making biltong. From the street it looks like red laundry. There are eight or nine clotheslines perpetually hung with rags of red meat turning purple, air-drying. This is where they met. Out in the road you had an audience of Bakorwa pretending to be going somewhere, slowly.

Meat means flies. Here is where the absurd takes a hand. Deon comes onto the porch from the house. Bruns goes onto the porch from the yard. The confrontation is about to begin. Deon is just filling his lungs to launch out at Bruns when the absurd thing happens: he inhales a fly. Suddenly you have a farce going. The fly apparently got rather far up his nostril. Deon goes into a fit, stamping and snorting. He's in a state of terror. You inhale a fly and the body takes over. Also you have to remember that there are certain flies that fly up the nostrils of wildebeests and lay eggs that turn into maggots that eat the brains of the animals, which makes them gallop in circles until they die of exhaustion. Deon has seen this, of course.

The scene is over before it begins. Deon crashes back into his living room screaming for help. It is total public humiliation. The Bakorwa see Bruns walk away nonchalantly and hear Du Toit thrashing and yelling.

Marika got the fly out with tweezers, I heard. By then Bruns was back at work.

Here is my theory of the last act. Deon's next move was inevitable—to arrange for a proxy to catch Bruns that same night and give him a beating. For symbolic and other reasons, it had to be one of the Bakorwa. At this point both Bruns and Deon are deep in the grip of the procedure of the Duel, capital D. Pragmatically, there would be no problem for Deon in getting one of the Bakorwa to do the job and probably even take the blame for it in the unlikely event he got caught. This is not to say there was no risk to Deon, because there was, some. But if you dare a Boer to do something, which is undoubtedly the way Deon perceived it, he is lost. An example is a man who was dared to kiss a rabid ox on the lips, at the abattoir in Cape Town. It was in the *Rand Daily Mail*. By the way, the point of kissing the ox on the lips is that it gives rabies its best chance of getting directly to your brain. So he did it. Not only that, but defaulted on the course of rabies injections the health department was frantically trying to get him to take. Here is your typical Boer folk hero. Add to that the Duel psychology, which is like a spell that spreads out and paralyzes people who might otherwise be expected to step in and put a stop to something so weird. Still, when someone you know personally like Bruns is found dead, it shocks you. I had cut this man's hair.

I'm positive two things happened the last night, although the official version is that only one did.

The first is that Deon sent somebody, a local, to beat Bruns up. When night falls in Ketersburg it's like being under a rock. There's no street lighting. The stores are closed. The whites pull their curtains. Very few Bakorwa can afford candles or paraffin lamps. It can seem unreal.

because the Bakorwa are used to getting out and about in the dark and you can hear conversations and deals going down and so on, all in complete blackness. They even have parties in the dark where you can hear *bojalwa* being poured and people singing and playing those one-string tin-can violins. There was no moon that night and it was cloudy.

Bruns would often go out after dinner and sit on one of the big rocks up on the hill and conduct his own private vespers. He'd go out at sunset and sit there into the night thinking pure thoughts. He had a little missal he took with him, but what he could do with it in the dark except fondle it I have no idea.

So I think Bruns went out, got waylaid and beaten up as a lesson, and went back to his hut. I think the point of it was mainly just to humiliate him and mark him up. Of course, because of his beliefs, he would feel compelled just to endure the beating. He might try to shield his head or kidneys, but he couldn't fight back. He would not be in the slightest doubt that it was Bakorwa doing it and that they had been commissioned by Du Toit. So he comes back messed up, and what is he supposed to do?

Even very nice people find it hard to resist paradox. For example, whenever somebody who knows anything about it tells the story of poor Bruns, they always begin with the end of the story, which is that he drowned, their little irony being that of course everybody knows Botswana is a desert and Keteng is a desert. So poor Bruns, his whole story and what he did is reduced to getting this cheap initial sensation out of other people.

As I reconstruct the second thing that happened, it went like this: Bruns wandered back from his beating and possibly went into his place with the idea of cleaning himself up. His state of mind would have to be fairly terrible at this point. He has been abused by the very people he is trying to champion. At the same time, he knows Du Toit is responsible and that he can never prove it. And also he is in the grip of the need to retaliate. And he is a pacifist. He gets an idea and slips out again into the dark.

They found Bruns the next morning, all beaten up, drowned, his head and shoulders submerged in the watering trough in Du Toit's side yard. The police found Deon still in bed in his clothes, hung over and incoherent. Marika was also still in bed, also under the weather and she also was marked up and made a bad exhibit. They say Deon was struck dumb when they took him outside to show him the body.

Here's what I see. Bruns goes to Deon's, goes to the trough and plunges his head underwater and fills his lungs. I believe he could do it. It would be like he was beaten and pushed under. He was capable of this. He would see himself striking at the center of the weight and convicting Du Toit for a thousand unrecorded crimes. It's self-immolation. It's nonviolence.

Deon protested that he was innocent, but he made some serious mistakes. He got panicky. He tried to contend he was with one of the other families that night, but that story collapsed when somebody else got panicky. Also it led to some perjury charges against the Visser. Then Deon changed his story, saying how he remembered hearing some noises during the night, going out to see what they were, seeing nothing, and going back in and to bed. That could be the truth, but by the time he said it nobody believed him.

The ruin is absolute. It is a real *Götterdämmerung*. Deon is in jail, charged, and the least he can get is five years. He will have to eat out of a bucket. The chief is disgraced and they are discussing a regency. Bruns was under his protection, formally, and all the volunteer agencies

are upset. In order to defend himself the chief is telling everything he can about how helpless he is in fact in Keteng, because the real power is with the seven families. He's pouring out details, so there are going to be charges against the families on other grounds, mostly about bribery and taxes. Also, an election is coming, so the local Member of Parliament has a chance to be zealous about white citizens acting like they're outside the law. Business licenses are getting suspended. Theunis Pieters is selling out. There's a new police compound going up and more police coming in. They're posting a magistrate.

There is ruin. It's perfect.

Here the road was a soft red trough. In a Land-Rover laboring along it were four whites, the men in front, the women in back. The landscape was desolate but neat: dry plains, the grass cropped short, small and scattered thorn trees, no deadfall anywhere, late-afternoon light the color of glue.

The men had an acoustic advantage. In the front seat, especially when the Land-Rover was in first or second gear, they could, by leaning slightly forward, talk without being heard from the back. Or they could lean back and monitor or enter conversations proceeding behind them. They began discussing bonuses and leaned forward.

The woman seated behind the driver was discussing her pregnancy, wearily. "Tess, we must leave it," she said. "I'm so tired of my pregnancies as a topic. I'll tell you about Greece. I adored it, and he"—she gestured toward the driver—"loathed it." She waited for something.

She said, "Gareth, did you not loathe Greece?"

"What?" he asked, and then, before she could repeat her question, said, "Yes, Nan."

"There you have it. I adored it, he loathed it. For Gareth there is only one perfect spot for home—Sussex. So that all travel that is not Sussex is just willful. He hated things, Tess, they were so silly, like the Greeks hissing for taxis, which is simply their custom. And in Crete was the hot-water schedule—an hour in the morning and another before supper, so we must always be poised to race back so as not to miss it. And the pillows were 'sandbags.' They were bad. There he had a point. I grant him that."

"We never go to Greece," Tess said.

"Well, you must. But what I truly think is, we should. I would rather not go with a man again, or at least not with Gareth, we are so ill-matched for that country. He agrees." Again she listened toward the front. She went on, "I irritated him no end. Item: I thought it was clever to refer to tavernas, places you eat, as though the Greek letters should just be read right off as sort of English, so I called them 'tabepnas.' I had to stop. Not amusing after all. Well. But every time we would see two women traveling together—this was Crete—he would say, 'Well, well, they must be on their way to Lesbos, where it all began.' And I said nothing—not once. Then the fortresses, or 'fortetsas.' They are on headlands, very high, walled about, beautiful, overlooking the blue sea. There were sieges lasting generations. Cooped in but they could look at the Aegean. So beautiful. But I was saying: On the top, there are date palms, old gardens still growing, graves, mosques. All these different conquerors left different artifacts, you see, and I just wanted to wander at will. But Gareth had it that straight off we must walk all round the perimeter to get a 'sense,' as he said, and only then could one wander at will. So it was. *Placet*. Drive gently, Gareth, we are tipping."

"I adore Cape Town," Tess said. "Botswana is so dry."

"But Greece! We could organize it, Tess, and it is so much the reverse of life at the mine. I mean, the mine is all right. And Cape Town—All right, you go down there, I accept that it is beautiful, but it's far from one hundred per cent the reverse of the mine. I mean, everywhere in South Africa the whites are on compounds, too, but armed and that. One wants something totally unlike—not South Africa!"

"Greece sounds lovely. Would you take the new baby?"

"I forgot."

Gareth said sharply to the women that someone should please hand the water bottle forward to Tom. It was done.

Nan said to Tess, “Truly, one comes to dislike the medical profession. Now I must deal with them again. Coming back here to Botswana from holiday, it was so strange and nice. We were in the plane, coming low over the land. I was happy to see Botswana again. It was so strange, Tess—the country seemed like a poor relation, someone nice who refuses gifts at first, someone you like. This country is so poor. We were flying low over it. And then all I could think of was our friend the peerless Dr. Hartogs, who said that from the air the country looks as if it has ringworm. He was saying that the brush fencing round the family rondaves and kraals looks like that. It spoiled it.”

“We love the sea,” Tess said. “Give us four days and we make straight for Durban. Durban isn’t nice, but it has the sea to put your feet in.”

“You’ll be singing a different tune about Hartogs when your day comes,” Gareth said over her shoulder.

Tess said, “Nowadays whenever I am on paved road I never take it for granted. Even in U.S. I enjoy it, just the being on it. Even here, when you get to the paved roads, bad as they are, I just say thank God to myself. I hate these spoors. And why do they call these tire ruts spoors? Does anyone know?”

Tom said, “We put in the roads and they don’t maintain them, do they? They think a road is a thing like your fingernail—chip it and it grows back. Well, they’re wrong, aren’t they?”

Gareth slowed. They were approaching a narrow concrete-slab bridge over a gully. There was no more than a yard of clearance on either side of the vehicle. The stream-bed beneath the slab was baked sand pocked with hoofmarks. They crossed safely. The bushes beside the road were plated with red dust.

They passed a small settlement and the men began to laugh. An imposing thorn tree overhanging a shed at the roadside was clotted with paper refuse—streamers of toilet tissue caught in the spines.

Nan said, “It’s unfair. We bring in all these metal and plastic things and bottles that don’t decay. In the old times, they could leave anything about and it was organic—it would decay or be eaten. Even as it is, the goats eat a lot of the plastic. Look at the courtyards, Tess. They are as neat as you like. They sweep them morning and evening.”

“Yes, everything goes into the lane,” Gareth said.

“They aren’t wasteful,” Nan said, in a voice made light. “Every bit of rag they can get they make something with. They make shifts out of maize sacks. They will ask you for your rag, and they are so grateful—”

“Hallo! Nan, don’t look on the right! Dead beast.” Gareth was peremptory.

Nan did as she was told. The men looked. On the bank was the corpse of a heifer, fresh. Dogs or jackals had been at work. There was movement in the brush adjacent.

“Third one this trip,” Tom said. “This drought is red hell.”

Gareth nodded. He related something that Hartogs, who was a great hunter, had told him. Animals were being driven mad with thirst and were fighting over carrion. There was some zoological protocol between vultures and jackals that was breaking down. The jackals were supposed to withdraw when the birds came, but lately they were staying and fighting. Hartogs had witnessed a magnificent fight. Gareth described it until Nan asked him to stop.

Nan said to Tess, but projecting for the benefit of the front, “Truly, are we so superior as we think? I wonder a little. When we first moved in at the mine, we did something at the house so stupid I am still in pain. There were two pawpaw trees growing side by side by the house, one thriving with nice big pawpaws on it and the other sick-looking and leafless—dead-looking. Well, we thought it was plain what we should do: take down the dead tree. So we hauled and pushed on the trunk of the poor tree and strained and pulled it over—uprooted it. Gareth and myself. It was his idea: we must just straight off do this, get it over. Then, with the crash, the servants come out. They had funny looks on. Dineo said, so quietly, ‘Oh, Mm, you have killed the male.’ We didn’t understand. It seems the pawpaw grow in pairs, couple male and female. The male tree looks like a phallus—no foliage to it, really. The female needs the male in order to bear. They take years to reach the height ours had. Then the female died. The staff had been eating pawpaws from our tree for years. It was humiliation.”

“Bit ancient times by now, isn’t it?” Gareth said angrily.

“So sorry,” Nan said.

They saw a woman standing at the edge of a strip of cultivated land, a mealie patch. Her baby was bound to her back with a blanket.

Nan resumed, in the same projecting voice, “And these blankets, let me just mention. These blankets they tie their children to them with. One sees the babies in the hot season and they are sweating and drenched. And I know from the sisters that quite a lot of them get pneumonia and die of it, when they shouldn’t. Why, do you think? I say because of acrylics. That’s all they can get nowadays. The acrylics don’t breathe. Of course, in the old times they used skins, or if they bought blankets they were wool. But we bring them marvelous cheap acrylics, make them very cheap and drive out the wool, and their children are perishing. Try to buy a wool blanket today at any price in this part of the world.”

Gareth half faced the back. “Might I ask where you have the least proof of that? You don’t know a bloody thing about it. We can’t set a foot right if we’re white, can we? Regular litanies with you, Nan. You’re becoming tiresome!”

“Could you possibly just carry on driving and not overturning? Let the women talk, Gareth. No, I have no proof, sorry. Now watch him start racing.”

Tom and Gareth began talking about crime. They agreed that the situation was getting out of hand.

Tom said, “You know, they have some of those road-contract chaps billeted in the Shangu Hotel to this day, the housing they promised is still not ready. Well, I talked to one of them. Well, you know how the hotel is, just by the railroad station. Train comes in twelve at night and stops for five minutes. So what happens? Every night at twelve—*pum pum pum*, you have these villains bounding down the hallways, footsteps, rattling door handles one after another.”

just to see if they're unlocked, by chance. Then comes a shout that the train is going, and *pum pum pum*, everybody pelts back and all aboard. Every night of the week without fail—s your watch to it. Life in the metropolis of Shangule.”

Tess began complaining to Nan about stealing. “The stealing is getting terrible, really.”

“I know they steal,” Nan said. “I think I should steal, too, in their place. No, I mean this Tess. I heard a story. Two American Peace Corps women staying in a rondavel in Serowe. Middle of the night. They hear sounds. They're locked in tight, all right, but they hear someone fooling at the door and windows. ‘Go away!’ they say. ‘Who is it?’ There is silence and then a voice says, ‘We are thieves, let us in.’ That somehow is so typical. I don't think they are really cruel. Wait.” She edged forward, signaling Tess to say nothing. She sat back.

“Gareth is still on about crime. It's coming up a sermon—how criminal, how worthless the Batswana are. How slow they are. ‘They move like clouds,’ he likes to say. They are so insanitary and so forth and so on ad nauseam world without end. It wears me right out. Not that I wasn't that way. I was worse, at first. I was just a maniac when food fell on the floor and one of the children picked it up to eat, because the help are barefoot—What is it?”

Tess was pressing a palm to her middle and frowning. She put a finger to her lips and slid closer to Nan. In a low voice, she said, “I'm ovulating. I get a stitch over here when it starts. Or on the other side.”

“You mean without fail? So you always know where you are?”

“All my life.”

“Aren't you lucky!” Nan said. Her eyes reddened, and she turned to look out the window on her side.

They had been passing through a long stretch of burned-over land. The bleakness oppressed them. The women began estimating how far it was to Lobatse, their destination. To correct them. “Ladies, you are too low by half. It's three hours from here to the pavement with the worst driving yet to come—the deep sand near Pala, the Trench. Then on the bitumen it's an hour and a half to Lobatse, the Cumberland Hotel, a lager, fillet chasseur, bathe, and good night all and thank you very much.”

He offered the water bottle. Tess drank from it, but Nan said no. She explained to Tess, “In truth, I am parched, but I don't want to make Gareth pull up for my comfort more than I have to—especially near Pala. There we must have momentum.” Tess set the bottle on the seat next to her.

“Just look at this country,” Nan said. “Red rock wilderness. It makes one sad, really.”

Tess made a sympathetic face.

They began tacking. Here the road was braided around dry sinks and sharp rock outcrops. The women looked commiseration at one another. The vehicle ran close to the bank on some curves. Brush scraped the windows.

The driving eased, finally. The men were murmuring about the road mess in Botswana. They were cynical. Nan sat forward, straining to hear. Contractors were using shoddy material. Service trenches were subsiding through lack of proper compaction. Heavy equipment was being dragged across fresh tarmac without rollers. There were too few bell-mouths.

Nan interrupted. “Do I understand you to be saying that all the trouble with the new road

is *not* just the Botswana government people but, aha!, bad workmanship by outsiders—whites, isn't it?—from South Africa and from Europe?"

"Well, to an extent, yes," Gareth said.

"Well, if you know about this, why don't you inform government? I'm sure they'd be grateful."

"They don't want to hear it."

"Oh, do they not? How do you know? Have you tried?"

"One can't just go and point a finger. They don't want to hear this. We are not road engineers, are we now?"

"No, but you are *engineers*. Mine engineers, but you know something about materials, and you seem to know quite a lot about roads, too, as it seems. So why not tell government?"

Tom said, "Waste of breath. You may believe that. You listen to your husband."

"They don't want to hear it," Gareth said again, more firmly.

"But then a letter. Anonymous. Or write the *Daily News*. They print letters."

Both men laughed, then said, "Not likely," in unison, which made them laugh again.

Nan raised her voice. "Why don't you go to, oh, *anyone*, then? Go to the High Commission instead of just sitting there laughing at the sheer folly of ever, ever, ever trying seriously to help these poor wretches get something they pay for! You won't even try! Because even if there are pirates you won't do it. Tess, this is what I am ill with. Just this."

Gareth spoke in an even, ominous tone. "You are exciting yourself. We'll not have it. The road is nasty driving coming and you are doing this. Tess, can you assist? We are not alone in the vehicle, Nan."

"Oh, you don't like what I say—what a surprise! You don't care for the people here, and there is an end of it. The smallest thing I propose is always senseless, madness—I must put it from me. Like the tins the workmen boil up their mealie pap in for breakfast and tea, No. 1 size. They are just boiling the lead from the seams straight into their food. Now, it *cannot* be sound. I spoke to the sisters, and they said, 'Good heavens, are they?' Tess, not even will he get a proper three-leg pot or two for his own men. That would *interfere*."

"You are making a row!" Gareth shouted.

Nan said, still loud, "Yes. Talking of rows, Tess, listen. Last week, blazing rage. For what? First, you know all the beef this country sends abroad. All right, they don't eat much beef. Certainly the poor hardly see it unless the chief has something to celebrate. No, the beef is kept to multiply, and then, when they need cash, it goes straight to the abattoir and the straightaway into tins and to Europe—England. Because grass-fed beef makes up perfectly into baby food, Tess. Now, what drove him to rage was this mad idea of mine: Why can't the government just save aside some portion of the tinned baby food and provide it to mothers free through clinics—why not?"

Gareth broke in. "I'll tell you why, because the mothers would eat it, wouldn't they?"

"Oh, Gareth! You shame me! Yes, all right. Some would. But a lot would get to the babies. The mothers are hungry, too. And the babies go straight from the breast to mealie pap and starch. And it kills a lot of them—indirectly—Tess."

"Mealie has protein," Gareth said.

"Ah, but so little! And one can just look at the size of the people. The men are small. Answer me why the meat must go only to the fair babies of Europe."

“You know my answer.”

“Well, state it for Tess and Tom, or just for Tess, then—by now they are fascinated.”

“It is not our part! That would be the dole, and the government are dead set they will not have that, and quite right. Now enough!”

“And that’s all you truly see?”

“All there is, isn’t it? Ah.” They had reached the last high point before the Pala stretch. The men were relieved.

“The Trench!” Tom said. “There it is.”

Tess said softly to Nan, “We must be still.”

Very softly, Nan said, “You know I don’t hate him, Tess, do you?”

Tess patted Nan’s shoulder.

The last of the sun was in their eyes as they descended. Gareth came down into the deep sar with good speed. The long ascent began well. The trick was to stay precisely in the spoor by the last vehicle preceding. There were hazards to avoid, the worst being the loose meshes of brush, like nests, which had earlier been packed into soft places in the track by drivers who had gotten stuck. Gareth scanned the road far ahead. There was right-of-way for only one vehicle. If two vehicles met, one would have to climb up into the side drifts or reverse to the last spot wide enough to permit clearance. Gareth was taut.

The road was below the level of the land. The banks at this point ran even with the shoulders. Nan looked to the rear. The dust plume they were churning up extended as far back as she could see—solid, like a wall. For some time, no one spoke.

They saw something in the middle distance ahead—a figure, and then figures, on the right bank, motioning. Grim, Gareth said, “*Na lifti.*”

Nan said, “Nobody is saying give lifts, Gareth. We are quite presentably full up. No fear.”

The figures grew closer.

“It’s *bushies!*” Tom said.

“No, it’s too far south—can’t be,” Gareth said.

“No, it is, it is—it’s bushies,” Tom said. “They must be clear over from the pan. It must be the drought. I hear the pan is dried up. God, that is a distance to come. Dear God above. It is! There’s a string of them. Want us to stop.”

“Well, good luck,” Gareth said.

“Bushmen—Basarwa,” Nan said. “But only women.”

“Hard to tell,” Tom said, trying to be light.

Tess said, “Oh, pity—they must want to trade ostrich shells or that beadwork. They want tobacco or salt or anything. Sugar. Too bad. They just give it away if you have what they want. Oh, too bad. I have some lovely things. Oh, pity we can’t stop and see. Well, that’s life.”

The banks were lower here. They drew even with the Basarwa—two young girls and an older woman with an infant caught against her front in a leather sling, all gesturing urgently.

Tess said, “They look so Chinese—they are all cheekbones; look at it.”

The women were close to the road. Two of them were holding out pots or cans. The girls were waving the vessels up and down, stiffly, frantically. The mother dropped into an odd posture, like kneeling prayer, but clapping her hands under her chin. They made a tablea

The Rover approached. The women were dressed in skins and rags. They were thin. Nan stared. Arms and legs were like sticks. Their hair seemed to grow in dots on their skulls. One girl appeared to be wearing a kind of cap, but it was a huge scab, Nan saw. All were smiling unnaturally at the vehicle as it passed slowly. They were calling out. Nan opened her window. It was impossible to understand anything.

“Will you *slow*, Gareth?” Nan asked. “I can’t hear them.”

Gareth said nothing.

The faces did look Oriental, except for the hair. The mother got up. The whole group began to trot alongside.

Nan opened the window fully and put her head out. Tess pulled at her.

“Can we not slow, Gareth?” Nan asked urgently.

“They’re trading,” Gareth answered.

“No,” Nan said. “They’re saying ‘*metse*.’ That’s it. We must stop, Gare. I have it clear.”

Tess said, “What on earth is *metse*? I don’t have any.”

“*Water*, Tess. They want water. I have never heard of this. They don’t do this. Look, they’re keeping up. This is too desperate. We must stop. We have the outer tank. It’s full of water. We must stop. Gare, I am pleading! I am faint. You must stop. Stop this. We have the external tank. You must *attend*. They are all running. One of the girls, Gare—a scab condition. They are smiling at us, begging. Gare, if you love me, *please stop!*”

“They can run for miles, they say,” Tess said.

“That is the men, Tess—when they *hunt*.”

“Right. They blow poison darts, and that weakens the animal or rhino or what all, and then they just run after it until it drops. Days, sometimes, it takes. They can run.”

“Tess, be still. Look at them.”

The Basarwa were reaching to touch or catch hold of the vehicle.

“Gare,” Nan said. “What do you say? Please, my heart, we *must* stop!” She put her hands on his shoulders. He tensed and bucked violently to reject her touch.

Gareth said, “There is no chance. We are in sand, Nan. We could be all night. *No!*” He was increasing speed.

“Then, Gare,” she said, “if we stick, all right, we could put brush down—I would help. It would help. Please, Gare. The mother is running. Their mother is running. We won’t stick. Help can turn up. They are skin and bone!” She appealed to Tess. “They are skin and bone. We are making them run.”

Again Nan put her head out the window. The Land-Rover was drawing away. Nan could hear the dire breathing of the runners.

“No stopping, I say,” Tom said.

Nan ducked back in. “Tom, this is our vehicle!” she said, shouting.

“You shall be civil to Tom,” Gareth said, in his most menacing voice.

Nan saw one of the girls drop to the ground, spent.

“One of the girls has fallen.”

“Nan, we are picking up dust. You will close up. Close the window.”

Gareth was right. There was dust in the air. “Hear, hear!” Tess said. She had taken out her bandanna and was holding it bunched near her mouth.

Nan closed the window and sat back, making herself look forward, her face agonized.

“They are still at the side, Gareth,” Nan said. “Gare, at the window you can see them, two of them. Gare, please look. Oh, *help!*”

Nan opened the window again. She looked back. The second girl had fallen. Only the mother, still carrying the baby, was still pursuing, her face wild. She would soon fall.

“The mother is still running, Gareth. She is straining, with that baby. I wish you would look. You are destroying me. *We must stop!*”

The mother was heaving with effort. It was too much. She threw her arms up and fell on her back, protecting the infant she was carrying.

The Land-Rover ground onward. Nan looked to the rear. The women were lost. She covered her face with her hands. Then she lowered her hands and seized the water bottle from Tess, who was holding it. She shoved her window open and hurled the bottle out onto the bank. She lunged toward the front, grasping for anything else she could find to throw out of the vehicle. The men shouted. Tom grappled with her. Tess shrank into her corner. Tom turned and got on his knees in his seat and seized Nan by the shoulders. He pressed her back. He held her. Gareth was trembling with fury.

“She has pitched out the water bottle, Gareth,” Tom said.

With a roaring cry that frightened them all, Gareth drove his foot down on the brake. The Rover slewed and stopped. The engine died. Tom released Nan.

They sat in silence, tilted, mastering themselves. Nan was the first to speak. “Why have we stopped, Gareth?” she whispered.

Gareth was contained. “One of us must collect the bottle. Simple enough.”

For a moment they were in darkness, enclosed in the dust of their passage as the wind came up sharply behind them. Nothing could be done until it was clear again. They waited.

Tom moved to get out. But Gareth caught Tom’s wrist and pulled him roughly back. “One of us must collect the bottle,” Gareth said again.

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