Private reserve

The chalet is halfway up the mountainside. It’s in a private reserve. You have to be taken up there by the owner of the reserve in his 4x4 if you don’t have one yourself. You leave your cars at the bottom, near the farmhouse, and load your stuff — food, drink, clothes, enough for the week’s stay — into the 4x4. The owner makes one trip up the mountain with two people and half the stuff. They unload the stuff at the chalet. They are left up there and the owner drives back down and fetches the other two people and the rest of the stuff. You unload it all in front of the chalet and the owner leaves in his 4x4. You carry it into the chalet.

The chalet is made of stone and has a thatched roof. It has a long deep stoep across the front, from which you can look out across the valley. The view is magnificent. Inside, the chalet has one big front room — on the right-hand side as you look in from the front door it’s the kitchen, on the left it’s the dining room, with a big wooden table in the centre. Behind the front room are two smaller rooms, bedrooms, separated by a narrow passageway. At the end of the passageway is a door leading to the bathroom, which is a small room that juts from the back of the chalet.

Hanging on the wall, over the dining-room table, is a rather vague watercolour of the self-same view from the chalet. It was painted by the owner’s wife.

“Left or right?”
“Left. Whatever. Whichever.”

“Which way do the beds face?”

They go into the room on the left. “Okay, well, that’s north, so ... that’s ...” Ricky turns, arms extended a little from his sides. “East, which means ... Emma thinks you should sleep pointing east.”

“The feet or the head?”

“Head should be east.”

“But then when you sit up, when you wake up, you’re facing west, which is the land of the dead.”

“According to?”

“The ancient Egyptians”

“So how did they do it?”

“Ask your wife. She’s the mumbojumbo expert.”

“I heard that.” Her voice is loud, jocular. She stands in the doorway of the small bedroom. “Ricky, stop talking shit and come and help. I’m not carrying any more. I’m exhausted and my back is sore.”

They have carried all the stuff inside. Packets of food are piled in the kitchen. In the dining room are crates of booze. They look at the crates.

“Do you think we’ll have enough?”
They have made supper and eaten it. They are sitting around the dining-room table smoking a joint.

“God, I haven’t smoked dagga in years. It’s quite fun.”

His wife says, “Well, don’t start again now. You were such a mindless struggle hippie when I met you. All that marching, all that dagga. If you get like that again I’ll divorce you. Chris and Dave are a bad influence.”

“Emma?”

“No, no — no thanks.”

“I thought you liked it now and then.”

“Oh, you know, it’s a fire chakra thing. Dope kills your fires. Down there.”

“Yes, but it does wonders for your celestial channel upstairs, doesn’t it?”

“Shut up,” she laughs. “Don’t mock me, you cynic.”

“Listen.”

“What.”

“They’re fucking.”

“Sssshhh, they’ll hear you ... I can’t hear anything.”

“Okay, that was a quiet patch ... there — there — that grunting — there —”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“There — didn’t you hear? That’s a fucking noise. I wonder who’s fucking who?”

“Whom.”

“Huh?”
She laughs. “You should be ashamed of yourself, listening to other people fucking—moffies moreover.”

“I’m a new-age man, for Christ’s sake, I’m gay-friendly, I talk about my feelings ...”

“You sure do.”

“Talking about my feelings, right now I’m feeling horny.” He snuggles up against her in the bed.

“That’s nice for you.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t.”

“Mmmmm ... That was amazing.”

“Were we making a lot of noise?”

“No more than normal.” His voice drops lower: “We are quite close to them.”

“Oh fuck. I forgot .... Mmm. That feels nice. Do it again.”

“Okay, so the boys are going for a walk. I hope they aren’t too hungover. The alcohol isn’t going to last if we carry on like last night. Shall we start on lunch?”

“Does that mean I’m a girl?”
She laughs. “For the purposes of this conversation and all other personal conversations between ourselves, yes, you are a girl. We’re girlfriends. Chris isn’t like that, is he?”

“No, he’s not, really. In that way he’s such a fucking man. We get by on subtle signals and intuition. My intuition, mostly.”

“You see, you’re the girl.”

“Oh God. Next you’ll be saying we’re women who love too much. Do you think me and you are from Venus and Chris and Ricky are from Mars?”

“Oh, Ricky’s a very modern man. He’s practically a woman. But sometimes I do think that he is in fact from ... Saturn.”

They laugh. He says, “Chris might seem like the man in the relationship to you, but he is in fact from the planet Uranus.”

“Eeeek! Shut up! I don’t want to know about your disgusting unspeakable sex habits.”

“Fine, fine. Here — is this leek big enough for you?”

Ricky and Dave are sitting on the stoep. Chris and Emma are doing the washing-up.

“Another magnificent meal ...”

“And that Shiraz was particularly well-rounded. All three bottles of it.”

“Well, it was in the cellar long enough. Emma’s not drinking, I note. Not last night either.”

“No, she says she’s gone off it. Trying to cut down.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Getting old. You can’t take the wear and tear any more. She’ll be forty-two this year. You’re nearly forty yourself, aren’t you? You’ll see what it’s like.”
“But what’s going to see you through your middle age? You can’t dump all your vices. You’ve got to have something to hang on to.”

“Yes, well, you are managing very successfully to hang on to the cigarettes and the dagga and the wine, at least.”

“I do my best ... Hello, darling.”

Chris leans over Dave and kisses him. As he straightens up, Dave puts his arm around him and pulls him into a hug.

Chris says, “Don’t embarrass the straight guy.”

Ricky says, “You’ll have to do more than that to embarrass me. Come, sit. We’re just talking shit. What’s Emma doing?”

“I think she’s lying down. She said she wasn’t feeling so well.”

“Christ, I hope she’s okay ... Let me just go and ...” Ricky gets up.

“Such a doting husband.”

“Yes. Quick, gimme a kiss while he’s away.”

He whispers, “They’re fucking again.”

“Mmm. Does it turn you on?”

He doesn’t answer.

“It was a joke.”

“Uh ... well, I was just thinking about it. Does it? Maybe it does. Does it turn you on?”

“I’m not really thinking about sex at the moment. Or I’m not thinking about sex as sex.”

“Whatever can that mean?”

She laughs. “You’re the academic. Work it out.”
“I’m a geologist, for Christ’s sake, not a linguist. Can’t I just be a horny man here for a moment and say I want to fuck you?”

She laughs again, and he laughs with her. “Sure. As long as I can be a mysterious woman for a bit and say I don’t want you to fuck me, not right now ... I don’t mean I don’t want to fuck, in general, not that I don’t want to fuck ever again, or even that I just don’t want to fuck right now ... I know it’s been a while. I don’t even want to say I’m just not in that space right now, because that’s evasive. Sorry ... Hey, listen, let me just tell you this — I love it when you say you want to fuck me.”

“Christ, I’ve never heard you say so many fucking words in one utterance in my life.”

“Did you hear what I was actually saying? Did you get the content?”

“Sort of ... Yeah, sure, okay. I’ll be patient. I’ll be sensitive. It’s a woman thing, you’re saying.”

“Oh shut up. Just hold me. Hold me tight. Let’s go to sleep.”

“As long as you don’t mind my cock sticking into your bum for a while. Till it goes down.”

“You can masturbate, you know.”

“What, here, in front of you? Are you mad?”

“Oh, for crying out aloud ...”

“Let’s just go to sleep then.”


He comes out of the bathroom, towel around his waist. She is standing in the passageway.

“Now they want to do the whole krans. Ricky says it will take four, five hours. Are you going?”
“Me, no, are you mad? I’m a moffie. I don’t have to go trudging through the bundu. Besides, what would I wear?”

“Chris is a moffie.”

“Not for purposes such as hiking. He’s missing some part of the gay gene. That’s why he’s a good lawyer — he does all that male bonding stuff. Aren’t you going?”

“No.”

“Why not? You’re practically Mrs Bundu-Bash of the Decade. Don’t you want to go out and feel the earth speaking to you or whatever?”

“I just don’t feel like it.”

“Okay, girlfriend —” His voice drops to a whisper. “Time to ’fess up. You’ve been acting very strange these last few days. Ever since we got here.”

“Have I? Is it that obvious?”

“Of course it’s fucking obvious. No wine, no dagga, no walks, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Do you think Ricky’s noticed?”

“Ah, so you admit it. Of course Ricky’s noticed. He thinks you’ve got some terminal disease and you’re not telling him to spare his feelings.”

“Don’t joke, you sick bastard.”

“So? What is it?”

“Sssshhh, here they come.”

“I don’t know, there’s something funny going on with Emma. She’s acting differently. Careful, it’s crumbling there.”
“They didn’t say the krans was practically impassable, did they? We’re risking our lives here.”

“Come on, it’s an adventure. Even if you fell you wouldn’t fall far.”

“Ja, ja. But I’m fucking tired now and I want to go home.”

“It’s an hour to the top, say, then we can walk back down, around the side, on the path. There’s no point in going back down, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’ll be harder than coming up.”

“Did you bring the map?”

“I memorised it. It wasn’t very complicated. There’s almost nothing on it. Just a few dotted lines and general directions.”

“God, I hate Camel Men.”

“Don’t be such a faggot. We’re having fun, aren’t we?”

“I suppose so. Can we have a smoke-break?”

“Sure. Go on, milady — you take the rock. I’ll stand.”

“Thanks. Chivalrous of you. And don’t call me a faggot, babymaker. It’s queer to you.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to say that word.”

“Oh, well, some of the moffies don’t like it, but I do. It’s kind of threatening. And sort of old-fashioned. It’s the kind of word they’d use in one of those Terence Stamp movies from the early Sixties.”

“So, is that a gay insult for straight people — babymaker?”

“Ja. Good, isn’t it?”

“I can’t see why anyone would take it as an insult.”

“So what’s up with Emma?”

“I don’t know. It’s a mystery to me. I’m only her bloody husband, after all.”
“Maybe it’s just the strangeness of being married now, after so long living in sin. You were together, what, five years? And you’ve been married for ...? When was the wedding? April?”

“Nine months.”

“And all so sudden. You would have thought it was a shotgun wedding.”

“She’s the one who insisted. And it had to happen fast. She was a fucking bulldozer. I never put any pressure on her, all those years. I mean I suggested, but ... Ag, you know, suddenly it seems like the right thing to do. It just took her a while. She had to get over all that feminism.”

“We got the invitation and it was, like, two weeks away! Great party, though.”

“Ja, it was. Great party.”

“Still, I’m glad I’m gay and I don’t have to get married.”

“You are married. How long has it been now?”

“Nearly seven years. But I’d hate to have to get up in front of all my friends and family and make these fucking vows.”

“It’s not so bad. If you’re committed to the relationship ...”

“Making promises I can’t keep in the name of a God who doesn’t exist.”

“Hey, man, stop — this is getting heavy.”

“Okay, let’s move on. I’m ready to go.” He stands up. “Let’s go. The sun is setting.”

“Where are they?” She is peering out from the chalet’s stoep, up the path that leads up the mountainside. “It’s getting dark. Ricky said four hours.”
“They probably got lost. Don’t worry. I’m sure Ricky is having a fantastic time playing Boy Scout.”

“And Chris?”

“I dunno. He’s always in the gym, so theoretically he’s into exercise. Mountain-climbing might be a bit butch for him, though. Not that it’s much of a mountain. So why haven’t you told Ricky?”

There is a silence. She stares into the gloom that is gathering in the valley. “Thank God I’ve had barely any morning sickness. That would have been a giveaway. I ... I’m just so scared I’ll lose it, like I lost the first one.”

“But it’s nearly three months, you said.”

“I know, and the gynae said there’s very little chance of a recurrence of, of ... The signs are all good, the Tarot spread I did, the planets — I told you. But I’m still so scared. If we lost another one, I think I might lose Ricky too. Maybe it’s irrational, but that was a very very hard time for us. We nearly broke up. Nobody really knew, except, well, you knew a little bit, but nobody really knew. We were just so stunned, after being so ecstatic. It was like the universe had turned on us. I was hysterical for days on end ... Ricky was good, very supportive, but I could see the strain. There were moments he hated me. But the wedding ended that, thank God — it was my ritual of mending.”

“Not the moment most people would choose to get married.”

“No. I know that. Maybe it was a bit desperate. I pushed him into it. I just suddenly felt so insecure, like I needed every possible thing I could grab on to to stay afloat. But it worked, didn’t it?”

“It would seem so. It was a very nice wedding, for such short notice. I even liked the new-agey chanty bits. I wish me and Chris could get married.”
“Shit, I’m tired. I hope they’ve got some supper ready when we get back.”

“And it’s even harder because I just don’t feel like having sex with him at the moment, and I can’t tell him why. I just can’t, not with a baby inside me. I know it’s not true, but it feels like all that bouncing around could endanger —”

“You can always give him a blow job.”

“Oh, God, I hate that.”

“What’s wrong with it? If it’s clean, I mean. It’s fantastic.”

“Maybe it’s fantastic to have it done to you, but I can’t believe it’s so fantastic to do.”

“Well, you’re a woman — if you could imagine how good it feels, you would want to do it to someone else almost more than you’d want it to be done to you ... Did that sentence make sense grammatically?”

“I think so. You’re very good with that kind of thing. Must be working in radio.”

“But when I’m on air I feel as though I’m screwing it up all the time.”

“Oh, maybe you do sometimes, I don’t know, but everyone else is much worse.”

“Where the fuck are they? It’s nearly eight o’clock.”

“Jesus, Ricky, are we on the right path? It’s almost fucking eight o’clock. Four hours, you said, and we’ve been walking since eleven this morning. By my calculations —”
“I know, I know, nine hours. I can do the math. Don’t worry, we’re on the right path. I know it. It’s just longer than it looks on the map. Remember we have to go all the way around to get back, we have to go in a big arc —”

“What if we get stuck somewhere out here all night?”

“It’s all right. You can cuddle up with me. I’ll keep you warm.”

“Fuck off. I’m not attracted to you.”

“All you queers ever think about is sex.”

“Now I’m really getting worried.” She bursts into tears. “Something terrible has happened! I know it, I know it!”

“No you don’t.” He puts his arms around her. They are standing on the stoep in the dark. “Nothing terrible has happened. They’re just lost, that’s all. They’ll be home eventually. We’ve just got to wait.”

“The krans, who knows what’s in there —”

“Listen, relax — be quiet. We’re going to give them another half an hour, and then I’ll start walking down to the farm.” He says this quietly, but he is trembling. “It will take hours! And you could get lost too!”

“Ssssshhhh, sssssshhhhh. I won’t get lost. It’s a road, remember. I won’t get lost. And it’s not as far as all that. It’s just steep.”

“You could fall, they could have fallen — they could be trapped — Oh, God —”

“Sssssshhh ... Hey! Look! There they are!” Two trudging figures are emerging from the darkness. “Fuck, guys, what took you so long?”
“This fucking idiot,” gasping, exhausted, gesturing wildly, “didn’t actually measure anything on the map ...”

“Measure, how I’m supposed to — Emma —” She runs to Ricky, throws her arms around him, almost knocks him off his feet.

“Thank God you’re safe, thank God, thank God —”

“Hey, hey, hey, calm down, it’s okay, it’s fine, we’re back —”

“I’m pregnant, I’m pregnant.”

“Mmmm, it’s nice to be in a bed ... Fucking Ricky. The geologist with rocks in his head. I’m going to ache all over tomorrow after that long walk to freedom. Not to mention the soap opera when we got back.”

“Well, I was starting to get a bit worried myself. I was starting to imagine you stuck on some ledge, somewhere, in the dark ... running out of cigarettes ...” They laugh. “I do love you very much.”

“I am aware of that. You mean all that soap opera was about Emma being pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking heterosexuals.”