

ACCIDENTAL TOURIST

Absolute elsewhere

Shani Raviv visits an out-of-the-way place inhabited by salt-of-the-earth people



I wanted to be somewhere else. So I flew to Absolute Elsewhere aka Byrne Valley in the mist belt forest and grassland of KwaZulu-Natal.

Home to a solar-powered intentional community of 10 adults, seven children and seven homes: a mud kraal, a mud mansion, an octagonal log cabin, two double-storey wooden houses, a prefab erected in two days and a “zozo” cabin.

There lived a peacemaker, a seed scientist, a German who played the ukulele, a salt-of-the-earth wild woman, a ginger-haired man of few words, a hermit on the hill, an Aids worker, Bob the builder and a woman with binoculars obsessed with succulents.

Being the elder, the hermit was the patriarch of the community who built his house plank-by-plank and sprouted not only the beard of a sage but an ivory-skinned baby, named after a Japanese filmmaker; and a Jewish wife who sang in Yiddish, danced in Spanish and cooked Asian and Indian rice.

The hermit acquiesced with a shy nod and a tug on his beard when I asked if it were accurate to “label” him an idealistic utopian anarchist based on his way of life.

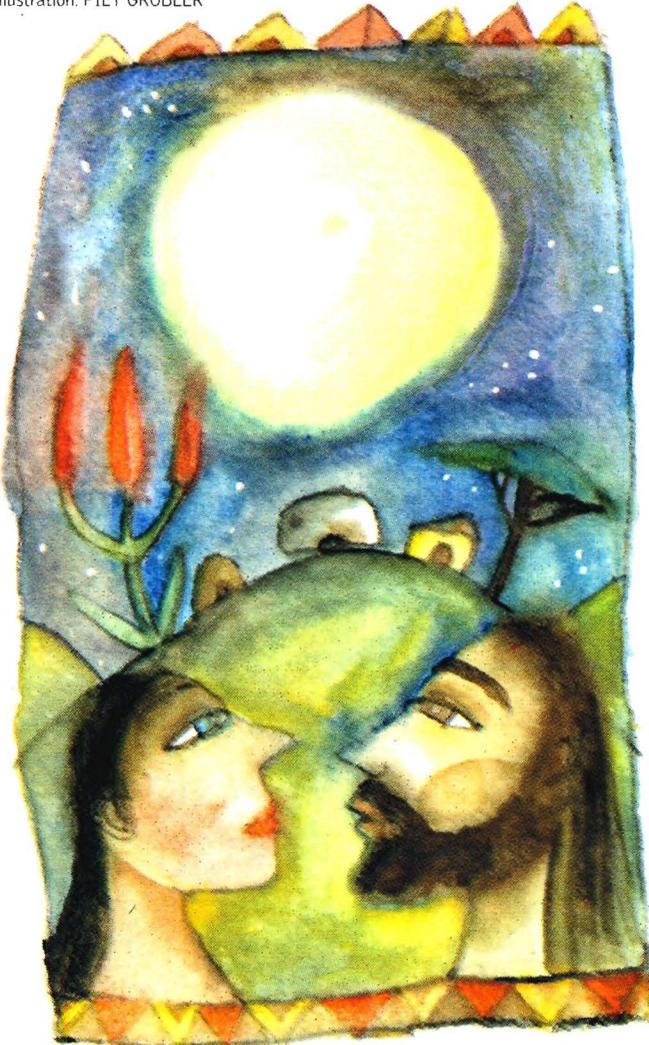
I also predicted his “Japanese” baby would be the next patriarch. But the women protested, pointing to a girl with a strawberry blonde mane and toffee skin, the only female child on the hill, who looked as though she rode unicorns in fairy tales.

“The next heir to this hill will be a matriarch,” announced the binocular woman, one of whose son’s has a common Biblical name and the other, the rare name of a rock star.

We were gathered round to celebrate the arrival of the communal washing machine — the Speed Queen. “This will be the collapse of the community,” said the hermit, convinced the women would wash the day away while drinking hot beer.

But the women were not like that. Especially the wild woman who

Illustration: PIET GROBLER



skinned her son’s pet rabbits, attacked by the family dog, applied salt to the fur and cooked rabbit stew. This, coming from a woman who rode a horse on a highway, escaped a hungry hippo on a Zambian river and lived in a Wendy house in an empty field, was a rudimentary act.

One day the hermit and I left the hill to traverse forested land and “bundu-bash” through bramble bushes until we happened upon a neighbouring farm. There lived a character — who deserves a magnum opus written about him — with his new wife and three dogs in a home he named Sweet Freedom.

A Dalmatian called Stripes, a deaf ex-police sniffer dog and a massive tan beast called Tyson. He also has a caged bird with a clipped wing that speaks English and drinks coffee but was too wired to speak that day.

Rock ‘n roll was playing on his stereo and I did the twist in my cowgirl hat on his burnished floor. Then he showed me his prized rosebush called “Husbands for sale”. But I wanted to know where the widow roses were hiding.

On his farm was a round dam with a lone tree at one end. We swam long in this perfect green circle that glistened like dishwashing liquid in a porcelain sink.

Then one night, by the light of the full moon, I made peace with the peacemaker whose interim abode was a five-berth caravan, with vinyl floor and pink paisley

wallpaper, called a Wilk. And by day I fell assistant to three Zulu women, his building bosses, on his mud mansion with metal beams, a skylight and walls made of earth.

To them I was the *makhoti* (young bride) from the big city getting my hands dirty. To the rest of the hill I was a newspaper sex columnist hiding out in the caravan of love, getting my hands dirty. Actually, I was absolutely elsewhere. In a dream. In love. In Africa. Eventually, I headed back to the big city, Byrned out.