



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:3:00

## The Beautiful Italian Girl on the Road to Etosha

By Tracey Dalton

You bought your lunch that morning. You bought your lunch to eat later because who the hell in their twenties wakes up and thinks they are going to die before midday? I can still see you now in the queue before me. Chattering with such animation to your boyfriend and two friends and ordering the sandwich that you would never eat.

I didn't see you all get into your jeep as I was busy buying my own lunch and packing up for a day in Etosha Game Reserve. Why else would we all be there, all of us foreigners driving on these unmade roads in the middle of nowhere, if not to go on Safari to see the animals? The baby giraffe that made me cry with its beauty and absurdity. The poor lion hounded by the tourist buses, reminding me of that poem where everyone jostles to see the last rabbit on Earth.

We came around the corner to your jeep on its side and I saw you far flung from its carcass. Lying as still as a baby antelope in long grass. Marius, our South African guide, who'd fought in Angola, sucked his teeth in annoyance, 'Facking tourists driving like facking idiots on these roads like they're made of facking tarmac'.

I held your hand for the forty-five minutes that it took you to die. I admired your beautiful mascara-covered lashes, framing eyes that never opened marveling at the Italian glamour of having make-up on in the Namibian wilderness.

My husband, of exactly one year that day, was trying to help your boyfriend who was punchy from his head injury. One of your friends had minor scrapes and the other was unhurt. What throw of the dice had led to your positions in the jeep that day where the outcome was one who was fatally wounded and one with not a blemish on them? Was the die cast from the beginning of your trip as you chose your seating plan and stuck to it? Or did you swap last minute that morning and seal your fate less than an hour before your death?

I watched clear liquid ooze out of your ears and thought it must be cerebrospinal fluid. Marius was busy radioing the hospital in the capital Windhoek so that a plane with medics could be scrambled. He said it was the eighth accident on that stretch of road in as many months.

Your boyfriend kept trying to tear his clothes off and jab at his blackened eyes. He was shouting and it was unsettling like when the baboons barked in the middle of the night. Your friend was babbling in English asking us over and over why she wasn't hurt.

I was a bit older than you but I'd never heard a death rattle although I'd read about it, probably in a Trollope novel. But your breathing became noisier and more laborious, with an age between each exhale and inhale. I willed you to make it to each next breath even though I knew you were going to die.

I carried on holding your hand even when you had gone. My presence with you during your last moments might or might not have been a comfort to your family but I have no way of knowing. I thought of the terrible phone call to somewhere in a peaceful, red-roofed village in Italy. Who was going to make it? Who would receive it? And what of its shattering impact?

I was still holding onto you as Marius guided the plane down onto that treacherous unmade road and the medics in their bright jumpsuits leapt out. One of them came to check your pulse and he didn't think I could see him when he looked at the other medic and in one fluid movement swiped his hand across his neck. He did this quickly but I saw it in slow motion like a scene in a film. I can picture it all now: the blinding sunlight, the heat haze rising off the road, the choking dust and the orange-clad medic and his almost imperceptible sign of death.

And there I was, alive in a new world where small decisions, such as where to sit in a car, could be the difference between living and dying.

I think of you occasionally, beautiful Italian girl on the road to Etosha, who bought a sandwich for lunch one morning because she didn't know she was going to die that day.