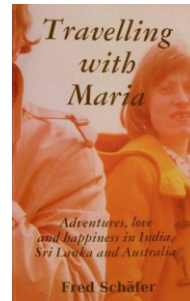


Extract from [Travelling with Maria](#):



### ***Looking for George***

The next day we went to Grant's Patch where we had been six months earlier during a previous visit. Grant's Patch is an hour or two north of Kalgoorlie, a bush area with just a few huts and fragments of huts that looked like they had been there at least fifty years, with lots of rusty tools and rusty machinery lying around. Some of the huts were interesting. When you entered them you could see which corner of the hut was meant to be the living room and which was meant for sleeping; you never could miss the kitchen.

The kitchen corners were the most interesting and amazing places. In some huts there were still cooking spoons and other pieces of cutlery hanging from nails in the walls and spoons and plates could be found on small kitchen benches. Sometimes you could see rusty pots and buckets with and without holes lying around. It felt strange and creepy and you would hardly have felt surprised if suddenly a gold digger or his wife had entered the hut and asked you what the hell you were doing in their home or whether they could help you with something.

During our previous visit we had discovered that many of the dirty looking rocks in this part of Western Australia, if you knocked them into pieces with a hammer, revealed an inside that looked like a mixture of quartz, plant fossils and low value gem stones. We had taken several kilograms of these stones to Perth in the hope that we might have discov-

ered a fortune, but as it turned out, the stones were worthless. However, they were beautiful and Maria and I remembered our first visit to Grant's Patch as a day of surprises and adventures and since we were in Kalgoorlie we decided that we would have another day of that kind.

We found Grant's Patch, the huts, the rusty tools and the stones and we hammered the stones into pieces but it just wasn't the same as the first time. The element of surprise was gone. We knew what to expect and often when a stone revealed an inside as dull as its outside we felt disappointed and soon got tired and returned to Kalgoorlie to look for George.

During our first visit we had met George. He looked like an eighty year old digger and invited us into his corrugated sheet metal palace on the outskirts of the town. His place looked huge, like a fort, and from the outside where we entered there were no windows. There were only corrugated sheet metal panels, somehow attached to each other, in some areas going straight up to heights of around three metres and looking like a solid wall, in other areas leaning towards the inside of the building and looking like a job that could have been done better.

George approached us outside his building. We must have attracted his attention because we were chatting to a group of Aboriginal children. They showed us their toys and Maria told them a story or two and kept them engaged and some of them laughed. I guess it wasn't that common in George's neighbourhood to see two young white people surrounded by ten or more Aboriginal boys and girls. The children behaved well and everybody seemed to have a good

time. When we looked around we saw half a dozen dilapidated huts and a few tents and bushes and big patches of red looking sand and soil and of course there was George's sheet metal palace. You would think that this must have been a sad looking picture, but it wasn't. There was a lot of open space and adjoining the area was a wilderness region with low growing bushes intermingled with a desert landscape. With the sun shining and the blue sky the picture took on a surrealistic quality, except that it wasn't a picture. It was all real and true and we were a part of it.

"How're you going?" George said.

"Good," I replied. "How about yourself?"

"Not badly."

"You living here?"

"Yeah," George replied and pointed to the sheet metal wall behind him. "Have been living here a good part of my life."

"In there?"

"Yep. Built it all myself."

"It looks huge."

"Come inside and have a look," George said.

Maria and I followed George inside his home and the Aboriginal children weren't happy about it. Maria told them that she would be back soon and tell them another story.

Inside George's building there was a courtyard from where one could enter several rooms. One could also walk from one room to the next without going through the courtyard. The floor was made of rammed earth and although it was uneven and contained a few depressions that edged toward a depth that one could be inclined to call holes, the

floor was clean and the place looked orderly and well looked after.

George took us to the kitchen and asked if we would like a cup of tea. Maria said yes and I asked if he had coffee. He took a tin of Nescafe from one of the shelves and opened it and took a spoon. By the way he then tried to scratch the coffee out of the tin, it became obvious that the coffee was old and hard and George confirmed this by saying: “Don’t think much of coffee myself, but I’m sure there is enough left for a good cuppa.”

I suddenly didn’t think much of coffee either and said: “Don’t worry. I’ll have a cup of tea.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

George put the tin back onto the shelf and took another tin that contained teabags. He took three teabags and placed them on the table. There was a big metal drum beside the table. It was the kind of drum that you can find on building and construction sites all over Australia. They are mainly used to transport chemicals and other hazardous goods. These drums are about a metre tall and have a diameter of around sixty centimetres. You can find the discarded drums in many Australian backyards where they are used for so many different purposes that one could write a book about them. Years later I would convert one of these drums into a rubbish incinerator and another drum into a barbecue. The drum in George’s kitchen was used as a portable sink. It was located beside a timber post that supported the corrugated metal roof and I saw a pipe with a water tap at the end, just above the drum. The pipe was attached to the timber post

and somehow found its way upward and disappeared through an opening in the corrugated ceiling.

“Where is the water coming from?” I asked.

“There is another drum on the roof”, George explained.

“How do you get the water to the drum on the roof?”

“There is a big rainwater tank over there.” George pointed to a big three-thousand litre water tank in the courtyard. “All the rainwater that falls on the roof area is collected in that tank through an arrangement of pipes and gutters.”

“Isn’t it dirty?” Maria asked.

“Oh yes,” George replied. “There is a lot of dust on the roof and whenever it rains the dust ends up in that tank. After a while it settles on the bottom of the tank and the water on the top is the best water you can get.”

“How do you get it from the rainwater tank to the drum on the roof?”

“I pump it up.” George showed us an electric pump that he used to pump the water from his big tank to the smaller tank on the roof. From the tank on the roof he had one pipe going to the kitchen and one to another room that he called his bathroom. There he had the same arrangement as in the kitchen. Every now and then, he explained, he had to empty the wastewater in the two drums in the kitchen and the bath.

“Interesting – very interesting.”

“It keeps me busy,” George said. “I guess that’s what life is mostly all about; keeping yourself busy.”

He had electric power in his home and a gas stove on a table with a portable gas bottle underneath. Although the water that came from his roof tank looked a bit brownish,

Maria and I enjoyed our cup of tea and the company of the old man. He showed us his house. In the bedroom there were two single beds beside each other and on a little table a photograph of a young woman.

“My wife,” he said. “She died nearly twenty years ago. Things were very rough then and in the end it became too much for her.”

“What happened?”

“She got fever and passed away. She was often sick. Living in the bush and digging for gold wasn’t what she was made for.”

“She looks very beautiful,” Maria said.

The old man looked at Maria and I could see that he was grateful for what she had said. The woman in the picture looked slim and fragile and her face on the fading black and white photograph was beautiful and reminded me of the face of Marlene Dietrich, although the young woman on the photograph smiled. I don’t think I have seen a photograph of a smiling Marlene.

“How did you two live in the bush? Did you camp? – or did you build a hut?”

“Sometimes I built a hut,” George explained. “But only when we stayed at the same place long enough. Often we just camped in the open.”

“What about the flies and the sun and the heat and the rain and the snakes and the scorpions?” I couldn’t help asking.

“It was alright with me,” George said, “but she didn’t like it. She never complained, but she just wasn’t made for that sort of life.”

“I think you should stop asking,” Maria said to me in German.

She was right. We could see that George’s memories were painful ones.

“During the last years before she passed away,” George said, “I used to carry her bed through the bush. It’s the same bed you saw in the bedroom. This way at least she didn’t have to sleep on the ground. I put the four legs of the bed in tins and filled the tins with water each night.”

“Why?”

“So that the insects couldn’t crawl up to her. I also bought a mosquito net, which I placed over the bed.”

“That must have made her very happy,” Maria said.

“Yes, it did,” George replied. “She was a good woman. It feels as if she had left only yesterday.”

This conversation had taken place six months earlier. Now we were back looking for George. We found his corrugated sheet metal home and knocked at the panel that we knew served as entrance to this unusual dwelling. We knocked hard and we walked around the building and knocked at several other places but to no avail. There was no sign of George. There were no kids either. There were a few older Aborigines further away and the whole area looked poor and sad and there was nothing left of the surrealistic magic that we had experienced on our first visit.

“It looks like a different place,” I said.

“I am sure it is the right place,” Maria replied.

“It is, but it feels different.”

“Maybe he has died.”

“Maybe death is not such a bad thing for someone like George.” As I said this I thought that this was a terrible thing

to say. I didn't want to invite death, not even for an old and lonely man like George. Maybe death is the end of it all. Maybe in death we are reunited with our loved ones. If George was dead and reunited with his wife, that would be all right. But I just didn't know.

“Let's go back to the caravan park,” Maria said.

“Yes, let's have a cup of coffee and a few biscuits.”

More about [Travelling with Maria](#)

Visit Fred's website: [www.condorbooks.com](http://www.condorbooks.com)