

Betty's Bay

On a windless day in the holiday season Betty's Bay is often seen as more than a sum of its parts. Its name seems fitting, and only a little trite. The beach is white and the sea is blue. If you go out beyond the breakers and float on your back you can see only the mountains. In the holiday season the locals melt into the landscape. They become nothing more than shop assistants and waitresses. There are coffee shops and art galleries in Betty's Bay, restaurants and a confectioner. There is a beach with warmer water than the beaches in Cape Town and there is the Harold Porter Botanical Garden. There are three lakes in Betty's Bay.



Ali bears an unfortunate resemblance to Rod Stewart. He's in his forties but he looks older. He has an untamed mass of fraying, grey hair and acne-scarred cheeks. He is the owner of Ali's Cackle, a pub which is built in the shape of an *alikeukel* or giant periwinkle. The walls emanate from a central column, and form two tight turns of a sloping spiral which spill into the double-door entrance. The only light comes from the portholes which are situated just beneath the stained pine ceiling. If there were significant windows in the building, the bar would look out over the kelp beds and towards Hermanus. The bar itself is curved and it is sturdy and shiny and clean. Cleanliness, however, is not an attribute of the establishment in general, as Ali is only able to afford a maid once a week. She came on Monday, which is already four days ago, so the urinals smell of sweet, cheap wine and the floor is layered with beach-sand and dead moths and bottle tops. Ali knows that he will have to sweep the place out before the weekend.

He stands up from restocking the fridge beneath the bar and is surprised by a woman in a white cotton dress who stands in the doorway.

"What can I get you?" His voice is raspy, phlegm-filled.

"Mineral water." Her thick, curly hair is seized by a gust of wind. "Still. No ice."

Ali is trying to work her out. It all makes sense: mineral water; succinctly cut dress; precise breasts; bow shaped shins; kempt British accent. Except for one thing: her hair.

She takes a box of cigarettes from the small, black handbag which she holds on her lap. Dunhill Infinite Lights. She struggles to open the box with only one hand. When she gets it open, she offers him one.

"No thanks." Ali smacks his chest with an open hand. "Doctor's orders." He leans over the bar and lights her cigarette. She smokes self-consciously, like someone who has only just picked up the habit.

"Where you from?" asks Ali.

"Franschhoek."

"A-ah! I thought you were a limey."

"I spent some time there."

Ali notices that the ash of her cigarette is about to break and fall. He passes her a the size of an outstretched hand. Its inside glistens blue and silver and pink. The dim light of the pub can be seen through eleven small oblate holes at its deepest corner.

“What’s this?” She turns it over. Its outside is bleached white with calcification and ribbed with concentric gnarls. “It’s...amazing.”

“Perlemoen. Ashtray”

She doesn’t take the hint, and ends up ashing on the bar. “What’s that?”

“Perlemoen! Abalone! Big slimy buggers which plant themselves on a rock and hardly ever let go.”

“Delightful.”

“You can have it in steaks or you can slice it thin and fry it in batter. There’s also an old recipe for it, where you stew it in a pod of kelp, together with white wine and cream.”

“Why bother?”

“It’s what the snobs would call a delicacy – you’ll either love it or hate it. I reckon it’s only worth eating if someone else is cooking. If you go through the *las* of shucking and scrubbing and rinsing in vinegar and tenderising with a spiked wooden mallet you’ll have lost your appetite by the time it’s cooked.”

She says nothing.

“Another water?”

“No thanks.” She zips her handbag closed and puts it over her shoulder. “Can you tell me where Bass Lake is?”

“Going for a dip?”

“No. A friend of mine lived here for a few months. He said I should take a look at it.”

“It’s the only lake in Betty’s Bay *without* bass.”

“He always called it that.”

“Most people do. Its real name is Malkopsvlei. Mad-head’s vlei, in Afrikaans. At the turn of the century there was a farmer, Mr. De Wet or Du Plooy, who used to bring his cows to graze at the la–”

“And everyone thought he was mad?”

“He grazed them on the eastern side of the lake, the muddy side. The cows got stuck in the mud with only their mad-heads poking from the lake.”

She giggles. “What did he do?”

“Old Mr. De Wet was a bit of a *malkop* himself – instead of just taking his cows to one of the other lakes, he brought in wagonloads of beach sand to create a safe grazing place for his stock.” Ali laughs at his own joke, before he makes it: “The Sol Kerzner of his time.”

“My friend did say it had a lovely sandy beach.” She stands up. “He could never work out where it came from.”

Ali walks her to the door. “Just drive towards the mountain.” He points. “And take the first right. You can’t miss it.”

As her car is driving away, he hears another female voice: “You won’t believe it...” Cathy, the barmaid, has let herself in through the back door. She is tall, with a long neck and pointy shoulders that haven’t yet settled. “The bloody septic tank is overflowing again.”

“I know.” He squeezes his nose closed between thumb and forefinger, making him sound like someone from *DuckTales*. “I’ve been keeping that door closed.”

“Sorry. Guess I just ruined that idea.” Cathy holds her hand to her nose as well. “Is Sucking Suzie coming?”

“Should be here any minute now.”

“Thank God. We’ll need it fixed by tonight.”

While they wait Cathy sweeps the floor and Ali carries on restocking the fridge. Cathy goes to the storeroom to fetch a case of Windhoek.

“How was school?” asks Ali.

“Fine. I made the team for hockey tour.”

“Awesome. Where you going?”

“Potchefstroom...it’s the national schools’ week.”

“Pukke!” Ali laughs. “When?”

“June holidays.”

They both turn towards the door when they hear the bass grumble of Sucking Suzie’s engine. The large truck which must have once been white but is now smeared a rich brown comes to a halt in the parking lot. The driver jumps down from his seat and wipes his hands on his overalls. “The tank’s there by the back garden, right?”

Ali nods.

“Can you direct me?” He motions towards his *handlanger*. “I don’t trust him.”

“Sure, no problem.”

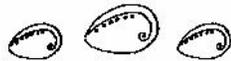
The driver edges the truck onto the soggy lawn. The wheels seep into the soft soil but they do not plug. Ali stands behind the truck and waves it closer to the tank.

The driver leans out of his window. “Am I okay?”

“One way.”

The driver gets out of the truck, again, and shouts: “*Maak hom vas, Albert.*”

Albert takes one final drag of his roly, tosses the *stompie* on the lawn and crushes it with his boot. He attaches the thick, grimy pipe to the tank and turns on the pump. Cathy cannot bear to listen to the gurgling sewerage, which sounds like a catfish in a swamp and smells worse, so she takes refuge inside. She has never been able to watch beyond this point, but she knows that the whole operation shouldn’t take more than twenty minutes. Enough time to wipe down the tables and chairs, and sweep out the bathrooms.



Rainbows form when the weather is bad.

The northwester brings warmer currents to Betty’s Bay. It channels through Disa Kloof where it gains momentum and bends trees. It brings rain which does not fall downwards, but attacks the two fishermen – Ali and his friend Herman – from the right-hand side. The rain mixes with beach-sand and works its way under their oilskins and into their ears. Even the seagulls cannot fly in this wind, and they huddle together on the flat guano-blotched rock directly off the point.

Ali walks to the shallow breakers and fills Herman's bait bucket with water to thaw the frozen mussels. While he waits for them to defrost he baits his own hook – the redbait has been in the fridge for a few days and it has ripened well. Its juice is bright ochre and it stains fingers and shirtfronts; his tackle box; and even the white ghost cotton which is used to fasten the bait to the hook. He casts his line into a calm pocket just beyond the outcrop of rocks. He locks the spool on his reel and puts his rod in the length of beige PVC tube which has been spiked into the sand as a rod holder. By this time the mussels are soft and ready to use, and he pries open the shell of one of the bigger ones. "You just want me to put the whole thing on?"

"Ja. Start with the smooth thin bit, and bunch the guts around the point of the hook. You'll need lank elastic."

Soon the hook is adorned with a puckered lump that looks like an old petticoat. Old because its colour is marbled – streaks of green interrupt the beige. "Where d'you want me to cast this?" he asks.

"I'll do it."

"You sure?"

"Just point me in the right direction. I'll be fine."

"Where d'you want to cast?" he asks again.

"You know. The usual."

"The channel to the right of the rocks?"

"That's right."

"What're we waiting for then? Let's go." Ali walks slowly, carrying the rod on his shoulder. Its mucky, string-bound base pokes out behind him and serves as a guide for Herman to hold onto. When they come to the point where a small stream runs into the sea, causing the sand banks to erode, Ali turns Herman to face the ocean. "Just put it straight in front of you."

Herman releases the spool, and holds it still with his thumb. He brings the rod back over his right shoulder and thumbs the line carefully as it unravels from the spool. He clamps it firm when the sinker hangs about a foot below the tip. He thrusts the rod forward and relaxes the pressure applied by his thumb, sending the glistening lead weight outwards in a perfect arc, before it splashes into a dark green patch of water. Herman sees none of this and he does not know when to jam his thumb back onto the whirring spool. The line comes to an abrupt halt, but the spool does not stop spinning. This imbalance causes a terrible overwind. A crow's nest. Herman plucks at the tangled mess. "I'll have to work on my technique." He shrugs his shoulders.

"*Hakuna matata*, it'll come back. Let me sort that out for you." Ali takes the rod, and within a minute he has cleared the knot and it is ready for use again. "Let's try that one more time! I'll shout when I see it splash."

"Okay." Herman repeats the process and this time, aided by his friend's advice, executes the cast with precise aplomb. With such a cast his bait must be anchored just above the sandy bottom, in the churning water around the rocks. In the feeding zone.

The men walk up the beach, towards the dunes, and stand, holding their rods, in silence. Eventually Ali speaks: "It's beautiful today." His hair is coated with a film of gritty moisture. "They'll be biting soon."

"When's high tide?" Herman is twenty years younger than Ali but that doesn't mean he can't fish. He is tall and his collarbones protrude, creating a third dimension to

his small chest. He wears sunglasses in spite of the rain and his curly black fringe sticks to his forehead.

“Four-thirty.”

“What’s the water look like?”

“A swirling black stew. Perfect.”

Herman shivers in spite of the poncho he’s wearing. Fishing for *galjoen* is never pleasant. Both of these men know this. The colder and wetter and windier it is, the more chance one has of catching anything.

“Jesus! There’s someone having a stroll,” Ali says, “Coming from Dawidskraal side.”

“Must be *bedonderd*. Who the hell’d want to be out in this weather?”

“Who are we to talk?” Ali coughs.

A long period of silence follows. Both men hold their rods horizontally in an attempt to reduce the bowing of their lines in the wind. If there is too much slack in the line, it will be impossible to feel the bite of a hungry fish. They wait and shiver. Nothing – apart from the slow tugging of crayfish which get to the bait first and scare the fish away. They know that when the tide comes in, their luck should change.”

“Any luck?” The solitary walker has reached them.

“Nothing yet,” Ali replies, without turning to look at the questioner, “Just crayfish.”

“Ja, there are too many bloody *kreef* these days.” Herman faces the nearby horizon.

“Wait a minute.” Ali turns to the woman. “Weren’t you in the bar yesterday.”

“I was,” she says, almost affronted.

“What you doing out in this weather?” Herman has not shifted from his position twenty paces along the beach, so he is forced to shout against the wind.

“I needed some fresh air.”

“You call this fresh?”

“I thought you might know...I found a Hessian sack about five hundred yards back.”

“What was in it?”

“Dunno. I didn’t check – it was in the water.”

Herman reels his line in, frustrated. “Bloody poachers.” He hands his rod to Ali, who puts it in its holder. Herman takes his cane from where it lies next to his tackle box and walks down the beach, towards Stony Point, tapping as he goes.

“What’s got into him?” she asks.

“Perlemoen poachers. He gets *vies*.”

“What d’you mean?”

“That sack you found is probably filled with *perlies*.”

“Aren’t you going to find out?”

“Damn right I am.” Ali puts his rod in its holder, leaving his bait in the water.

They walk further away from Herman.

“Poaching you say? I saw the sign in the parking lot, but it’s all news to me...”

“The waters around Betty’s Bay are a marine reserve. The Hendrik Fucking Verwoerd Marine Reserve to be exact.”

“*President Verwoerd?*”

“The old bugger had a holiday house here.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s still in the family. They sometimes fly the *vierkleur*.”

“Unbelievable.” She shakes her head. “You were saying...”

“Was I?”

“The marine reserve. Poachers.”

Ali pulls the hood of his rain coat lower, to shield his eyes from the rain. “Back in the day it used to be chock-a-block with *perlies* the size of dinner plates. But the Chinks have moved in with scuba tanks and boats...there’s nothing left...”

“What do they do with it?” She has wedged her hands into the pockets of her anorak, and she stoops as she walks.

“It all goes East. Fertility *kak*.”

“Rhino horn, bear’s testicles, perlemoen. Now I’ve heard it all.”

Ali nods. “They’ve got a shitload to answer for.”

“And the crayfish?”

“What?”

“Your friend was saying there were too many.”

“You don’t miss a trick, do you?” He pauses. “Betty’s has always been *perlie* country, but in the last ten or fifteen years crays have trekked in from the West Coast. The cockroaches of the sea. They eat sea the urchins which shelter baby perlemoen, so it’ll be really difficult for the *perlies* to get going again. Thirty years ago catching a *kreef* was something special. These days they’re a menace.”

“But the police...”

“We’ve got two cops for the whole area. Rooi-Els, Pringle, Kleinies. Between them they’ve got a 9mm revolver, two sets of handcuffs and a speed-trap camera.”

She laughs a stilted, non-committal laugh and peers into the shallow water ahead of her. “We’re just coming up to it now.”

“Where?”

“There.” She points to the breakers. “That dark thing.”

“Oh,” Ali mumbles, “It’s deep.” He wades into the water and drags the sack onto the shore. It bulges and stretches at the seams. He kneels next to it and slices it open with his fishing knife. He sticks his left hand into the sack.

Ali returns to the fishing rods alone. Herman is lying on his back in the sand. He has taken his sunglasses off and the rain batters his scarred eyelids.

“Have you called the cops?” asks Herman.

“What for?”

“The sack.”

“Ag...it can wait.”

“Don’t be a *pillik*...”

“You’ll never guess what was inside it.”

“What?”

“Wheat,” Ali laughs, “The staple diet of the western world.”

“Must have fallen off a ship.”

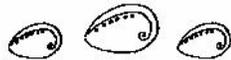
They fish for a few more hours, only speaking occasionally. When it's too dark to thread a line through the eye of a hook, Ali packs their bags and they leave. They have caught nothing.

"Wanna come round to my place this evening for a few beers?"

"Aren't you working?"

"Ja, we can keep an eye on the pub from my *stoep*." Ali piles their stuff into the back of his Series 2 Landy. "It's not exactly high season."

"Tempting." Herman stands still for a second and inhales the sea air. "But I'm bugged and my ma's expecting me for supper."



When Selena gets back to her car she puts the heater on its highest setting and takes a box of Dunhills from the inside pocket of her jacket. By the time the lighter has popped out, the windows are already steamed up. She puts a soggy cigarette in her mouth and tries to light it. It smoulders and smokes but it won't light. She takes another one from the box and tries again. Same story. She presses a button on the centre-console and her window opens. She throws the cigarettes as far as she can and closes the window immediately. It's cold out there. Claspng her hands together, she puts them on the top of her head. She leans forward, resting her chin on the steering wheel, and cries. The dashboard is soon sodden with tears and raindrops.

"What's wrong with you?" she says aloud. She sits up and examines herself in the rear-view mirror. She rubs at her eyes and scrapes her hair back, out of the way of her face. "You're pathetic." She snivels, drawing some of the mucus up her nose and into her throat. "You don't even smoke, you fool!" She takes a tissue from the cubby-hole and wipes the mirror clean. She forces herself to smile. Her lips are almost purple and her eyes are red, but the rest of her face is bleached white. Her smile morphs into a hysterical sobbing laugh. She stays this way, laughing and crying, hunched over the steering wheel, for a lot longer than she would like.

Eventually she feels fit to drive. She demists the windows and puts a CD in her car radio. Acts Two and Three of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. The rain falls at right angles to her windscreen, but her Volvo doesn't struggle against the northwester. The music calms her and she even begins to forget that she's cold.

She likes Betty's Bay. Likes Ali, and his stories. Likes the raw weather and the absence of midweek bustle. Maybe she should give Rupert a call – he's been bugging her ever since she got back from Italy – and tell him what he wants to hear. That she'll make something for him. Maybe she'll do the research and let someone else direct it, but she knows she's ready to start working again. He'll jump at the offer and only then will she throw him the curveball. She'll work for him, but on her terms. She doesn't want to do fashion, or adverts, or flight-safety videos...money isn't an issue. She wants to get back into environmental stuff. She's hardly given it a moment's thought since she left varsity, and she regrets this. She'll tell Rupert about Betty's Bay, about the perlemoen and the crayfish and the poachers. If he really wants her back, he'll accept.

She's had enough of finding stupid crutches to help her deal with it all: smoking; TM, Thai Chi, walking...none of these achieves anything in the long run. In fact, they're responsible for the current surplus of maladjusted, under-confident, new-age cretins. She can't even hear herself giggle over the music. Act Three has just begun and The Duke of Mantua is singing *La Donna è Mobile*. She realises that it's the first time in ages she's been able to take her mind off Giuseppe (Bottega, not Verdi) and the police investigations and the subpoenas. But in so doing she remembers all of these things yet again. She turns the radio off – this woman is more than a feather in the wind – and concentrates on the road, using only the clutch to brake into the corners.