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I've lived in Betty's Bay long enough to know its various weather patterns and I love each one of them in its own way. It's easiest to love the postcard summer days when the beach is white and the sea is blue, but I find other less popular conditions more fulfilling. Fever-green cold fronts; sideways South-Easters; soft windless drizzle and even berg-winds are all good for something. (Galjoen fishing, kite-flying, frog collection and drying laundry; respectively.)

I've never been able to love what's happening to the weather right now, though. It's not uncommon at this time of the year, but every time it does this I pour myself a double Bells with no ice and close the curtains. A mid-morning coastal fog is descending and it will soon obscure the Bunsen sun, giving the sky a nuclear tinge.

Just as I'm settling down in my favourite corduroy-covered armchair with the crocheted armrest covers which haven't been cleaned since Fiona died, there's a knock on the door. I leave my glass on the table next to the unstopped decanter and go out to face my unexpected visitor and her menacing backdrop.

"Professor Pauling?"

I nod, as I suss her out: grey-haired, nervous, leather-bound copy of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* in one hand, walking stick in the other. I get people like her all the time.

"Oh," she says, "I didn't expect you to be so...young." Her skin is no longer able to blush. "I'm Edwina"

I feel my ears heating up, so I shake her hand and say, "Please call me Alf." Old ladies are habitually nervous in the company of professors, but few people realise that the reverse is also often true. "Do come inside." The sky behind her is sickly, and I close the door as soon as she has entered.

I lead her to the sitting room and manage to persuade her to have a drink. She takes her whisky with lots of tap water, but even this weak dilution should calm her somewhat. “I visited the penguin colony this morning.” She sips at her drink. “And being a member of the Glenashton Amateur Historians Society I wanted to find out more about it.”

Who’s to blame for this, I think to myself, why doesn’t she read the bloody pamphlet?

“The lady at my B&B told me you are *the* authority on the matter.”

Most people in Betty’s Bay think I am *the* authority on all things historical or environmental. I guess I grew a beard and started smoking a pipe just to humour them. “I’m a physicist, not an environmental historian.”

“I think everyone here is rather proud of you. They think you know everything.”

The truth of Edwina’s statement obliges me to answer her. “When the first Dutch settlers arrived in the Cape, the Jackass penguins, or African penguins as we have to call them now, wisely fled the mainland and took refuge on the nearby islands. Stony Point was the first place that they returned to in the eighties...” When she starts taking notes in a small floral journal, I recoil and fob her off. “Everything there is to know about the penguins is in a pamphlet. You can get it at your B&B.”

“Will this pamphlet be adequate?”

“I wrote it,” I say, forgetting to mention that I did so ten years ago, which means that it has no mention of the leopard attack or the boardwalk.

“In that case I’m sure it will be wonderful.”

I fillip my glass with my index finger and look at my watch every few seconds. Edwina sips at her whisky, apparently unaware of my indelicate hints. After what must be at least a minute, she speaks. “What can you tell me about the shipwreck?”

This one’s going to be a tough nut to crack, I realise, as I formulate the briefest possible explanation of the *Una*’s presence. “At the turn of the century a Norwegian whaling company established a branch at Stony Point.”

Just as I am getting into it, Edwina interrupts me. “Is that what those ruins are?”

“Yes.” I resign myself to a long question and answer session. “They’re the foundations from the corrugated iron sheds, and the smaller structures are the tubs in which they boiled the blubber.”

Edwina finishes her drink. I do not offer her another one. “You were telling me about the ship...”

“Of course,” I mutter, “The ship’s called the *Una*. They deliberately scuppered it to protect the slipway from swells. Now it’s a great spot to dive.”

“That’s not very exciting.”

“Those Norwegians weren’t a very exciting bunch.” I conveniently gloss over the fact that they had travelled thousands of miles from home, most of the women only thirteen or fourteen years old, to engage in mortal combat with some of the largest creatures the ocean has to offer and, fortunately, Edwina lets my comment slip.

“Good riddance to them,” she says, “It’s great to have the whales back.”

Edwina has inadvertently hit upon the solitary glimmer of hope which pervades my as yet unfinished book, *A History of Environmental Exploitation in the Area of Cape Hangklip*. I do not inform her of this, but instead remain taciturn.

I’m not normally this antisocial, in fact there are times when I could almost describe myself as a ‘people person,’ although not in as many words, of course. It must be the memory of the jaundiced sky outside which has made me so uneasy and impatient. And, in the same breath, it is the realisation that by now the sun should have burnt the fog off which prompts me to break the silence. “I’m terribly sorry Edwina,” I say with very little sign of resignation, “But I have to go and fetch my daughter from school now.”

“You have a daughter?”

I don’t even bother to nod.

“That’s marvellous,” she continues, unperturbed by my obvious lack of enthusiasm. “What’s she doing finishing school now?” She looks at her watch. “It’s midday.”

I have seen the finish line and am having none of her delaying tactics. “Exams,” I lie, “Mock-matric.”

“Of course,” she twitters, “Wish her all of the best.”

I open the door to discover that I was right: the fog has all but disappeared, and the landscape washed clean as if with a giant flannel. Edwina declines my offer of a lift to her B&B, explaining that it’s just around the corner, and she needs the exercise besides. As I drive away I see the last tendrils of the fog hovering above the beach like forgotten splodges of shaving cream.

I think back to my meeting with Edwina.

Whenever something goes wrong I obsess over apportioning blame. I try to be as objective as possible. I am a scientist. My mind is rational. I examine the facts, find the guilty party, and treat him or her with the scorn he or she deserves. I pass the rubbish dump and its resident troop of baboons and drive through the cutting towards Pringle Bay. I go over the events of the last hour in the courtroom of my mind and all of the evidence points towards me. I pass judgement on the spot. I turn off Clarence Drive, and take the old service road to the Buffelsjag Dam. I used to work at the end of this road.

Once I’ve been cleared at the security gate I head straight for the dam. I wade out to the weed-beds and locate an individual plant which is separate from the clump. I submerge myself in the brackish water, just managing to keep my hair dry, find the weed’s root and tear it from the muddy bottom. I deposit the mamba-green strands in a collection bag and fill it with water. Although I have already taken numerous and various samples from the dam: water (shallow, intermediate and deep); soil (shore, intertidal and lakebed); fauna (larvae, nymphs, frogs, crabs) and, of course, flora, the technician from the laboratory at Stellenbosch University contacted me earlier in the week to say that the tests on the weeds had failed unequivocally. They berated me for having given them only a partial sample, explaining maliciously that without its roots a plant will die. I should have remembered this from first year botany, and it’s common sense to boot. I knew, once again, that I was solely to blame. This morning’s jaunt has brought back all of the memories of my conversation with the lab technician and it is with embarrassment – even though no one is watching – that I tie the bag closed, place it carefully on the floor in front of the passenger seat, and drive back towards Kleinmond to fetch Cathy.

As I descend the hill which leads to the Palmiet River bridge a watery slap forces me to confront reality. The collection bag has fallen over. Fortunately the plastic is thick enough for it not to have broken. It serves as a reminder. I stop the car at the parking lot to the Fairy Glen picnic site and place the collection bag in one of the special compartments in the boot of my car. The chapter involving the Buffelsjag Dam is the only one which I have not discussed with Cathy, and the weed sample would only elicit questions from her.

Cathy is taller than the boys she is talking to outside the school gate, and the maroon blazer she wears drowns what little colour there is from her face.

“How was school?” I ask dutifully.

“Fine,” is her stock response.

“It’s meant to rain tomorrow,” I say, “Shall we go collecting?”

“Frogs?”

“*Microbatrachella capensis*.”

“I know,” she says, mocking my professorial tone, “The Cape Micro Frog: attains 1.8cm in length, endemic to the Western Cape, found in only four locations...Kenilworth Racecourse, Betty’s Bay– ”

“So,” bored of my own speech, I interrupt her, “Are you going to come?”

“There’s rugby tomorrow.”

I shrug my shoulders, knowing that she loathes the sport.

“I told André I’d help out at the pub.”

“When’s the game?”

“Five,” she says, “Ten past.”

“Perfect,” I change down a gear to as we rise out of the Palmiet valley and the car lurches forward. “We can go after that.”

“If it rains.”

“If it rains,” I agree.

We complete the rest of the trip in silence.

The northwester brings warmer currents to Betty's Bay. It channels through Disa Kloof where it gains momentum and bends trees. Even the seagulls cannot fly in this wind, and they huddle together on the flat guano-blotched rock directly off Stony Point. Just as I am putting the crumbed hake in the oven, I hear the door open. I turn and shout, "That was quick."

"We lost." Cathy puts her dripping raincoat over the back of a chair. "Everyone left pretty quickly."

"Supper'll be ready in about twenty minutes," I say, "Then we'll go to the *vleie*."

"I'm just going to have a shower."

I don't even try to convince her of the futility of this plan – we will be wading in mucky waist-deep water for the next few hours – but instead content myself with another Bells.

We put on two pairs of tracksuit pants each and three pairs of socks underneath our waders, and drive to the marshlands around Grootwitvlei. The rain is loud against the car's soft canvas roof. Thankfully there is a gap in the downpour as we reach the lakes, and we are able to take our time in selecting the necessary implements of collection from my custom-made compartmentalised boot. We each don a headlamp, and I wear a many-pocketed waistcoat designed for photographers and fishermen, which is laden with bottles and scalpels; preservation solution; a notepad and a large supply of Bourneville chocolate. Cathy carries the collection net and we pick our way through the clumps of restios, in search of large puddles. After only a few minutes of walking I hear the low-pitched scratching call of the micro-frog. I motion to Cathy to slow down, and we creep towards the excited males.

Our stealth is rewarded by their continued calling, and we try to single out an individual for capture. This is easier said than done, due to the frog's size and its dull, mottled markings which vary from green to grey to brown. Males call from floating

vegetation, and they are very quick to swim away when disturbed. After a few close shaves and muffled expletives, I identify an unperturbed individual. I lunge at it with the net – *voila*, first time! I seal it in a bottle of water, to ensure it doesn't dry out. Once it has been stashed in one of my zip-up pockets I celebrate by sharing a bar of chocolate with Cathy. Soon, though, we are back to work: we will need at least three tissue samples to perform a reliable DNA analysis.

This time the hunt is resumed by Cathy, who has her sights set on a very vocal male that is perched on a clump of weeds. It calls from the apex of the floating island and I suggest that she coaxes the frog into a wide-mouthed jar with her free hand. She makes the double handed swoop with the dexterity of a gymnast and captures the frog without any hassle. She dips the jar into the lake and closes the lid before the frog has even thought of escaping.

After these swift successes we become complacent and abandon conniving stealthiness in favour of insouciant bravado. Our game suffers as a result, and when we eventually get home it is past midnight, and I can hear Cathy's teeth chattering in time with the shuddering of the roof tiles in the gale.

I climb the stairs onto the stoep and stumble and almost fall as I approach the front door. Cathy shrieks.

"Don't worry darling," I say as I pick myself up from the ground. "I'm fine."

"No!" She is still hysterical. "Look." She points at a dark shape on the stoep.

I turn on my headlamp and wait for my eyes to adjust to the sudden profusion of light. Neither of us says anything as we take in the gory details: a juvenile Jackass penguin lies on its back with a hunting knife protruding from its chest. The knife secures a piece of paper to the dead bird's back. I draw Cathy towards me, kiss her on the forehead and hold her in my arms.

She wriggles free of me and pulls the knife from the bird, passing me the bloodied scrap of paper. Without looking at it I open the front door, go to the living room and sit in my armchair. Cathy pours me a large whisky. I turn on the reading lamp, finish the

whisky in one gulp and look at the paper. It's actually newspaper clipping from *The Cape Times*, a letter to the editor:

**Saint Alf of Betty's Bay**

On a recent visit to Betty's Bay I visited the Stony Point Penguin Colony. Being an avid member of an amateur historical society, I was intrigued by the history of the colony and the adjacent, now defunct, whaling station. I asked around, and the owner of the bed and breakfast in which I was staying referred me to Professor Alf Pauling.

I paid Professor Pauling a visit and was enchanted by his welcoming manner. He proved to be such a fountain of knowledge – I could have stayed all day listening to his tales! Professor Pauling is revered by his community not only for his obvious intellectual prowess, but also for his tireless attempts to rid the Overstrand of the scourge of *perlemoen* (abalone) poachers. He has initiated a community based...

*Here the text is obscured by the penguin's blood, and only the final lines of the letter are legible:*

...rumours that Professor Pauling is in the process of writing a book. Alf – if you are reading this – I can only urge you to keep writing...the world deserves to hear what you have to say!

EDWINA CURRY

GLENASHTON, DURBAN

When I have finished reading, I place the clipping on the table next to me and pour myself another whisky. I take a long sip before looking up to meet Cathy's stare. 'What did it say?' she asks me with her eyes.

"It's from a woman who came to visit me last week," I say, "You know, one of those mad old ducks who wants to know more about the history of Betty's Bay."

Cathy nods. "And?"

"Here." I pass her the soggy piece of paper, and watch as she reads it.

"Must be the poachers," Cathy says when she has finished reading. "Animals."

Cathy is right. Only the poachers can be responsible for what has happened. What does one penguin mean to people who make a living out of raping the sea? "I'm going to publish my book," I say.

"What?" Cathy blurts out, "But you said it was...private, something you owed to yourself."

"I've changed my mind." I pause, before correcting myself, "They've changed my mind."

"Who?" Cathy says stupidly.

"The effing poachers," I snap, "At least *I* had the decency to feel bad about what I did." Cathy is wrapped in a blanket and she stares at me, confused. I get up from my chair and pat her sodden head. "It's time you were going to bed," I bend down and whisper, "It's late."

*The following year A History of Environmental Exploitation in the Area of Cape Hangklip is published. Its launch coincides with the police's uncovering of one of the main poaching syndicates in the Overstrand. The book could not be described as a bestseller, but its sphere of influence extends beyond the confines of the Western Cape's ecologically minded community. There are chapters on the Jackass Penguin; the perlemoen poaching; the depletion of the Cape Micro Frog's environment; alien*

*vegetation and its impact upon the Fynbos; and the dredging of Grootwitvlei, among other things.*

*The last chapter is a surprise to all who read it, even Cathy:*

### **The Somchem Plant**

I am not from Betty's Bay. I first came to the area in 1980, when I was employed by Armscor to direct the Somchem Nuclear Delivery Systems plant. In 1990 South Africa abandoned its nuclear programme, three years later South Africa became the first country to voluntarily dispose of its nuclear armoury.

It was common knowledge that the nuclear programme was divided into two sections: the nuclear reactors and warheads were developed at Pelindaba, while the delivery systems were designed and tested at Somchem. If you visited the Hangklip area in the 1980s you may well have heard the thunderous rumblings of missiles exploding against the Kogelberg.

The reactors may not have been developed at my plant, but that is not to say that they never came there: it was important to President Botha that South Africa should be able to launch a nuclear weapon instantly, should the need arise...and we had the launch stations.

Traditionally nuclear weapons are developed and housed in unpopulated areas of little ecological importance. Having read the other chapters in this book it will be clear that the Hangklip area does not fit this bill. I was – obviously – more aware than most of the site's unsuitability.

*Saint Alf – Nick Dall*

*The chapter goes on to disclose the findings of Professor Pauling's survey of the ecosystem of the Buffelsjag Dam, the dam which provides water to the area. On second testing, the weeds were found to be contaminated.*