

ESCAPE TO A *lonely island*

WHEN LEONIE JOUBERT VOYAGED TO MARION ISLAND, SHE FOUND MORE THAN JUST THE FINGERPRINT OF CLIMATE CHANGE. SHE FOUND HERSELF.

I'm standing on the deck of a heaving SA *Agulhas*, as the research vessel's giant screws dig into the silvery-grey waters, powering us through the Roaring Forties, those legendary latitudes where the world's weather is born. A cloud of seabirds mills above the ship's wake, but it's only later that I realise I can count myself among a few who 'now belong to a higher cult of mortals, for I have seen the albatross!' as American ornithologist Robert Murphy wrote a century ago.

I'm 30. I'm not much of a birder. But I have this thing burning beneath my sternum like a furnace: the sting of failure (I've just limped away from my first grown-up job, broken), niggling loneliness, excitement about striding into a blank map, a hunger for something more. This existential itchiness has propelled me to answer Mark Twain's call to '... throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover'.

But I have no idea what I'm doing.

I'm following a team of scientists to Marion Island, home of South Africa's sub-Antarctic weather station since 1948, to see how carbon emissions, shunted up into the atmosphere over Beijing and New York and the Mpumalanga Highveld, are squeezing this island like a fist as global temperatures rise.

The birds hover on motionless boomerang wings, as if by magic keeping pace with the ship as it rears out of another trough. I'm tiny and fleece-wrapped: an excited, naive, aspirant writer, voyaging uncertainly into the world of climate science.

Marion Island, the largest of the two making up the Prince Edward Islands in the Southern Ocean, appeared on the ship's radar screen before the first dark lines of rocky cliffs cut through the mist.

Some crude pen lines on the bottom of the page of my journal capture the moment. Few have seen these remote islands, wrote author John Marsh in 1948, and 'few ever want to. They thrust their lava peaks out of that vast sea where the world's wildest weather is born. Their name is synonymous with storm, disaster and death'.

Our ship put down anchor in the sheltered crescent of Transvaal Cove and we waited for the cloud to lift enough for the choppers to ferry us across to the weather-beaten research base that creaked uneasily on stilted platforms suspending it over the uneven rock and soggy marshes.

The island's remoteness makes it an ideal study site for natural scientists. Marion bubbled up out of the ocean floor about a million years ago. It's a thimble of volcanic rock with a polar desert at its centre, mossy fellfields in the middle with the tough cushion-like *Azorella* plants that are topiaried by the freeze-thaw cycles, and the peat bogs along the coast with their caps of lush greenery that look like neat lawns but which give way beneath your boots and swallow you in up to the waist.

This is where I discovered wilderness, raw, beautiful and perilous. For a month, I trekked about on foot through the

restless maritime weather, following scientists as they counted rockhopper penguins on the beaches, sidestepped barking seals, dug core samples out of *Azorella* cushions, or hiked back to the lab to squint through a microscope to describe a new species of tardigrade (a micro-animal known sweetly as a moss pig-let) collected in a sample from a volcanic lake.

Wilderness like this isn't silent. There's the constant tugging of wind at your ear, or rattling calls of penguins, or skuas cawing overhead, or the swell surging up a rocky beach, or the puff of an orca coming up for breath beyond the waves. But the lack of mechanical sound and manmade structures is blissful.

Again and again, I disappeared into that solitary wilderness: hunching into a sleet-stinging rain or enjoying the odd sunny day, striding across the fields of volcanic rock that bloom with filigreed lichens and moss gardens or over the black sand beaches with their stones rolled into pebbles by the sea. Each journey was as much an internal one as it was a grinding physical exertion.

It was also here that I finally understood the unfolding catastrophe that is climate change. That even Marion's remoteness could not spare it from the plunder of human activities happening half a world away: temperatures here have risen by 1,5 degrees Celsius since the 1950s, the sea has warmed by 1,4 degrees Celsius, rainfall is down by 30 percent, the ocean current that regulates the climate is shifting south and disrupting the algal blooms which bring fish for the near-shore feeding penguins, the island's glacier has all but disappeared, and the spread of alien plants and insects is accelerating as they thrive in the warmer conditions, out-competing the slow-growing local species.

I arrived not caring much about birds. I left having sat within reaching distance of wandering albatrosses as they unfurled their three-metre wingspan, tilted their beaks skyward and courted each other into a lifelong mating bond.

One decade and four books later, the ache in my chest hasn't left. I still long for meaning, for love, for purpose in a chaotic world. It's true, what Hemingway said: writing is 'at best, a lonely life'. So is travelling.

But I don't fear the existential ache anymore. To journey into wilderness is to go in search of oneself. Now I use the Cape's wilderness to settle things. Running in solitude along Table Mountain's sandstone paths, my feet grinding over the rocks in low-range, I run into my loneliness, towards myself. Just me, my trail shoes, and the sound of my breath: crunch-crunch, breathe-breathe, crunch-crunch, breathe-breathe... 

