

The Tourist Trail

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In darkness, Angela ascended the winding gravel road. She carried a flashlight, though she kept it off. She knew the path well. The Clouds of Magellan illuminated the white bellies of penguins crossing up ahead. Most stood by the side of the road and watched her pass, their heads waving from side to side. When one brayed, the high-pitched hee-hawing of a donkey, the others responded in kind, forming a gantlet of noise. It was mating season at Punta Verde, and the males were rowdy.

As she reached the crest of the hill, the road veered right and continued for half a mile to the vast empty parking lot where tourist buses and taxicabs disbursed their cargo during the day. Angela continued straight, onto soft dirt and patches of grass, sidestepping the prickly quilambay bushes and the cavelike penguin burrows. She stopped at the top of the hill and scanned the wide, arching horizon of the Atlantic. The moon, about to rise, gave the sky an expectant glow. She was looking for the telltale lights of passing ships but saw nothing but the stars.

He should be back by now.

The last she heard from him was a week ago. He was off the coast of Brazil and heading south. The weather would not have been a factor. She was only supposed to trek up here every other night. But since she lost contact, she began visiting nightly. Not that she would see him. But maybe she would see something to explain his absence.

A star crested the horizon. She watched patiently as the light strengthened and inched from right to left, south to north. It could be a fishing trawler headed for Puerto Madryn, returning from the Southern Ocean, its cavities stuffed with writhing fish and krill and the inevitable, under-reported bycatch. She felt her stomach tighten.

The moon began to bleed out over the water, erasing the ship from view. Angela waited another hour. There were no more lights on the water. The penguins standing sentry by the bushes around her began to bray more loudly. Their day was just beginning.

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“Three four six two seven,” Doug shouted over the wind.

He was on his knees, face to the ground, squinting at the entrance of a burrow. With one arm he extended the *goncho*, a long piece of rebar, hooked at the end, into the hole. He was nudging the male so he could get a better view of the five-digit number on the punched stainless steel band wrapped around the penguin’s left flipper.

Doug was in his mid-twenties and, like most naturalists his age, looked more the part than old-timers like Angela. While she stomped around in worn tennis shoes and plain, thrift-shop khaki pants, he was a walking REI catalog: leather boots, camouflage pants with more pockets than objects to fill them, an Indiana Jones hat with messy blond hair covering his ears, and a blue bandana around his neck. He was the type of assistant that kept Angela’s program running year after year, fresh from the classroom and ready for an unpaid adventure. Too young still to find the trip down here tedious – the ten-hour flight to Buenos Aires, two-hour flight to Trelew, and five-hour bus ride on a gravel road to the research station. And not much of a research station at that. Two cinder-block huts, one shower per week, and a public restroom that they shared with the tourists who stopped here to shop for postcards and pay their admission fee.

Angela leafed through her notebook, her little *black-and-white* book, she called it. Every penguin fitted with a tag was listed here, with a number, place, and date. Most numbers were entered once and never again revisited. While finding a tagged bird was not as statistically significant as winning the lottery, it certainly felt that way at times. A red-dot bird was a known-age bird, one that they had tagged the year it was born, sometimes up to twenty years ago, and hadn’t seen since. Finding a red dot was a family reunion.

“Did you hear that?” Doug asked.

“Hear what?”

“Sounded like an engine. A boat engine.”

Angela looked up and tilted her head back and forth.

“Must be the wind,” she said. She returned to her book.

“Red dot?” he asked.

She said nothing. But she was beginning to hope that this bird was not a red dot. She did not want to let Doug handle the bird, even though she knew he was due. It was the natural order of things for researchers to pass on their knowledge and skills. Once they found

a red dot, they had to weigh it, measure its feet and the density of feathers around its eyes.

If Doug did weigh the bird, it would be one less thing he needed to learn from her. One less reason to join her on these trips. One day closer to not needing her at all. Not that he ever needed her to begin with.

She looked at Doug and nodded.

“Kick ass!” Doug leapt to his feet and unloaded his brown backpack of a caliper, hand-held scale, and a nylon strap.

This one was tagged six years ago. Finally ready to breed, this little guy was probably in his second season at Verde. Returning to his natal colony to make a nest, find a mate, and begin a ritual that would last another two decades, if he was fortunate.

In the first week of the season, against her better judgment, Angela had let Doug extract a penguin from its burrow. Doug was bitten so badly he had to be driven to Trelew for stitches. His natural instinct had been to pull away, but the penguin’s hooked beak had gripped his flesh tightly. *It’s like a Chinese finger prison*, he joked as they sewed together the sinew of his left hand.

Doug used the *goncho* to pull the bird out of the hole by his feet, then grabbed him swiftly by the back of his neck. He gripped the neck firmly, so the bird could not swing around and bite his arm. Angela slid the strap around the bird’s waist, cinched it, and attached it to a hand-held scale. Then Doug let go.

The bird flapped its wings and snapped at the air as it twisted in circles. Angela read the weight aloud, Doug entered it into the notebook, and then Angela grabbed the bird and held him between her legs, to measure the feet.

The wind shifted. Angela heard an engine cough, coming up for air between the waves. She looked up, half expecting to see a boat cresting the hill, when she heard a scream. Her own. The penguin had bitten the skin between her thumb and forefinger.

“Doug, take hold of the beak,” she said, trying to remain calm.

He fumbled with the bird’s wings, finally holding onto the head and prying the beak apart. Angela snatched her hand back. The bird squirted out beneath her knees and retreated to its nest.

Angela’s fingerless ragg glove was shredded, and blood was beginning to bubble to the surface of her skin.

She started up the hill, toward the sound. Doug followed.

“Where the hell are you going?” she shouted.

Doug froze.

“We’re not done measuring,” she told him. “Stay here. Don’t let him get away.”

Angela stomped up the hill, angry at herself for making such an amateur mistake, embarrassed for yelling at Doug.

The first thing she saw as she crested the hill were whitecaps blown backwards. She felt her body pushed forward by the stampeding wind, a breeze that rolled off the Andes and gathered speed over hundreds of miles of nothing.

Then she saw him.

A man prostrate on a flat stretch of rocks that extended two hundred yards away from the beach. The remnants of an inflatable boat danced on the waves that washed over his legs. It looked as if the boat had exploded, sending him and his belongings in all directions.

She hurried over sand and mussel-covered rocks, the sound of crunching shells in her ears as she neared him. He was face down, a large man in a fluorescent orange jacket with blond hair and an early beard. The waves splashed over his legs. She grabbed his arms and pulled him, as best she could, away from the water. And it was then the body stirred and opened its eyes. He came to, as if from a deep sleep.

“What?” he asked.

“You were in the water.”

“Goddamn piece of shit,” he said, looking around. “The engine flooded. Wave tossed me.”

Another wave crashed over his body, dragging him across the mussels into Angela’s shins, nearly taking her down. He spit out salt water and looked up at her, confused. She helped him to his feet and he leaned on her until they reached sand. She saw smears of blood on his jacket and arms and neck. She sat him down, pawing at his clothing, looking for the source.

“You’re hurt,” she said.

“I’m wet.”

“You’re bleeding. You need a doctor.”

“No doctors.”

“But you’re bleeding.”

“There are people looking for me. People who wish to hurt me. Do you understand?”

She drew away from him. He appeared to be in his early forties. He had the look of a merchant marine – a reddened face that rarely saw sunscreen and hair so bleached that it didn’t match the hair

on his face. He had large blue eyes that looked her up and down.

“You’re the one who’s bleeding,” he said.

She glanced down to discover the source of all that blood. Her ragged glove was saturated and dripping.

She remembered Doug and glanced up the hill; he was not there.

Now was the time to return to the camp and notify authorities. Report what you’ve seen, bandage the wound, document items recovered, note coordinates, date, and time. Normally that was what Angela would have done. She detested tourists and trespassers. Yet this man was neither. He was wet and shivering and needed her help. And she had a soft spot for strays.

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Zero four two two nine.

She tagged him during her second season at Verde.

At the time, the penguin had taken a liking to the old Toyota pickup truck the researchers used to travel to town. He would do the flipper dance with the tires, bellying up to the worn Goodyears and paddling them with his flippers. It was a mating ritual. Clearly, he was not the brightest of penguins, but he was young still.

They named him Diesel.

Sometimes Diesel would offer up a flipper dance to a seated human. That’s how Angela got to know him. She used to read in the early mornings, seated outside the cinder block *cueva* that she shared with the other researchers.

“It’s nice to get attention from a male once in awhile,” she told Shelly, her boss. “I won’t bicker over species.”

Mostly, Diesel spent his days on his stomach under the rear of the truck, watching the humans pass.

For the first three seasons Diesel loitered around the camp, trying to barge his way into the *cueva* or the office. Shelly said that this one was not likely ever to find a mate. They soon discovered that he wouldn’t bite if touched, and he became more of a pet than a penguin, always nearby as researchers prepped for a day’s census or when they walked between trailers and tents and the bathroom.

He followed her into the public toilet one evening after the tourists were gone. Angela picked him up to get him out. Over time, while sitting outside of the office, she got into the habit of lifting him

onto her lap and staring at him eye to eye.

And just when they were sure he was far too domesticated ever to take a mate, he found one. Or one found him, as was usually the case. One morning, Angela found Diesel under the Toyota with a partner on her belly next to him. For weeks they all deliberated how to remove the truck without disrupting this fragile relationship. They had to move quickly – once an egg was laid, any disruption could cause the penguins to retreat to the water, sacrificing the next generation. If Angela had had her way, the truck would never have been moved.

They spent a week constructing an artificial undercarriage out of leftover plywood, brass pipes, duct tape, two spare tires, and two cinder blocks. The switch occurred during the morning hours when the birds were standing beside their nest, crowing to each other.

Stacy, a rookie researcher who was good with a stick shift, piloted the pickup; the rest followed closely behind with the contraption. The penguins watched this bizarre parade but did not seem terribly alarmed. When the humans left, they returned to their counterfeit nest. The true indication of success came in the form of two eggs, which Shelly noticed three weeks later. The eggs were smaller than normal, but it took a year or two for young penguins to become successful breeding pairs. Diesel was just getting started.

Angela had already selected names for the chicks.

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Shelly Sparks, the director of the research camp, was a tall, angular woman in her late forties with auburn hair. She would say that you could tell what month of the breeding season it was by the length of her roots. She dyed her hair before she arrived at Punta Verde in late August and not again until the last of the penguins had traded in their old feather coats for new and returned to sea. *We molt together*, she would say.

The dining room had been a storage shed in its first life. Now it consisted of two long tables and a propane stove, two small windows covered in plastic. There were no overhead lights, but candles created a warm environment for nine researchers – three men and six women, including Angela.

Shelly could never resist making light of the scabs and stitches and torn gloves that no naturalist escapes. Angela stood and waved her swollen hand like the Queen, which was met by cheers from the junior

researchers who had long ago forgotten that she, too, was human.

She caught Doug's eyes and glanced at the floor. She was avoiding him now. He had followed orders earlier and stayed close to the nest, but when she told him to fetch the first aid kit for her hand, he was incredulous. Why couldn't they both return to camp together? It would take him an hour to make the return trip.

While he was gone, Angela deposited her castaway in the northern reaches of Mission Valley (Shelly, being from San Diego, named parts of Verde after her hometown). She assembled the man's waterlogged tent, tucked between bulbous lyceum bushes. He had a pronounced limp and was shivering.

"I need to get you dry clothes," she told him.

"I've been wet before," he said. "All I need is food. And liquor couldn't hurt."

Shelly was heading back to the States in the morning, to give midterms to her UCSD students, leaving Angela in charge for a week. Her absence gave Angela hope that she could keep him hidden.

Angela folded a large hunk of lamb into a napkin, no small feat as she was a vegetarian. She excused herself from dinner and exited through the back door, by the storage room, where she grabbed a bottle of Malbec.

Outside, Angela stopped by the artificial nest, a ritual she now dreaded. The female was there waiting, her head swaying erratically from side to side, the chicks chirping loudly. They were hungry.

Diesel should be back by now.

As second in command, Angela no longer crammed into the *cueva*. While a 1970s-era 6 x 8 trailer that leaked wasn't exactly high living, it was a big step up. Mostly, it was privacy. It also came with its own penguin, Geraldo, who nested under the trailer, between the cinder block foundations. In early mornings and late at night, Geraldo brayed loudly, calling to any and all potential mates. Angela was long past being awoken by penguins, but she still appreciated hearing him flap his wings against her floor.

Geraldo had at least selected a nest that was guaranteed to be around for awhile. But these penguins were inland a good kilometer; the most desirable nests were near the water, closer to the food. It was getting late in the season, and Angela was not optimistic about his odds of finding a mate.

Doug knocked on her door.

"You look like you're going somewhere," he said.

“Just up the hill, like always.”

“You need a companion?”

“I think I can manage tonight.”

Angela’s mind wandered as she hiked through the darkness, the moon not yet making itself known. Maybe it was transference. She was caring for this lost soul as a way of making up for another lost soul. Or maybe she simply found him too attractive to share with the others.

She found him standing outside his tent, watching over the water.

“How long do you need?” she asked.

“A few days.”

“You can’t leave this campsite,” she said. “I will bring you food and water. But you can’t start a fire or draw attention to yourself. And by no means do you set foot on the tourist trail.”

“People will just think I’m a naturalist, like you.”

“You’re not one of us. If you had any idea the amount of paperwork I had to fill out to get permission to stand where I’m standing right now, you would understand.”

He agreed, and she handed him her flashlight and the food. In addition to the meat, she brought him two bananas, a roll, and five protein bars from her personal stash.

“Do you have any earplugs?” he asked.

“You’ll get used to the noise.”

“At least we have wine,” he said. She forgot a corkscrew, so he carved an opening with his pocket knife and took a long drink.

Despite being alone with a strange man in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, she was not afraid of him. Perhaps it was because she never really felt alone out here, surrounded by her knee-high neighbors peeking at her from under bushes and within burrows. Some hovered nearby, cutting wide swaths around the tent, as they trekked to the water.

Angela didn’t ask him who he was or whom he was running from. There was something freeing about knowing nothing about someone and him knowing nothing about you. The camp was a daily soap opera, one that grew more incestuous by the day. Angela had a crush on Doug and everybody knew, including Doug. He was ten years younger, but he’d seemed drawn to her when she took him out that first day. Angela never deluded herself. Her older brother once told her she was built like a nose guard and, worse, she knew what a nose guard

was. Guys in college thought she was gay. She hid her curves under loose-fitting, practical clothing, as she always had.

Doug tagged along with her on her nightly trips up the hill. He was an astronomy major and he would tell her about the Southern Cross and other constellations that one only encounters south of the equator. He got her thinking about children for the first time in fifteen years, simply by asking if she had any. But Doug was only a flirt. He was not interested in Angela for anything more than her knowledge and experience. Angela was glad for a new, albeit mysterious, companion.

She took the bottle when the man offered it to her. And with each drink he became a bit more talkative. He asked for her name and she told him.

“They call me Aeneas,” he said.

“You’re kidding.”

“You’ve not heard of me?” He appeared surprised. “Surely you’ve read about me in the papers.”

“We don’t get home delivery here.”

He explained the name, an alias, and his pursuers, various coast guards and government agencies.

“I do battle with whaling ships,” he said.

“Like Greenpeace?” Angela asked.

“They fight with words and water guns,” he said. “We fight with the hulls of our ships. We ram them. We mangle their props.”

“You sink them?”

“On occasion.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“No.”

And Angela left it at that. A sneeze broke the silence that followed.

“What was that?” he asked.

“A penguin.”

“Penguins catch colds?”

“They sneeze to exhale the salt from their beaks.”

“I could probably do the same,” he said, rubbing his nose. “Are you married?”

“Do I look like I have time for a marriage? Out here attending to homeless men?”

“I was married once,” he said.

“You?”

“She traveled with me for awhile, but I think she thought it was a phase. She went back to L.A. and waited for me to settle down. She divorced me in absentia.”

He took a long drink.

“You find that amusing?” he asked.

Angela realized that she had been smiling. “No. It’s – it’s that word. When I was in junior high, I thought absentia was an actual place, but I was too shy to ask anyone where it was. I spent hours looking for it in the atlas at the school library. I imagined this sort of Shangri La, tucked between mountain ranges, with aqua lakes and pine trees and thatched roofs. When I hear the word now, it reminds me of how big and mysterious the world was back then. It’s gotten a lot smaller now that everything is mapped.”

“I’ve been living in absentia for years,” he said. “There are still a few unmapped places left.”

The bottle was empty, and she stood. He joined her and in one smooth motion grabbed her waist and kissed her. She felt dizzy and pulled away.

“Wait,” she said.

“Wait for what? Like you said, it’s mating season.”

“For penguins, not—” she began to say but he had already grabbed her again, this time with more force, and she responded with greater force, pushing him so hard that he stumbled backwards into a quilambay bush. A startled penguin emerged from under him and bit his leg.

“Ouch!” he yelled, scaring out several more penguins, sending them flapping away on their bellies.

“Good night,” she called out, walking off in the dark.

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It was Angela’s idea to attach the satellite device to Diesel. Shelly thought it premature. Give him another year, she said. But Angela insisted after the eggs had hatched, when penguins grew even more loyal to their nests. She knew he’d be back.

Using a blend of duct tape and super glue, Angela affixed the unit, the size of a computer mouse, to Diesel on a cold morning in late October. It was a two-hour procedure; Doug assisted, but he did not approve. Although the tracking devices diminished in size over the years, they still inevitably exerted a drag on a penguin in water,

reducing the odds ever so slightly that it could survive if pursued by a leopard seal.

“What’s the point of tracking them,” Doug said, “if the act of doing so reduces their numbers?”

“Fishing nets do more damage than these devices will ever do,” Angela said. And this they knew from the dozens of flipper tags they received each year, mailed anonymously from fishermen who heeded the *Avisé al* request stamped on the back of each tag. Some tags arrived straightened out by hammer so they would comfortably fit into an envelope. She wondered how many tags were left on those ships, or at the bottom of the sea.

Her life was consumed with attrition and its causes. An oil tanker spills off the coast of Argentina and they count ten thousand fewer penguins. But some causes were less obvious. The anchovies and krill that the penguins fed upon were diminishing in quantity, thanks to the fishermen. With less to eat, the penguins foraged further and further from their nests, diminishing the odds of a successful return.

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The next morning, Angela sent her team south of the camp, including a reluctant Doug, while she headed north.

After only a few minutes of walking, she sighted an orange jacket atop Banker’s Hill. “I told you to stay at the tent.”

“I needed a better vantage point. I thought I saw my ship.”

But he did not see his ship, and Angela scolded him as she led him back north.

“Do you have to wear that jacket?” she asked.

“You don’t like it?”

“Not exactly camouflage.”

If Angela was going to harbor a terrorist, she would at least put him to work. They began counting penguins within five-meter circular plots placed thirty-three meters apart. They followed a grid mapped by Shelly that covered the entire colony, designed to give them a reasonably accurate population estimate. Finding the edges of a circle required two people – Aeneas standing in the middle, holding a measured piece of rope in one hand, a notebook in the other, while Angela walked the perimeter, holding the other end of the rope, calling out penguins – single male, active pair, one egg, two eggs, inactive

nest.

“How many of these circles do we have to do?” he asked.

“You have someplace better to be?”

“I’m just curious.”

“A hundred or so,” Angela said. “I could try calling your ship from our research station.”

“Too risky. There may be others listening in on the channels,” he said. “You trying to get rid of me?”

She didn’t answer him. She wasn’t sure what she would do with him once they finished their circles. But at least keeping him close to her kept him away from the others.

He drank too much and still would on occasion rest his hand on her shoulder and gently massage her neck, which she no longer resisted. But when he drank he also talked, and she found his stories exciting. She brought him two bottles of Malbec that night.

The alias was his idea.

“When we sank this Norwegian whaling ship five years ago, I spray painted *Aeneas* across the hull. I figured that it would confuse the feds. It didn’t. But I do identify with the man, the myth. Aeneas was a man without a port.”

“Where will you go when the whale season ends?” she asked.

“I’ll head north. There’s always a hunting season for something somewhere,” he said before standing and pacing the darkness. “We don’t fish anymore. We obliterate, slaughter, expunge. We use vacuums, for fuck’s sake! That’s not fishing. That’s extermination. When you raise cattle, you at least feed them. But fishermen don’t feed fish. They just take. They even take the food the fish eat. They are the greediest creatures alive. I could kill them all.”

He stood over her and emptied the bottle.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

He told her: Late last season they were attacking a Japanese whaler in the Southern Ocean. He was in a Zodiac trying to wrap chains around the ship’s propeller. He had a young female volunteer with him, whose father, unbeknownst to him, was the governor of Utah.

“I only wish it was me who fell off the boat,” he said.

“Did she drown?”

“No. The ship turned hard and rolled us; she was sucked into the props. The Japanese, sensing an opportunity, claim that I pushed her off the boat. And now I am wanted for manslaughter

and other federal charges. One wrong turn, and I graduated from activist to terrorist. But what about those poor fucking whales that got slaughtered because we had to hightail it outta there? The Japanese are sure to make quota this season if we don't get back."

"What about your crew? Won't they be arrested?"

"The ship will be boarded, if it hasn't already happened. But it's me they want. It's the captain who is liable for the actions of his ship."

The next day, they made good time on their circles. He was a steady partner, quiet and focused, but always quick to make a joke when the opportunity arose. Angela could see why a woman would have married him. Yes, he would belch and curse at all the wrong times, but he also listened at all the right times.

"You want to switch?" he asked.

Angela was surprised to see him taking an interest. And the next three days were spent circling, with lunches sitting cross-legged in dry river beds or on red cliffs overlooking the water. She taught him the difference between quilambay and lyceum bushes, how to spot flipper tags. She enjoyed watching him grunt and curse as he crawled on the dirt, straining to see into the burrows.

She wanted to shave his beard, see his face in full, smooth and warm and up close. And then she would catch herself and switch to thoughts of nests to be counted.

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Days passed. Aeneas remained, as he liked to say, "waiting for his ship to come in." But Shelly would return soon, bringing Angela's solo field trips to an end. Other naturalists had started to question why they couldn't attend to nests up north.

Angela pored over the latest satellite tracking data in the office. She cross-checked every coordinate, every time stamp, hoping for an abnormality, a number out of place, a false positive. This was the third week without contact.

Doug entered and hovered over her shoulder. She wanted to elbow him in the stomach but instead ignored him.

"I had a rather strange sighting today," he said. "What shall I call this one – an orange dot?"

Angela spun around. He was smiling.

"What did you say?"

“I was looking for you. We finished up early and I thought you could use a hand with your surveys. Now I know how you were to able to cover so many circles so quickly.”

“Who have you told?”

“Nobody, yet. Who is he?”

“I can’t say.”

“You’ll have to report him.”

“He’ll be gone any day.”

“Angela, people already know something’s up. And if I don’t say anything, they’re going to think I was in on it too.”

“And there’s no chance you would risk anything on my behalf?”

“It’s not personal. I’m new here – and I’d like to be invited back next year. If you don’t do it, I will, if for no other reason than to preserve what’s left of our Malbec supply.”

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The next day, Angela did not visit him.

Walking the south line, she encountered a penguin dead in his nest. A grey wolf had killed him the night before. The female, sitting on her eggs, eggs that would be abandoned soon, weaved her head from side to side. The grey wolf killed not for food but to mark territory. Nothing more than a thrill kill. Bycatch.

But this wolf had defecated on the penguin. Angela had never seen such an act, so vindictive, so personal. Six months ago she would not have cried. The females were never single for long. Males in the surrounding bushes were already eying the empty nest. But what she had once seen as instinctual head movements she now saw as a creature in mourning.

She returned to camp. Two speeding cars approached the camp, kicking up a trail of dust. She watched from a distance.

“*La policia,*” said the tourist standing at the door of the public bathroom.

The police cars skidded to a stop at the *guarda fauna*’s gate but only for a second as the *guarda fauna* waved them through. Angela gave chase.

They were going too fast to stop for the penguins, and she prayed that none was making its way across the road as the cars crested the hill. Angela lost sight of them through the brown dust.

When she arrived at the buses and pushed her way through the crowd, she had an awful feeling that she already knew what happened. A tourist required medical attention, a bleeding face and an hysterical wife. Police scoured the bushes of the colony with disregard for the trails, the warning signs, the railings. Penguins panicked, scattering about. The perpetrator had taken off into the bushes.

Police reviewed the camcorders of the tourists. Angela, looking over their shoulders, caught a glimpse of a bright orange jacket.

After dinner, she found him on Banker's Hill.

"I was looking for you everywhere," he said, explaining himself. "I thought you might be on the trail. This American was feeding penguins. I told him to stop. He didn't. So I told him to knock it off or I'd knock his head off."

"How civilized."

"I know that was not the smart thing to do."

"You have to leave."

"That's what I was coming to tell you. This ship is here. I made visual contact this morning. They're sending a Zodiac in an hour."

She looked out over the water.

"Come with me," he said.

"Where?"

"On the ship."

Angela said nothing.

"We'll get a new ship, one that patrols just these waters. You can be in charge. You'll do more good for those birds out there than you can do counting survivors here."

"Is that all you think I do, count survivors?"

"You can't tell me you're not sick and tired of diminishing returns."

"I am a scientist. I'm not some warrior."

"You're wrong. This is a war. And the battleground has shifted. You have the tourist trail. Those sixty thousand visitors each year are protection enough. If a tourist bus runs over one penguin it's a provincial disaster, you said so yourself. Out there, the fishermen kill a thousand penguins and nobody hears a word."

"Just leave."

"I'm going to," he said.

"I mean now. I don't care if you swim out of here!"

She was not aware she was shouting. She'd always kept an emotional distance, and an arm's length, to prevent getting bitten.

Then she told him about Diesel, told him everything, including his five-digit number. Zero four two two nine. She told him that when she lost one penguin, she lost so much more than that. When they killed Diesel, they killed his children.

He hugged her and she closed her eyes and sobbed.

That night in her trailer she dreamed she that she had said yes. She was on a boat now looking in at Punta Verde, as penguins porpoised around her. The researchers would have their theories for why she left suddenly, in the night. People who did not know her said she was kidnapped. People who did said that she was in love. But she was neither. She was tired. Tired of watching trawlers pass at night, their multitude of nets and longlines and vacuum hoses sucking the life from the ocean with GPS-enabled precision, with penguins as bycatch. Tired of days spent holding onto ropes and walking in circles. Tired of counting survivors.

She awoke earlier than usual, perhaps hoping that she would see Aeneas before he left. She hiked to his tent, now empty. She broke down the tent and packed up the trash and bottles. She had Doug help her carry the bags back to camp.

The breeding season would be over soon, and the penguins would waddle their starved bodies back to sea, to drink deeply and fill their bellies, to follow the fish, and to elude the predators that waited just below the water line.

Angela walked to the nest, got on her knees, and lifted out the bodies of the chicks. She buried them behind her trailer.

~

Two weeks had passed since he left. Shelly had returned and, with her, their routines. The chicks were fledging. Tourist buses jammed the parking lot.

Angela was on her own, on her hands and knees, looking into a nest, when she heard a noise.

“Angela.”

She stood to see him, still in his orange florescent jacket. He looked exhausted. She smiled but he did not return the gesture. He walked up to her and pressed a steel penguin tag into her tattered wool glove.

Zero four two two nine.

“I am sorry,” he said.

She stared at the tag and pressed it hard between her fingers. The smooth edges. The indentations of each digit. She could feel him now, on her lap, the raspy purring noise. Gazing into his eyes. Imagining the thousands of miles he had traveled to be here, right here at this point in time, with her. This tag was all that was left.

“I can’t stay long,” he said. “They know I’m here.”

Of course they did. He was out there, cutting nets, holding knives to necks. He boarded three ships before he located Diesel’s tag. He terrified the men. He sunk the trawler that took Diesel’s life. But it was worth it, she thought. He brought Diesel home to her. He could have sunk them all.

She grabbed his jacket by the sides and pulled him to her. She kissed him, his beard sanding her lips.

She took him to her trailer. They made love that night as Geraldo brayed.

In the morning, while he was sleeping, she crawled out of their cramped alcove and stared at him. She hung Diesel’s tag on a chain around her neck.

He would not ask her to come along this time. He noticed the tag around her neck, and he held it and kissed her forehead.

“Now you’re a known-age bird,” he said.

He left the trailer, and she waited a few minutes, but he didn’t return.

On the ground in front of her trailer was a small canvas sack. She remembered him carrying it the night before so she looked around, but he was gone. She grabbed it and it jingled as if full of bottle caps.

She kneeled and opened the bag to find hundreds upon hundreds of flipper tags. She ran her hands through them. So many mothers and fathers caught in nets. So many abandoned chicks. So many red dots. She felt something at the bottom and held up Diesel’s satellite tag.

She stood and began to run up the hill. Tourist buses passed her, coughing dust. She could feel the eyes and cameras upon her. But she no longer cared. Perhaps there was still time. She crested the hill, leaping onto soft dirt and patches of grass, hopping the prickly quilambay bushes. She could feel Diesel’s tag around her neck, reminding her that he was now looking over her, tracking her movements. In places cold and always blowing. In sickness and in health. In absentia.

The Tourist Trail won the *Phoebe* 2008 Fiction Prize (www.phoebejournal.com).

If you enjoyed the story, please take a moment to forward it to three friends.

Please support penguin research at Punta Tombo (the inspiration for this story) by visiting <http://mesh.biology.washington.edu/penguinProject>.

The Tourist Trail is now a novel. If you'd like to be notified when the novel is published, email me at jjunker@gmail.com.

Thank you.

John Yunker

