

Phosphorescence

‘IT GETS THE BLOOD GOING, my dear.’

Her granddaughter stared disbelievingly at Alice’s answer, straight on, in a way that Alice herself would never have dared to regard her elders, especially her own grandmother. Brittany shook her dyed fringe down and replaced the earphone of her iPod, signalling the end of interaction. Alice could hear the notes’ angry reverberation in her granddaughter’s skull, like bees. She assumed that Brittany’s throat was still too raw for much speech.

Alice tucked her own wispy hair into her rubber cap and draped the old striped towel over the rocks, her flesh goosebumped in anticipation. She began her simple, resolute walk towards the whitewashed pathway to Graaf’s Pool, as she had every evening for more than fifty years, feeling the lightness as she always did, feeling like a showgirl, feeling like a bride.

It didn’t show on the outside, Alice knew. Brittany was watching her progress, her face in the dusk unlined, her eyes sleepy and blank, idly counting Alice’s sun spots like the pips on dice. Being sixteen meant not having to care about damage, not even the kind you did to yourself on a Saturday night with a bottle of Panado. ‘It takes eight pills to cause permanent liver damage,’ the reproving nurse in the Medi-Clinic had said as she removed the pan with its swirls of charcoal and vomit. ‘Eight. You are a very lucky girl.’ The pan had slopped dangerously.

Brittany didn’t feel lucky. She sat on the sand and waited for moonrise because her grandmother had thought it was a good idea to get her off the couch and out of the flat, but when she looked at the water now she saw

only her sharp edges refracted: she was immune to the smell and sound of the sea, and everything in it.

Under Brittany's dumb gaze Alice straightened her back in her black costume as much as she could, grateful for the coming dark. Still, her bones curved like forceps and there was only so much good posture could do. Her son Sidney, the plastic surgeon, always said that it was the skeleton you couldn't change. Boob jobs, tummy tucks, facelifts were easy to execute, but when your patients hauled themselves up from their towels on the sand to hobble to the water, they hunched over like the old ladies they were. Plastic surgery was as much a mystery to Alice as the idea that in another century Sidney himself had emerged, smeared and screaming, from her body. She couldn't imagine wilfully visiting radical change upon herself.

Her granddaughter evidently could. It was, lately, all that Brittany thought about. Last weekend's attempt to cut herself loose from them altogether had ended in her sullen flight to Cape Town. She would stay with Alice in the beachfront flat until the new school term started in Jo'burg. She needed a change of scene, Sidney had said, from behind the phone on his mahogany desk. Get her away from those people she hangs out with. Alice had a sudden vision of Brittany as a red-striped dishcloth on a washing line. No one had said 'suicide', but the word had stung like a thrown stone.

Alice lifted the construction tape that was meant to bar her from the walkway and ducked under it. She was careful in the way that people who know the cost of falling are. She was familiar with the water arriving from the other side of the planet, with it leaving as it did, rapidly. The rocks on either side were slippery, but the path this evening was more than usually treacherous, splattered with periodic candle wax melting weakly. Small groups of people had taken to coming to the pool in a kind of nightly vigil. They sat on the rocks. From her flat Alice could see the tiny flames flickering in the dark.

Now she shaded her eyes and squinted back at the play area above the strip of sand where Brittany sat motionless. There was no one else at this time of day except for the workers. The municipality couldn't leave the place alone. Men still mowed relentlessly, sending the shorn blades of grass

into the air over their heads; they raked and trimmed. Others, with SOLID WASTE emblazoned on their backs, scooped up the stinking kelp in sacks and tipped them into the waiting lorries. One woman raked the sand. Alice wondered if she also rearranged the shells. They were always obstructing the promenade, four or five men working on the sewage plant located right next to Mouille Point Lighthouse, the smell of decay wafting onshore with the wind to all the travellers who sat sipping lattes, a reminder of the contents of their expensive insides.

Since the municipality had first tacked the demolition notices to the lampposts, swimmers had stopped coming to Graaf's Pool, spooked by the tape. There had been one or two nostalgic articles in the free suburban papers and a small, largely ignored, outcry, mainly from the gay men who used the pool as their own. Alice was glad that there was someone else who felt the same clench of heart at the destruction of this half-secret place.

The bulldozers appeared a few weeks later and were left on the lawns overnight, expectant. That first night Alice woke up every few hours from her light old-woman's doze and thought that she could hear their metal ticking as it contracted, their hinged claws creaking in the wind that also rattled the notices on the lampposts, that pulled at the strings of coloured light bulbs swinging between them, regardless.

But the lights would go too. It would all go. The ellipsis made her afraid of the changes that could be forced on a body overnight, without consent. Still, the carnage and the flattening hadn't happened yet. The old Jews sat on their benches and the rentboys washed their used parts in the showers; children in transparent underpants paddled in the shallows and seagulls perched on the poured concrete pillars of the promenade, the red dots on their beaks like blood.

Maybe the men from the municipality had forgotten about bulldozing Graaf's Pool. The machines had been squatting for nearly twenty-eight days now, leaving stretches of dead yellow grass under their bellies. Alice marked each reprieve on her tidal calendar, the way she had when she was first married and had to diarise her cycle: safe-unsafe-safe. Everything we know is pulled towards the moon; the earth can hold onto most of its subjects,

except water. That recedes and swells as we turn by degrees, so slowly that we feel it only as a change in the pressure between the ears.

Alice saw that the levels were low when she reached the pool, below even the cement line left by the workers who whitewashed the walls twice every season. High tide this morning had lapped against the retaining wall of the promenade, the waves splashing passers-by with their dirty brown foam. Brittany, hugging herself at the window, had almost smiled at their squeals and jumps. Low tide tonight, under the rabbit's moon, would abandon the sand for the far shore.

Alice didn't hesitate; she never did. The water froze your marrow solid. It was always better to immerse yourself. The shock ended sooner; you adjusted. She pushed off from the wall, keeping her eyes open though the salt stung, watching the bottom. Sometimes things washed in with the tide and couldn't wash out again: a transparent octopus had once flailed at her in terror.

With every length she swam, Alice wondered if this one would be her last, if a man with roses of sweat on his T-shirt and a paunch over his belt would order her out of the water; she would have to lift herself out to lie panting on the rocks before him, an ancient mermaid, scaly and songless.

No one came. Alice gave up her lengths and clung to the side. Lately she tired more easily. She leaned back on her elbows and regarded the sky. It was almost purple now, the first stars out, the volume of the traffic turning up a notch as other people sat down to dinner, peered into cocktails, listened to music in bars. Alice studied the lights on the shore. She could barely make Brittany's figure out but she could imagine her pose: hugging her knees, legs crossed at the ankles, impenetrable.

Alice kicked her feet in the water, feeling its resistance. What if this really *was* the last time she swam in Graaf's Pool? The misery of the subtraction astounded her. She wanted some tribute, a final act. Alice glanced around and saw she was still alone. She took off her cap, a few tiny hairs at the nape yanked out in her hurry. She slipped the straps of her costume off her speckled shoulders, and the sand trapped in the folds of her body sank to the bottom of the pool. The rest of the black nylon was easily pulled

over her belly and thighs. It floated away from her grasp, the shed thing in the water like a sealskin. Alice wondered why she had ever bothered with it. She dived experimentally; the currents swirled between her legs, the temperature changing as the cold met the warm, as if she had cast off decades with the material. It really did get the blood going.

When Alice broke the surface she already knew what was waiting. Brittany stood at the edge of the pool, fully clothed in the darkness.

‘You were gone so long,’ she said. Alice regarded her steadily. Somewhere behind her the costume was bobbing like seaweed. I wonder if she can see my pubic hair, she thought.

‘You never know,’ she told Brittany. ‘The next time we come here, the pool might be gone.’

Her granddaughter shrugged in the night air. Her hands were jammed into the pockets of her hooded top. They said, very clearly, *That’s not an excuse.*

‘How cold is it, anyway?’

‘Colder than an ice-cream headache,’ said Alice. Colder than a near-death experience in the Emergency Room, she said in her head. ‘Don’t slip on the wax.’

Brittany bent and unlaced her sneakers. She divested herself of her ankle socks and her black jeans, her haunches thin as a deer’s. Her top went next, then the shirts – three of them, layered archaeologically – until she was standing in her girlish underwear, a mystifying combination of cotton and wire scaffolding. She doesn’t need a bra, thought Alice, looking at her unpromising chest. Why is she even wearing one? Her granddaughter’s body was a collection of straws, white in the moonlight.

Brittany stored her iPod carefully in her top and then stood for a moment longer. She bent down and tumbled her panties over her knees and bony feet, fumbled at the clasp of her triple A. It left lines on her body that Alice saw briefly, and then Brittany fell forward into the water. Alice had to stroke backwards in a flurry to avoid being bombed.

Brittany came up for air and the two of them grinned at each other, treading water. With their hair wet they didn’t look very different.

‘It’s really cold!’ she gasped. It wasn’t an accusation. Alice splashed a little seawater at her and swam out of reach.

‘Don’t be a baby.’

Brittany was waving her arms like tentacles and craning her neck from side to side.

‘Look!’

Alice obeyed. The water around them had a greenish cast to it. When Brittany moved her limbs the little lights moved with her: she was trailing phosphorescence from every fingertip.

‘What is it?’

‘Plankton,’ said Alice. ‘Like fireflies.’ She didn’t add that dinoflagellates occurred in concentration when raw sewage was present in the water. Let Brittany have something that wasn’t spoiled. The two of them fell quiet. Above them the moon was swollen orange and fully risen, the rabbit scrabbling his paws to prevent his fall into mortality as the earth and sun lined up.

At first Alice thought that the massive flood of light was natural. She was about to remark on the moon’s brightness when they heard the engines start. Then the men’s voices carried to them in bass notes over the walkway. Brittany made sense of it first.

‘Gran! It’s the bulldozers!’

The men from the municipality hadn’t forgotten. They were just waiting for spring tide: the highest high tide that had washed over the promenade this morning – and the lowest low tide at nine p.m. that would leave Graaf’s Pool dry enough to demolish. They would have the full moon to see by even without the enormous generators and the blinding stadium-strength lights. Their artificial beams lit up the pool and the two women in it in a parody of daylight. She hasn’t called me Gran since she was little, Alice thought obscurely.

The men’s shouts took on a different timbre, and she began to be afraid.

‘Gran! What are we going to do?’

Alice considered the options. Brittany at least could get dressed here, but her own costume was long gone, a gift given back to the sea. She would

have to walk back naked and then stumble around, trying to find her towel on the rocks.

‘We’ll have to go back.’ She could feel herself shrinking, osteoporotic with shame.

‘Gran, no.’ The idea horrified Brittany, but Alice had no others.

The voices were coming closer. Alice thought she could hear the sound of the men’s shoes on the walkway, but that was impossible. It was solid concrete. It must be the bulldozers, starting up. The vibrations made her teeth click lightly together with the same insectile hum transmitted by the men with the edge-trimmers. Suddenly she was exasperated.

‘Well, what do you want me to do?’

She instantly regretted snapping at Brittany. Her granddaughter’s eyes were enormous, her hair plastered to her head like one of those Japanese cartoon girls Alice saw everywhere. What were they called?

The two of them were silent.

‘What if we did it in stretches?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If you got out now, quickly, and then I did too, and if we were both very quiet—’

It made a certain sense, Alice supposed. Especially for someone who was used to being under the radar.

‘Gran, we have to go now. The longer we wait ...’

Alice nodded, considering. They might as well. ‘But how do we cross the road?’ It sounded like a joke.

‘There’s another way.’

‘What other way?’

‘Come. I’ll show you.’

By degrees they hauled themselves out of the pool, the phosphorescence slipping off them like scales. While Brittany dressed as fast as she could, Alice crept and hid, crept and hid in the shadows of the rocks, keeping parallel with the walkway as much as she could. She slipped once on the candle wax, lacerating her palms. She wondered if her bloody handprints would still be there in the morning.

The men had reached the pool and were setting up more lights, angling the first bulldozer. Were they just going to push the rubble into the sea? The two women didn't stay to watch. In increments they got to the beach without using the walkway, terrified and exhilarated.

On the flat sand of the beach, Brittany tried to take her grandmother's hand, but the slashes hurt too much. Oh God, thought Alice, I'm smearing blood all over her. By the time they reached the flat they would look like the last demented refugees from *Lord of the Flies*. She gritted her teeth, shivering, and surrendered to Brittany's guidance.

The door was small, built flush with the retaining wall of the promenade, invisible at high tide. Even now it receded into the shadow thrown by the overhanging lip of the boardwalk above it.

'What's this, Brit?'

'A door. A tunnel, I think. Maybe it goes over the road. Under, I mean. We can cross.'

'Brittany,' Alice enunciated, 'we don't know for certain where it goes.'

'Gran, we don't really have a choice.'

If Alice was honest with herself she would recognise her pride surfacing, flailing like a small transparent octopus. How was it possible that she had been coming to this place for half a century, and never noticed the door? Or had she seen it and cast it off as a storeroom, a boat shed, somewhere the municipality kept its spades? And how had her granddaughter – her stick-thin, dyed-fringe, suicidal granddaughter – seen it at once for what it was?

'How did you know about the tunnel?'

'While you were swimming, I went for a walk. It was just here.'

It was just here.

Alice sighed. 'All right. Let's try. But if there's anything funny in there – anything at all – I'll walk naked across Beach Road like Lady Godiva!'

'Okay.'

'Okay.'

The boards of the door were weathered grey and splintering. When Brittany tugged at the rusted padlock, the chain came off and lay in her hands like a medal. They peered into the dark mustiness. At the far end, over

the road, was a dimly illuminated rectangle. Alice thought sharply of the Cango Caves and how she was stuck there once in the Chimney, thirty years ago, when they were on a caravan tour of the country. ('How do you remember which ones are stalactites and which ones are stalagmites?' Sidney had sung out. 'Tits hang down!') The lights were going off in the Caves too, now, because algae was growing in response to the false warmth, the determined renewal of cells carpeting the stalactites like plaque.

Alice coughed. She could feel the spores settling in her lungs.

'Let's go, then.'

The two women – one naked, one fully clothed – ducked under the lintel and made their way into the darkness, aiming for the light. Behind them the earth shook as the bulldozers ate away at the dry boundaries of Graaf's Pool. The cement walls crumbled and then turned to powder, and the candle wax was washed out with them. The phosphorescence was gone, sucked back out to sea, clinging to a black costume that caught on the kelp and washed up at Three Anchor Bay in the morning.

Inside the tunnel the two women were dumb with the smell of crypts and limestone. Their feet were wet with the puddles they splashed through, numb at the extremities. For some of the way, they held hands.