

SWEEPS OF LIGHT ON THE OCEAN

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For more information, address: benswanepoel@gmail.com

FIRST EDITION

Editor: Catrina Mehltreter

Interior: Ben Swanepoel

Cover designer: Jelena Mirkovic Jankovic

ISBN (paperback): 979-8-9920048-0-9

ISBN (ebook): 979-8-9920048-1-6



SWEEPS OF LIGHT ON THE OCEAN

BOOK ONE – NOT ANOTHER DAY

That time when I grew up, almost destroyed myself in retail management, and then thought I could sail around the world.

A MEMOIR

BEN SWANEPOEL

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PART ONE
Benny

The Question

The boy stands before her, his slender body convulsing with each involuntary sob, each exaggerated intake of breath. The backs of his knees beat a steady drumroll against the upturned seat of his school desk. Each feature of his face works independently of the others in a grotesque effort not to express the humiliation, pain, and confusion bombarding his brain. Lines of tears carve clean strips down his cheeks, like ancient water channels across a Martian desert.

She stands alongside his desk between the rows of his classmates, her plump legs slightly apart, feet firmly planted. She hits him again. The tapered wooden blackboard pointer connects with a satisfying thud against his hunched shoulders.

‘What? Is? The? Answer?’

Her speech is forced through closed teeth, each word a poignant question.

With the passing of time, the boy’s sobs become steadier, measuring his endurance. One sob for every three intakes of breath, one involuntary convulsion for every two sobs.

Having only recently turned seven, the boy is smaller than most of his classmates. Had he been born only a few days later, say on 1 July, he would have started school a year later. What he lacks in size, he more than adequately makes up in other (arguably more important) aspects of schoolyard

society. Few can run as fast or jump as high—or climb a tree with as much precision and grace, a skill honed through hours of practice.

He is a cheerful boy; ‘Smiley’ they call him. His report cards are filled on the positive side with comments such as, ‘Has an extremely rich imagination. Very enthusiastic, loving, helpful.’

On the neutral side, ‘Lacking the ability to sit still for any length of time.’

On the negative side, ‘Talkative and immature. Lacks concentration.’

Ironically, it was a combination of all three sides of his report triangle that landed him in this current predicament. While his teacher was droning on about the gospel of addition, a small piece of crumpled paper lying just across the aisle under the desk of a past girlfriend diverted his attention.

At first, the paper held only a weak allure, but the more he looked, the more it resembled a crumpled brown R10 note. Serious cash, at a time when a pile of coins could buy almost anything, up to the magnitude of a bicycle. Notes of currency in 1966 were tickets to ride life to the furthest limits of a boy’s imagination: rocket bikes, jet packs, a real tree house with an electric lift!

The R10, scribed in the upper left of the note, now clearly discernible, fit perfectly within the context of the crumpled folds, the face of Paul Kruger guarding or proclaiming (he was never sure which) the authenticity of the currency.

At some point the boy realised he might need to include a partner, as the rights to this windfall still lay legally within the territory of Girlfriend Past. The teacher had found him out during these slightly noisy negotiations, and

even then, he had been quite willing to include her in the partnership agreement.

Everything fell apart when, on closer inspection, the note was found merely to be a few tricks of the light filtering through the towering casement windows of the primary school classroom. In fact, on close inspection, it would have been difficult even for someone with a 'good' imagination to have mistaken it for a brown R10 note.

'What is the answer?'

At first, he had reacted to the beating as he would to any mid-level beating, which was a daily occurrence and an important part of the playground hierarchy. He tried to focus on the numbers she had scribbled on the board. In her hand was a piece of white chalk so small that he wondered how she held onto it at all.

He had smiled reassuringly at the alarm shown on the face of the past girlfriend as the first blows struck. Mostly it was the male teachers who delivered the beatings: immediate, hard punishment, administered and received in good spirit, with the crime just as quickly forgotten. Exactly how any good punishment should be delivered.

Caught talking in class: one whack. Caught throwing paper jets behind the teacher's back: two whacks. Stealing lunch from the girl with funny eyes: three whacks.

Somewhere around the sixth whack, he started getting concerned. This was uncharted territory. Obviously, there was something going on here that he had missed. His inability to give the answer to the sum on the board was a much more serious crime than he had imagined.

As the anger and resentment towards him had grown, a more sinister mood had descended on the class, oozing like

escaping gas and pervading even the warm glow of sunbeams swirling with particles of dust, skin, and chalk powder.

So, he tried to focus on finding the answer behind the question. By the seventh or eighth whack, the class had gone silent.

‘What is the answer?’

With a shock, he realised he was alone. Alone and ashamed. From that moment, it became useless even looking at the blackboard, which together with the white chalk, had blended into a blur of incomprehension.

‘What is the answer?’

Though many of the children are now whispering the answer, mouthing its shape, or holding up some figures, the boy never utters the sounds that would save him.

‘What is the answer?’

The period is drawing to a close. The boy is withdrawing into a place where any further beating would have no additional effect. No matter how much she hits him, the sobs get no louder, for his humiliation has plateaued.

The world around him—the sobbing girls, the downward-turned heads of the boys, the rows of desks, the blackboard—is now just a movie being played somewhere off in the distance.

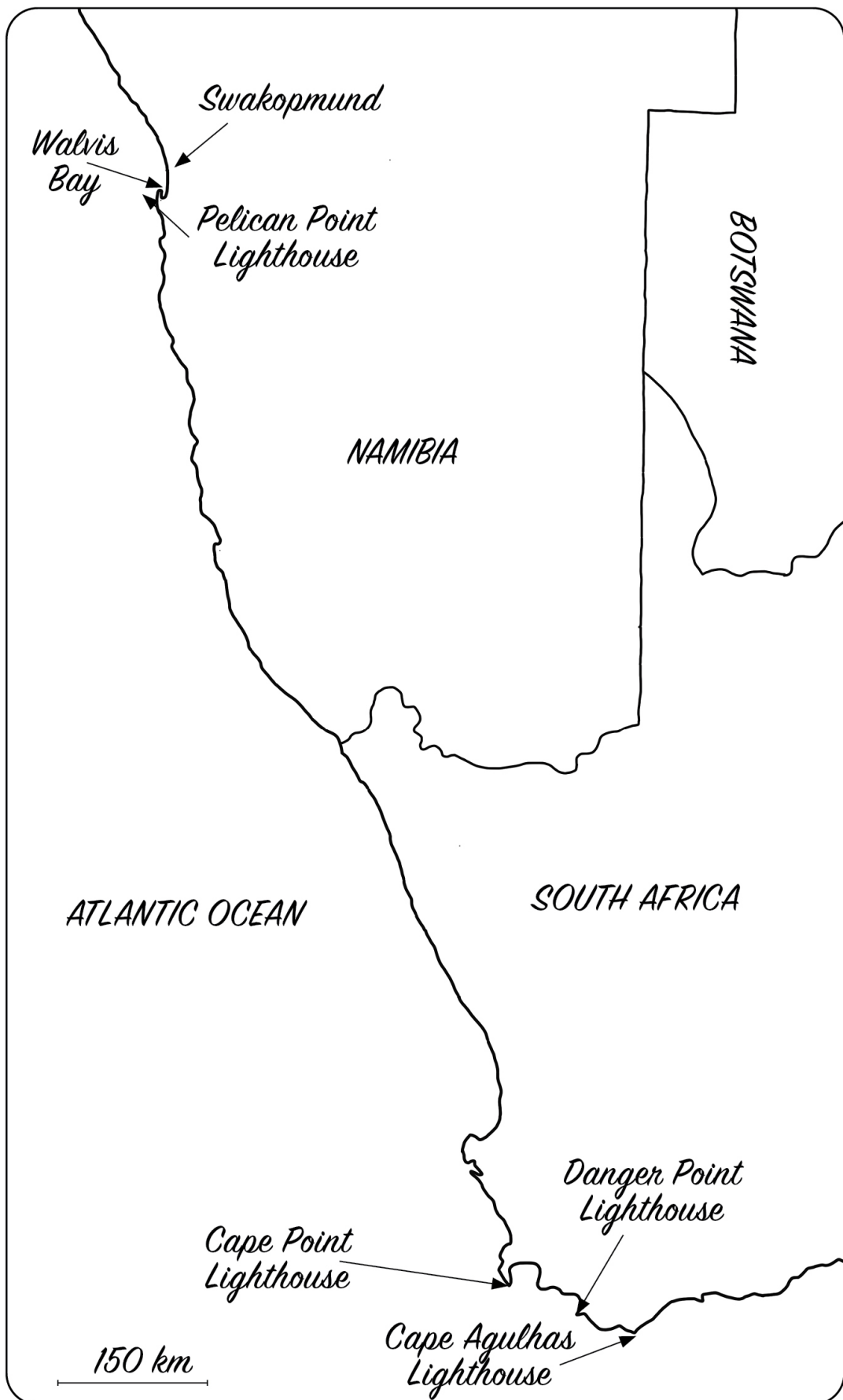
With more urgency, she brings the stick down on his back.

‘What is the answer?’

Then it hits him that the beating has nothing whatsoever to do with 25 plus 17.

The bell rings, and while class may finally be over, the lesson has only just begun.

MAP 1-SOUTHERN LIGHTS



I
DAYS OF WONDER AND LIGHT

Stories and Lies

I was born in a lighthouse poised at the very edge of the world during a howling southeast gale. The mighty Atlantic and Indian Oceans crashed together far below, boiling and frothing, colliding against the southernmost point of the African continent.

This makes for a good story; however, some of it is true, and some are lies.

The truth: I was born at the Mowbray Maternity Home in Cape Town, the mother city of South Africa. My family lived just a few metres above the rock of Cape Point, where my father worked as a lighthouse keeper. In fact, nobody lived in any of the actual lighthouse buildings around the Cape, but rather in bland suburban-styled government houses a little way off. The lighthouse building itself was reserved for the lighthouse keeper's office and contained a metal spiral staircase running through several iron floors. At the very highest floor was the source of the light.

The light itself was, from my recollection, a collection

of gleaming multifaceted mirrors, angles, and magnifications all coming together to form the magic of the lamp. An iron walkway ran all the way around the lamp, from which my dad would polish—and possibly worship, I thought—the giver of light.

The truth is that the Atlantic and Indian Ocean currents often do mix at this point. I know this not because of what I have read in geographic journals, but because of first-hand experience. On more than one occasion, I have felt those waters flow in a mere moment of time and distance first warm up to the rock, then instantly frigid over my bare feet as I brace firmly against the lunging, twisting cockpit floor of a sailing boat. Of course, this line can vary considerably from season to season, storm to storm.

The bigger lie I have told is that Cape Point is the southernmost point of the African continent. In truth, the tip of Africa is located several miles southeast of this rock. It is this truth that hides perhaps the biggest lie of all.

Cape Point is a dramatic setting, a jagged arrowhead peninsula jutting out to cleave asunder the warm Indian side of the continent from the cold Atlantic. To the left, the mighty arc of False Bay. To the right, nothing but brutal ocean all the way down to Antarctica. The lighthouse, originally built from stone, stands poised on the very precipice of that arrowhead, while ocean swells pound below, proclaiming the perilous reputation aloud: ‘The Cape of Storms—Take heed—Mariners beware.’

On the opposite end of this visual scale is the true southernmost tip of Africa, Cape Agulhas. Not a tip or a point or an arrowhead at all, but a flat, windblown, featureless piece of sand and rock. Same as the piece before it, and the same

as the piece beyond it. So unremarkable it is that authorities needed to build a monument just to show visitors where it is at all. Ho hum, fiddle foo. Any child with a packet of crayons and no gifted imagination to speak of would have created Cape Point as the southernmost tip of the African continent. Had there been an intelligent designer of the Earth, there is no way that Cape Point would not have been the southernmost tip of the continent of Africa. Therefore, the birth of the Earth, along with you and me and all creatures great and small, was merely an accident, and that right there is the closing of the argument. No additional theories or scientific exploration are needed.

Of course, being less than a year old, I remember hardly anything at all about my early days on the rock of Cape Point. Even the memories and feelings I do have are of my subconscious construction, built up from stories I have been told and photos I have seen. At best, they are to be taken with the precursor: 'Based on fact.' At worst, they are a complete fabrication. My father was a storyteller, you see, and the line between storytelling and lying is not always drawn with a thick black crayon.

My favourite story of his life on this dramatic peninsula is how my dad and his colleague would hurl sheets of corrugated iron off the edge of the cliff near the lighthouse into the teeth of a howling southeaster. The wind currents shrieking below them would hold these sheets in mid-fall, turning them around, playing with them for a few moments, then, as if in deliberate defiance, send them hurtling back up and over the lip of the cliff, inches from the rocky outcrops where my dad and his colleague would be crouch-

ing for safety, grinning and giggling like naughty school-boys. With each telling of the story, the distance between certain death and safety shrank considerably, almost to the point of inevitable beheading.

My next port of call is Swakopmund, a small German town along the desert coastline of South West Africa (now the country of Namibia), close to the seaport of Walvis Bay. I say German, as the country of Namibia had been a German colony since 1884. In 1945, after the Second World War, the United Nations (UN) took over control of the country. South Africa, being South Africa, told the UN what they could do with their control issues, and assumed control over the country themselves. In the early 1960s, while my family and I were living there, South Africa was still in control of Namibia, much to the annoyance of the UN.

Browns and blues make up the colour palate of my memories here. Browns for the desert sand dunes beyond the last row of houses and for the salt roads squaring out the town. Blues for the Atlantic Ocean beating out the rhythm of the shoreline and the sky. Desert air is so dry that at night, the entire Milky Way feels as if it is only an arm's length away.

We live in a modest house in the middle of town alongside a wide salt road. Turn left to the shopping district, right to the cold Atlantic. Although we live in Swakopmund, my dad has little to do with the lighthouse that is located very close to our home. His primary posting is to the remote sandy spit of Pelican Point, which guards the entrance to the Walvis Bay Lagoon. The lighthouse itself is about six nautical miles (11 km) from the harbour of Walvis Bay, which is about forty kilometres from Swakopmund. Because the lighthouse

is only accessible by sea, he remains at the lighthouse for a few weeks at a time before being relieved. Before leaving on his duties to Pelican Point, he often hides gifts around our home for my sisters and me. He gives instructions to my mom to tune our radio to a prearranged frequency on a specific date and time. During his duty, he then illegally uses the lighthouse radio transmitters to talk to each of us, giving us clues as to where he has hidden our gifts. Mine are usually chunks of rock candy, like large uncut diamonds—but for a child like me, they hold much greater value.

My fondest memories are of the times we all got to live with my dad at Pelican Point Lighthouse. We travel to the lighthouse by tugboat, and the captain occasionally lets me steer on the brief trip across the bay to the lighthouse jetty. The lighthouse is a prefabricated cast-iron tower which was originally intended for the port of Durban but was never put into service. At 30.7 metres tall and painted black and white, it serves its purpose well as a navigational aid on the fog-inundated coastline. We all live in a wooden bungalow a few hundred metres away from the lighthouse. There is only the sand, the sea and the sky.

In order to transport supplies from the tugboat jetty to the lighthouse, a distance of some six hundred metres, the department has installed a section of trolley track. They load supplies delivered by tugboat onto a heavy steel trolley, and my dad and his colleagues push it up to the lighthouse. One blustery afternoon, deeming conditions perfect, my dad and his colleagues fit a large canvas tarpaulin to a stout jury-rigged mast and walk the contraption along the rails away from the lee of the lighthouse. When the wind first

catches the sail, the overall weight of the steel trolley fools the men into slow acceleration. It's enough to have them scamper onto the trolley, grinning foolishly and looking for places to hold on. Acceleration is slow but linear, and soon the trolley is rumbling along at a good pace, picking up an ever-increasing speed. Being men of practical means, they have thought ahead. A good hundred metres from the end of the rail, they have tied not one, but two heavy railway sleepers across the tracks to act as an emergency brake. It soon becomes obvious to the men that their plan is working a little more efficiently than hoped, and they bail over the side into the hard sand. Rubbing their bruised bodies and grazed egos, they watch in alarm as the runaway trolley hits the sleepers. It flies up in the air, and, to their open-mouthed astonishment, lands squarely on the rails on the other side of the obstruction. Unchecked, the trolley smashes up against the hopelessly inadequate stops and dives headlong to the bottom of the waters of Walvis Bay Lagoon.

Danger Point

Danger Point is the first place that feels like home to me, where we are all together in the same house, on the same piece of soil. The lighthouse is a little to the west of Cape Agulhas, near the fishing village of Gansbaai in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

Danger Point is a remote posting. The closest town to the small lighthouse settlement is the fishing village of Gansbaai, about ten kilometres of gravel roads away in the weekly supply truck. Danger Point is an apt name for this lighthouse, as many lives had been lost along this stretch of coast in marine disasters involving over one hundred ships, the most infamous being the wreck of the *HMS Birkenhead*, which struck the mostly submerged reef now known as Birkenhead Rock. It was during the attempted escape from the sinking ship that one male crewman, with little thought of the consequences, shouted out, 'Women and children first!' This phrase went on to become the norm on all rapidly sloping decks worldwide. As a result, while all the women

and children survived, most of the men perished. In 1895, forty-three years later, Danger Point Lighthouse was commissioned as a warning to all mariners plying this dangerous shark-infested stretch of water. It remains a beacon to this day, stabbing its lightsabre far out to sea, precisely three times every forty seconds.

There is something about the sea that matches the pulse, the ebb and flow, of my energy. It makes me feel understood in areas that are both known and unknown to me. I love the mornings at Danger Point. Dreams transition to the breath of the morning tide surging against an uneven shore, receding with the sound of a million weeping black mussels, packed side by side in carpets clinging to the jagged sandstone rock. My sisters and I play for hours in the tidal pools along the shore, always with a wary eye open for puff adders and Cape cobras, of which there are many.

I am fascinated by the blowhole in the rocks near the sea, which spews thick coffee-coloured foam each time a wave surges into the caves below us. We sit and watch this spectacle for hours when the sea is angry and brooding. Seagulls, busy and noisy in uncoordinated chorus, beckon me to come and see what the sea has left for me during the night. Maybe a glass fishing buoy, or a rusting tin of beans from some foreign fishing trawler, all mixed in with the fragrance of buchu, kelp, and sometimes a dead seal, smelling like Marmite on rye bread.

I never fully understand what my dad does as a lighthouse keeper, but I feel proud of him. I can sense that whatever he does is done with diligence, intelligence, and pride. The two huge lighthouse generators are immaculate. Everything in that generator room is spotless, painted with green enamel paint and covered with a thin sheen of pro-

tective oil. The sound in that room is deafening, the smell of diesel overpowering, but it never frightens me. I understand it to be an important piece in the tapestry of my life on Danger Point; it signifies to me that everything is under control. I understand that the lives of many people depend on the light at night, the foghorn during times of mist, and something about radio signals transmitted into the air.

My dad speaks over the radio with every ship he can see (and many that he can't), providing information about position, weather, and how to avoid the reefs. He can tap fluent Morse code, often spelling out our names at the dinner table with a 'dit-dit-da- da-da,' much to the annoyance of my mom. As kids, we knew the Morse code for 'S.O.S.' before we could say, 'Mama!'

Even as a five-year-old, I understand that life at Danger Point is as close to perfect as it will ever be. I never want to leave here, but soon the talk around the dinner table is of school for my sisters and moving closer to a better life. We leave the smell of buchu, diesel oil, and the occasional pungent dead seal and head for the city.

I still cry for the part of my father which never came with him to the city. It remained on that rocky shore, to attend to the light, long after technology replaced the need for a human voice. A voice to confirm the exact location of a dangerous reef, or to spin some exaggerated yarn between men who understand the meaning of solitude.