

South

By Gillian Philip

Ice lies in a thin slick across the bay, but he's in the water anyway. The boy always is. Just like his grandmother.

It might as well be the other side of the earth: her side of it. A late and overcast day in monochrome, showing only white, and spikes of grass and tree, and the hills drawn in charcoal streaks with scribbles of gully in between. Not so much snow, now.

The world's only colour lies in the beam of the Land Rover headlights – sick yellow of winter grass, a few dull pink yards of road. I switch off the engine and the lights too. Creak the door open into silence, and walk down to the shore, tightening my scarf round my neck. Cold burns my throat when I call to him.

'Culley. Time to come home now.'

I wait, used to it now, the tight slow thump of my heart as I wait for him to not-come-back. One day he'll be gone. One day, like his mother.

Not today.

He hauls himself from the water, nostrils flaring open, cropped hair stiff with salt against his long skull, bits of ice still glittering in it. He towels his scalp with one hand, pulls on jeans with the other, tugging denim over damp skin.

He smiles at me. 'Grandpappy.'

'Culley. Your father is worried. It's late.'

He looks at the sky, surprised. 'I was just coming.'

Like a boy hauled from the slides in the play park, he's sheepish, apologetic, a little resentful.

The relief chokes my throat, so to pass the embarrassing moment I bend to retrieve his jumper from the black rocks, and hand it to him. Unhurried, he pulls it over his head; big as it is, it stretches across his overdeveloped shoulders. He smiles at me again, his dark hair stiff with salt and frost but already drying.

'I'll take you back,' I say.

'Thanks. I'm sorry. It's hard to know the time.' He scratches his scalp nervously, and the frost-light makes the slight membrane between his fingers look thinner than ever.

He's a gentle boy. He doesn't like to cause hurt, regrets it when he so often does. I don't worry for him. Not much.

I keep the rifle in the Land Rover, but I know I won't need it.

His grandmother looked much the same, first time I saw her. Half-naked, that is, not gentle. In that climate I thought she was mad, with nothing but a silky-fur blanket clasped round her like a cloak.

I'd gone to watch the penguins because I had some time off, and watching the penguins was a hobby for me, not work like it was for Mal. He watched penguins and fur seals and sometimes leopard seals, when there were any, when there was ice in the bay. They didn't come in the warmer weather. He watched them and counted them and made records, and because those were the days before the internet, he sent data back home on the Inmarsat. I helped him, when I wasn't fixing things. He loved his job, and I loved mine. You had to, or you wouldn't be out on this lonely outcrop of a godforsaken island.

The unexpected woman sat on a rock, watching the penguins too, and they seemed more nervous of her than of me, but I wasn't watching emperors any more. I laid my binoculars down because I didn't need them; she was that close.

When they say blood runs cold it's a cliché, but there's no other way to describe it. She wasn't supposed to be there. I'd thought Mal and I were alone at this end of the island, and I thought for a ridiculous moment she'd missed her cruise ship and been left behind. Except that people off the cruise ships didn't dress like that – half-naked under a silky-fur wrap.

She turned her head and looked at me.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

My gut had tightened with the fear of madness. It was well below zero but her pale skin didn't prickle with gooseflesh and she didn't shiver, not once. Her hair was sleek and black and wet, and for a crazy moment I thought she must have been in the water. But that wasn't possible. Not in her skin.

'I'm fine,' she smiled, 'I'm grand. Hello yourself.'

To step away from a near-naked woman, and one so beautiful: that would have been the mad thing. And when Malcolm found out, as he certainly would the next time we got garrulous with homesickness and rum, he'd never let me forget it.

So I took a step closer instead, and saw that her hair wasn't black at all but an odd iron-grey, with a hint of what might have been dappling. And though she was so tall and straight and slender, and her face was a long reptilian oval – which isn't to say it wasn't beautiful – her shoulders looked disproportionately powerful. She smelt of the sea: of grease-ice and salt and tussac grass, and quite possibly penguin-shit. I fell in love.

I said, 'You'll have to come back to the base. You'll have to come back with me.'

I'm a practical man. I'm not a scientist like Mal but an engineer. I fix things. I fix plumbing and generators and wireless masts and chemical toilets, when they need fixing. So I'm practical, and I'm rational, but where I come from they do have the seal stories. I thought the superstitions and the myths and the legends all came from the same place I did. It never occurred to me there could be others. I didn't know there'd be an equivalence, a balance in the round globe, a mirror image of the north, if you like, which was the south.

I thought they made the seal stories because common seals look so human: gentle and intelligent and empathetic. But those seals of the south don't look human. Or if they do, it's another kind of human altogether.

I should have thought. But I didn't think. I didn't think at all in the months, turning into years, when Elin was mine.

Mal counted the leopard seals and studied them, and he loved them and respected them, but he feared them properly too. He stayed out of the water when the ice was in the bay, and he stayed away from the land's edge when the penguins flocked like a black-and-white buffet. He didn't want to be mistaken for one, he said, laughing.

Elin liked Mal. She laughed when he laughed, but I was never jealous. It never occurred to me that she'd be unfaithful; she was too possessive, too passionate for that. She didn't want to go back, she said, to the small fishing settlement on the other side of the island. She liked scientists, that's why she'd come. She liked engineers too, and me best of all.

She got pregnant, of course. I hadn't exactly thought to stock up on supplies that might prevent that. I wanted her to leave the island then, to come with me on the red-hulled supply ship when it next called. She refused.

Unnervingly, she refused any help at all. The pregnancy couldn't have been as long as it seemed; I must have lost count of the months. She was restless and discontented, and liked to be alone, and one day she didn't come back for all my searching and screaming, or Mal's. She simply reappeared the next day with her infant.

She smiled, her dappled hair plastered to her head, but the dampness wasn't sweat, because when I kissed it and kissed it, holding onto her fiercely, it smelt of seawater, and ice, and penguin-shit, and blood.

I loved our baby so ferociously, fear settled into me and wouldn't leave. Children change things. Not outwardly, though; not for a while. I was too embarrassed to confide my suspicions to Mal, and I didn't want to argue with Elin, so as usual we'd sit in the evenings, all three of us – four, with our quiet, ravenous daughter – and we drank rum and talked and laughed and spoke about the fur seals and the supply ship and the weather coming in across the razor-edged hills.

Elin got along great with Mal, but nobody stays on the base forever; nobody, it seemed, except her. And now me, and our child. Mal's replacement, when he chose to leave, was a spiky little man called Thewlis. I didn't especially want a replacement for Mal, but then the base didn't belong to me or the others who came through. The base wasn't Elin's. A replacement for Mal had to come to count the penguins and the fur seals, to record them and measure them and send the data back.

Thewlis respected the leopard seals as much as Mal did. He'd get out of the water if there was one there with him. They weren't aggressive, only curious, but you never knew. You never knew, and you could only remember Shackleton's wild stories, and take account of anecdote and an earlier, less scientific age.

Thewlis understood a lot less about children than about sub-Antarctic fauna, but that was hardly his fault. He simply couldn't understand us keeping Sylvie in the wilderness. We

beggared his belief, he said, when he got to know us better. It was mad, bringing up a child here. And soon she'd be of an age for school, and the nearest school was two islands away, and then what were we planning to do?

I hadn't planned anything, but I didn't like to admit that because I'd sound downright gormless.

Thewlis didn't like or understand Sylvie, but that didn't stop him worrying about her. She needed proper paediatric care and a decent education. He wanted us to take her away.

That's not quite true. I was useful; I knew the base and its innards. He wanted Elin to take Sylvie away.

It's not right, he'd say, stroking his little beard, all concerned. It's no environment for a youngster.

Elin said that Sylvie ruined the environment for him; that was his trouble.

'I think it's only right,' he told me quietly, one evening after he finally browbeat me into agreement, the evening before the red-hulled ship was due to dock again and take us north to civilisation and nursery school and paediatricians. 'The older she gets, the more she'll need to be away from here.'

I knew he wanted the bleak beauty of the place to be child-free, but I also knew he was right. So I drank too much, and Elin stormed out in a temper, pulling her fur wrap around her winter clothes and slamming the door. She must have expected to be very cold. Indeed, she was gone all night and between alcohol and anxiety I didn't sleep at all. I turned over and stared into the dark and worried till the palest streak of dawn let me get up.

Stiff and bleary, I opened the blind. There was ice in the bay.

I saw Thewlis close to the base; he'd only just set out on his rounds of the ragged shoreline. He glanced up at me, waved. I waved back, and thought about the glitch with the generator and how I could fix that one last thing before I left.

I sighed and blinked hard at my headache, and that's why I didn't quite see the lunging shadow. If I saw it at all it was a blur on the edge of my vision, like a fleeting, flaring cataract.

I heard his hoarse howl, and then I was running, grabbing my boots on, not bothering with my anorak. I hoped Thewlis could keep his hold on the frayed edge of the ice, because he wouldn't live if he went in the water, not when something had pulled him there like a striking snake.

I thought I ran fast, but by the time I reached the brink of the land, scattering offended penguins, there was nothing on the ice but a smear of blood.

We found Thewlis later that day: me, two fishers, and my own replacement plus the supply ship's crew after it docked. We hunted for hours, and I thought we might not see him again at all. One of the fishers from the little town brought a pistol; it was too late for that, but I didn't say so.

When we found his sodden corpse, Thewlis was barely touched; I thought he might even be alive, till we rolled him over and saw his skull, crushed by a single bite.

When we told Sylvie she ran sobbing in shock to her mother, who stood soberly at the base door and wrapped the girl in her arms and kissed her dappled hair.

Later, the two of us argued so badly that the others left us alone to it, going outside to try to smoke in air that was minus ten and falling.

'It was a leopard seal,' I yelled at Elin. 'I'm not changing our plans. We'll still take Sylvie when the ship leaves. It's dangerous here.'

'It isn't dangerous for *her*,' she spat. 'Thewlis antagonised it. He must have.'

'You're being selfish,' I shouted. 'Because you don't want to leave.'

‘And neither does she. And she never will.’

And of course she flew out again, slamming the door so hard it bounced. I rolled my eyes. Her rage was too much of a habit for me to care. Instead of caring I drank more, and laughed with the crew and the new engineer and the men from the settlement, and drank even more. Sylvie played quietly in the corner of the room with her plastic Sea Life animals, and looked morosely, but only occasionally, towards the door.

I drank beyond the point of not caring, to a state of suddenly caring very desperately. I was drunk and maudlin and angry, so when I stood up fast, I knocked over the chair.

I blinked, and stared at the abandoned Sea Life set. ‘Where’s Sylvie?’

Sylvie wasn’t far away. I saw her in the light of stars and ice: ice in the bay, ice on the edge of land and life. The child was laughing, dangling her bare feet into freezing water, leaning down to the sleek raptor head raised above the greasy slick of ice.

‘No,’ I screamed. ‘No.’

It bared dinosaur teeth as ancient as death. Sylvie hesitated, looked back at me, then at the seal. I was drowning its growls with my furious frightened yells, and I was outpacing the men behind me. I’d scared her. Sylvie began to cry.

‘Daddy,’ she wailed.

As I hurtled towards her I saw that blurred shadow lunge again, and the seal had her leg.

And I had her arm, but only just. I looked at the seal and I knew it would tear her in half sooner than let her go. It glared hatred, my daughter’s blood on its teeth, and suddenly I wasn’t drunk any more. I wasn’t drunk when I yelled ‘Shoot it! Shoot it!’ and the man running up behind me fired a shot into the sleek reptilian head.

But my vision was blurred all the same, and my eyes stung with awful grief, and the head was sliding under the surface, wolf-eyes turning dull, full of hatred, then full of nothing but death, and then lost in the deep cold water, trailing a single tendril of blood.

I took Sylvie home. I didn't love the island any more. My daughter had health checks and hospital treatment and an education, but she walked with a limp ever after, a limp and a faraway sadness. She limped down the aisle on her wedding day, and she limped to the boy Culley's baptism, and I daresay she limped the day she went to the sea at last and didn't come back.

On that day and many days after, Culley's father howled with grief, so I got him drunk and patted his shoulder, but I knew I shouldn't cry myself because, after all, I'd cheated the sea of her for long enough.

And I did have Sylvie's son, because she was better than her mother. She was just selfish enough to go to the sea, but not quite selfish enough to take the boy with her.

Still I worry. I go down to the bay that's a mirror reflection of one in the far south, and I shiver in the darkness and count seconds, and wait for Culley to not-come-back.

And sometimes him not-coming-back isn't the worst thing I imagine, when he smiles at me and his canines gleam in moonlight, and his hug is so strong and fierce it could drag me under.

I keep the rifle in the Land Rover.

It's not as if I'll need it.