

Storm over Birkhall



CHAPTER 2

BETWEEN THE STORMS – BARKLY EAST, NOVEMBER 2009

*I no longer want ideal conditions of weather and water,
though I look for both within reason. But a bright
and pretty day, a day when one is free to go, is the
day to go fishing, even if the fish do not think so.*

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN, FISHERMAN'S SPRING



There was a time on my frequent fishing trips to Barkly East when I drove straight through from Cape Town in a day and ended up on Basie and Carien Vosloo's farm, *Birkhall*, road-scorched and tar-crazed – the highway equivalent of jet lag, I guess. You could put it down to old age or just to a steady falloff in my need to rush, but I've at last arrived at the point where the drive up on any long-distance fishing trip is almost as enjoyable as the fishing once I get there.

At first on these road trips I just leaned heavily towards taking my time, but later I began making a real point of it – and once the countryside stopped flashing by like the blurred-green scenery you see from one of Europe’s bullet trains, I began to notice how much I’d been missing. In fact, I noticed three things; the first being how interesting and beautiful the countryside is when you actually take the time to look at it, especially the deep Karoo. Then I got to understand that the prospect of fishing can somehow seem all the more enticing just for the waiting. Finally, after one or two encounters you could call close shaves or near misses, it dawned on me that I was rapidly increasing my chances of getting written off in a head-on collision, a point when you naturally start considering a more defensive lifestyle.

And so my trips to *Birkhall* jumped from around twelve hours of solid driving interspersed with hurried stops for coffee to something like twenty-four hours with a relaxing overnight stay and plenty of unhurried stops at various points along the 1,100-kilometre route.

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The R61 is the dead-quiet, flagpole-straight, endless and seemingly boring stretch of road between Beaufort West and Aberdeen, and I love it like no other highway in South Africa. It passes through 150 kilometres of its own vast void of apparent nothingness. But that’s deceptive, because I discovered the R61 is actually varied and interesting when you take the time to look around.

The first half *is* unremarkable. It’s almost featureless; just flat, treeless Karoo scrub country with mountain ranges too distant to be distinctive. But the closer you get to Aberdeen, which is the village at the end of the R61, the more the road takes on the character of the Camdeboo Karoo, meaning impressively tall mountains

to the north and a distant, pastel-blue range to the south, both ranges running the whole length of the highway. Vervet monkeys congregate in the thorn trees that line the dust-dry riverbeds, small herds of springbok graze the veld, raptors are plentiful, especially the Pale Chanting Goshawks that classically sit in wait on treetops. And then, in the colder months, fields of blood-red aloes light up the drab veld like Chinese lanterns.

I begin Route 61 with my mind numbed from the soulless five-hour, truck-dodging drive up the N1 to Beaufort West. But halfway from Beaufort West to Aberdeen, I begin to feel free and comfortably alone. I relax, count goshawks, monkeys, kestrels, antelope, the rarer shy and cleverly camouflaged bustards and korhaans, and suddenly I don't notice those sleep-inducing white lines slipping relentlessly by under the bonnet any longer. And if I pass more than a dozen cars on this ninety-kilometre section, the road feels busy.

I always pull off the road near a bridge over a dry riverbed, where a stand of thorn trees throws a pool of shade onto the edge of the highway. I stop as much for a cup of black, sweet coffee and to stretch, as to suck deep breaths of Karoo air into my lungs.

This trip, the truck was half in, half out of the shade. It's not the deepest shade and not the coolest. The countless different birds I'd seen from the truck were strangely absent, as if alerted by my stopping. But somewhere in the trees along the riverbed I eventually heard the sound of birdsong. In the far distance, a small troop of monkeys crossed the road in loping, taunting strides, stopping on the white line to stare at me. Only a single car passed with a whoosh and a toot of its horn. I sipped the last of my coffee and left. Moments later, through a hallucinatory heat-haze, I saw a silvery-blue lake shimmering just below a distant line of mountains. It was hard to believe it wasn't actually a huge, sparkling piece of water.

About thirty kilometres from Aberdeen, and close by the road, there's a lovely old farm called *Kariegasfontein*. Its tin roofs and white-washed buildings are set in a stand of trees, edged by tall palms and prickly pears. The farm spans both sides of the highway; farmhouse one side, outbuildings and sheds the other. I have liked the look of this farm ever since I first saw it seventeen years back, and I always slow to a walking pace here to soak in its sense of remoteness and its rustic, timeless, deep-Karoo atmosphere. In the vast sweep of bone-dry Karoo country, the palms and the surrounding trees lend the aura of an oasis to the place.

Over the years I had wondered who owns the farm and pondered its history, and was frequently tempted to drop in and announce myself as a passing visitor in need of a cup of coffee and a history lesson.

On this trip I actually did turn off at *Kariegasfontein*. I took a drive along a side road that swung around the back of the farmhouse, parked off and busied myself taking photographs of the scrub veld and thorn trees and the nearby range of tall mountains. The only sound was the silky click of my camera's shutter. Then a farmer drew up in a truck. I suspected from the look on his face that he was about to ask what the hell I was doing on his land, but instead he lifted a hand in greeting and said, 'Okay, I see you're just taking a few photos.' I told him I had admired his farm for years, that I'd kept telling myself I'd drop in one day, but somehow never had. He introduced himself as Philip McNaughton and I introduced myself. He looked at me for a long moment, then asked, 'Do you do any fly fishing?'

'When I get the chance,' I said.

'Are you the guy who wrote a book on it?'

'For my sins I did,' I replied.

'Small world,' he said. 'It's back in my house right now. Can't recall the title. My uncle passed it on to me.'

'Is it *Hunting Trout* maybe?'

He said, 'Could be.'

And that, roughly, is how we became acquainted, and how I learned a little about the history of *Kariegasfontein*.

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I've got into the habit of breaking my trips to Barkly East at a place called *Mount Melsetter*, Mike and Candy Ferrar's guest farm midway between Middelburg and Steynsburg, though you might need to consult a map to get a bead on exactly where that is. I'm usually there at about 5pm, when it's a relief to unpack, stroll around, then sit on the veranda with a glass of white wine looking over a vista that starts with a wide sweep of garden and a stand of thorn trees hiding a dry riverbed, and ends in the wavy, purple outline of a range of distant mountains.

This part of the Karoo is a birding paradise, so I picked up my binoculars and strolled up the riverbed with Mike. We spotted a few interesting birds, didn't find the Namaqua Sandgrouse Mike had seen the day before, then came across what I thought might be fossil remains. Mike confirmed it and took me to a few more pieces, carefully wiping the dust off one particularly large specimen to expose the stark-white remains of a ribcage embedded in grey rock.

'Palaeontologists think this is *Lystrosaurus*,' he said, 'the precursor to mammals on earth, around 250 million years ago.'

Standing in that dry Karoo riverbed, holding the remnants of the ribcage, made mankind's history on the planet seem remarkably recent – and my own existence in the wider picture of the universe remarkably brief, never mind insignificant.

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From *Mount Melsetter*, the drive to *Birkhall* is just a lazy roll through folding grassland country and then into mountains. Along the way the weather changed. In Burgersdorp the sky was blue and laced with clouds, but by the time I stopped to fuel up in Barkly East, the clouds were low-lying and slate-bellied. The clouds were reflected in the pools of rainwater that stood in the streets. When I asked the petrol jockey for his forecast on the weather, he just shook his head, as if implying some dark portent, then added, '*Maar, meneer, jou bakkie lek rooiwyn.*' (But, sir, your truck's leaking red wine.)

I walked around the back. Sure enough, a wide swath of dusty-red cabernet stained the tailgate and bumper, and the inside of the load bed smelled like a shebeen. I had packed the back of the cab with my fly-fishing gear, float tube and five boxes of Shepherd's Cottage wine – a couple of cases each of reds and whites, and a case of rosé. The wine was a gift for Donie and Juan-Marie Naudé, who run a fly-fishing lodge on their farm *Vrederus* in the Pitseng Valley. Then I remembered hitting one of the noxious speed bumps on the outskirts of Aliwal North. They remind me of the ski-ramps you see in the Winter Olympics. Even at 40km/h, I was launched into space. Everything on the floor lifted, then crashed down with a bang that I could feel through my spine, but I hadn't given a thought to the wine. One of the boxes of red hadn't quite survived the fall. At least half the bottles were cracked and emptied; thankfully the rest were intact.

I checked everything in the cab. All was good. Rod bags, rod tubes, fly vests, the airless carcass of my float tube, folded waders, fly-tying kit, nets. All were free of wine stains. Not that it would have mattered.

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The drive from Aliwal North to Barkly East had been pleasant, the dams along the road all full, the aloes decked in red blooms, and the prickly pears sprouting flowers of pastel pink and pale yellow. In one field I counted more than a dozen Blue Cranes. That was pleasing, because not many years back we saw few enough of them to be concerned. And since I've done this road trip on average at least twice a year for many years, I'm in a position to notice changes like this, and it's good when they're for the better. Some years, certainly 2005 comes to mind, Blue Cranes were as rare as honest politicians. I wondered what had changed in their favour, but long may it live, whatever it is.

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The real nature of this trip, though, revealed itself as I crossed the Kraai River at Moshesh's Ford, forty kilometres from Barkly East and only six kilometres from *Birkhall*. The river was a thundering, bank-high, coffee-coloured torrent. By the time I pulled into the farmyard it was raining, and Basie said more rain was on the way. Plan B was already going through my head.

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When the rivers in the lowlands are rained out, you have to head into the hills to catch fish. In the headwaters, the flow in the streams will be high, and the water may look like ginger beer, but that's no problem. In normal conditions, these headwaters are mostly thin, fragile and exquisitely clear places, where you walk on eggs, use hair-fine tippets and tiny flies to catch trout. But give them a day or two to run off after rain, even after a heavy storm, and they suddenly become as sweet as a summer peach.

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My friend Tony Kietzman drove across the next morning from Rhodes where he lives and works. We decided on fishing the Coldbrook on my friend Theuns Botha's farm. It's a tributary of the Sterkspruit River about thirty kilometres upstream from *Birkhall*. We enjoyed a pleasant hour catching up with each other on the gravel road that heads into the mountains and crosses the Sterkspruit three times. At each crossing, the flow was still churning with fullness and colour, but turning onto the side road leading up the valley the Coldbrook runs in, the water changed. It was still fast-flowing, but clear enough to be fishable. We stopped just short of the first drift above Theuns's farmhouse. He owns this section of the Coldbrook and, over the years, has become a good friend of mine.

The stream is interesting up here – mainly swift pocket water, but there are deeper, slower-flowing runs and a few pools where the water takes on a soft, jade-coloured tinge. We drifted dry flies through the better pockets and runs, each drift triggering the lovely anticipation of an imminent take, but nothing rose to our offerings. But there is plenty of stream up here, so we kept moving, casting a dry fly over likely-looking spots, and if it didn't raise a trout, quickly moving to the next. In an hour's fishing we never saw a fish. In fact, we didn't even spook one, which was ominous. I told Tony I'd fished this same stretch with some pals a few months back when we lost count of the number of fish we caught by the time we got around the first two bends.

We changed to small nymphs hung under chartreuse poly yarn indicators and fished with the fly occasionally bumping riverbed pebbles, our eyes following the indicator, waiting for any hint of unnatural movement, and when there was, lifting our rods smartly. It wasn't as poetic as dry fly fishing, and it wasn't how we'd have

chosen to fish a stream like this, but we got a few trout. They were the sort of rainbows that are typical of most little-fished, upland tributary streams: startled-looking fish, all small and ice-cold to the touch, all iridescently bright with rose-coloured flanks heavily spotted, as if scattered with the drifting soot of a campfire.

Along the riverbank there were stands of bright-yellow irises, *Moraea huttonii*, and the surrounding valley was looking beautiful. It was enough just being there, but the fishing was fun in the old-fashioned sense that upstream-indicator nymphing for small trout always is. In the end I fished the leader naked, without an indicator, just watching for the glint of a fish, or for the leader to move or tremble or slow. We weren't short of trout, but they weren't in every run either, and none was longer than a ruler.

Mid-afternoon a wind got up, with an icy edge to it. We were about done and a long way above the truck. We headed out, following convenient sheep tracks along the side of the stream, then hugged a fence in the last paddock where a bull lifted his head to stare at us, his jaws rolling rhythmically on the cud, his eyes vacant with indifference. At the truck we poured a mug of warm coffee, wondered why this hadn't been another sixty-fly dry fly day and, in the end, put it down to the weather. It had seemed a certain bet we'd catch a heap of fish off the surface; but then one of the lessons you learn in fly fishing, after mastering casting and some of the other circus tricks the sport is known for, is that you can't second-guess wild trout.

The drive back was beautiful in its own way. Huge plum-coloured clouds heavy with rain lay low-sprawled across the horizon, but here and there we saw thin patches of blue sky, and splashes of sunlight lit lucerne fields a neon-green. At times the mountains on one side of the road were golden with treacle-coloured light, while on the other side they were deep in shadow. It was a strange, surreal landscape: the southern Drakensberg in one of its grander guises,

a gentle beauty in a landscape that under the fast-approaching storm was becoming faintly menacing. Yet this sort of scene is no more out of place this time of the year in these mountains than a London cab in Oxford Street. We stopped the car to take photographs. I could smell the rain coming on the cold wind – the dank, earthy smell of wet leaves newly turned. Suddenly the petrol jockey's silent shake of the head came to mind.

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That evening on the *Birkhall* veranda, Basie grilled steaks as thick as roof rafters. He did them on a steel wok connected to a portable gas cylinder. The white-marbled meat was good in ways it's hard to put your finger on, other than to say you can't lose sight of the fact that it hadn't come from a fridge in some city supermarket, but from a grass-fed animal slaughtered on the farm.

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The storm went through and the morning sky was a huge blue dome. I caught trout in the lake on *Birkhall* using a standard pattern that I tie to imitate hatching midge pupae. The abdomen is an amber-coloured Nymph Rib, which has a lovely resinous quality and thins out as you stretch it tighter. The thorax is peacock herl, and the breathing gills are white filoplume fibres. I tie them unweighted on grub hooks in sizes 14 and 16.

The wind was light, and swallows and martins swooped around hawking insects off the surface, their beaks leaving only the tiniest marks on the water. If a fish rose within casting range I'd drop a fly alongside it, leave the fly dead still to sink, then lift gently, wait for the bow wave as the fish swung to intercept, pause that crucial fraction of a second, then, as the leader straightened, set

the hook with no more than a gentle lift of the rod tip. The fish weren't big. Well, not as big as trout *can* get in this piece of water. But then I reminded myself they were big enough to have eaten the fish we'd caught the day before in the Coldbrook, meaning the size of any fish you catch is relative; at least to your, and the fish's, circumstances.

It began to rain way out north over the mountains, the rain falling in grey columns that immediately left a liquid rainbow across the skyline. It was nearly as pretty as the rainbow that appeared some years back when I fished this same lake with Chris Bladen. Not to gild the lily, but that day the mountain above *Birkhall* was white with snow and the light as clear as diamonds.

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A day later I sat on the *Birkhall* veranda, tying flies in the soft rays of the early morning sun. I'd given Carien's handsome chickens the eye as a potential source of hackles, then thought better of it. Later I strolled across to the shed where shearers were deftly flicking ewes onto their backs; in one long, uninterrupted run they'd shear the wool off an animal, then casually toss the shorn pelt intact onto the sorting table as if it was a complete duvet.

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I checked the Sterkspruit at the Lindisfarne Bridge. The river could have drowned you. Basie asked if I'd mind going to Barkly East to collect feed for his rams. On the way I took care to avoid a tortoise crossing the road, an uncommon sight in this part of the world, then came across another nearer town. On the road back I threaded around another tortoise crossing the road on a blind rise and got out of my truck to save it. It was making for high ground,

so that's where I put it. Then it struck me that *all* these tortoises had been making for high ground.

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There were deep rumbles across the hills that night, and lightning lit the black sky. There was one momentous clap of roof-rattling thunder that seemed to explode inside my skull, and we were in darkness. For a moment, every feature of the garden and every tree was floodlit by a lightning strike, and I saw rain sweeping across in nearly horizontal waves, shafts of silver water blown on winds that seemed to buckle everything. I went back to bed and read by candlelight, enjoying the storm's sudden electric flashes of light, the steady sound of rain on the roof and the slowly receding, deep drumrolls of thunder – the exhibition of primeval power. It made me wonder whether tortoises know a lot more about weather patterns than we humans do.

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The next day was as quiet as a dove in a tree, the sky laced with feathery clouds. Things felt innocent enough down on earth; in contrast, the long vapour trails left by passing jets were blown apart in seconds, a clear sign that something less innocent was going on up there. Once again Tony joined me. The rivers were still out, so we waded into weed patches in *Birkhall* dam until we were up to our waist, casting short lines into emerald-coloured buckets of deep water in front of us. We'd driven past a Black Stork on the way in, and an African Spoonbill was feeding quietly in the shallows on the far side of the lake.

I was back on my midge pupa imitation. It was small – say, size 16 – but then the natural is often small, and it somehow felt right.

The water looked inviting in the way lake water does when it falls straight off weed banks into resinous-green caverns full of clarity and depth, and where the surface is winking with light. There was plenty of lake and there were plenty of trout. The weather was good, and I felt comfortably confident. I fished the midge pattern dead slow, like a natural, just under the surface, almost on a gentle wind-drift. I had greased a few inches of the tippet to stop the pupa sinking too deep. I had one hard pull and lost the fish, then landed a rainbow hen of around three pounds.

Sometime that morning I left my rod lying on a patch of weeds floating on the surface to search my vest for something. While I was searching, the palest green damselfly nymph came wriggling towards me, just beneath the surface. It crawled up a stalk of weed and hatched in front of me into a flimsy, waxy-winged adult. Then it climbed onto the handle of my fly rod to dry out. I photographed the whole process, and then, with that remarkable piscatorial insight we fly fishers are occasionally known for, I changed to an imitation of a slender, pale-green damselfly nymph and fished it slowly in gaps between the weed-beds. I hooked and landed a few rainbows, one of them a brute of a fish well over six pounds. Tony had a heavy fish break him clean off. Then way down the bank, I saw him lift a dripping landing net that bulged deeply under the weight of a bucking fish. Against the sunlight Tony was briefly surrounded by a sparkling halo of spray.

You might say the cue to change to a damselfly imitation came as a blessing of sorts, but the fact is we don't often crack the code in fly fishing quite this easily. The point you need to remind yourself of is that the code is mostly waiting there to be cracked as long as you keep watching and thinking – or, like me, just get plain lucky.

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It's a reassuring sign on any trip – and fishing trips especially – that things are going well when you lose track of the days, and it's even better if you aren't exactly sure of the week. I'd had a day wandering up a tiny stream that handed over its trout quite easily, but none of these fish was as impressive as the pair of prancing Crowned Cranes I came across on the drive back, or the little White-throated Swallow that refused to fly off its perch on the railing of a bridge until I got so close I could almost have touched it.

I had been fishing a tributary of the Sterkspruit, petite and not open to the public, a bright stream that I guessed we would actually never bother fishing if the better-known rivers were even in half-good nick. So it's rarely fished, and trotting a size 16 RAB through the runs proved the point. The trout were either off guard or they were as trusting as house pets. Maybe both. Whatever, getting in some fishing like this once in a while strokes the ego. And you couldn't turn your nose up at the size of these fish either. Okay, they averaged out around nine inches, but that means the occasional twelve-inch fish showed up.

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I spent an afternoon on *Birkhall* dam again, this time experimenting with different patterns. Things were getting to feel comfortably familiar. There isn't much better than a small damselfly nymph on most trout lakes in this country, but it's pleasant, in a contrary sort of way, to do something different, so I tried a size 10 DDD that bobbed nicely on the surface but remained untouched. I changed to a sunken midge pattern and had a trout take it in mid-water straight away. This pattern mostly does best in the evening, and mostly up in the shallows, but here the pattern was suddenly working on a bronze-bright day in deeper water when the dry fly wasn't. It was one of those counterintuitive revelations that happen

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fairly often on stillwaters – although when I think about it, you don't so much work out these revelations as stumble on them.

Part of stumbling on things in stillwater fly fishing has to do with common sense, empirical learning and the percentage game. The percentage game says that from about, say, 10am to 4pm, the odds are loaded on the trout feeding in mid- to deep water. It works, but it discounts the propensity stillwater trout have to rise at any buggy-looking dry fly when you least expect it, and often from deep down. I've traded on that for a long while – especially when the water is clear, a west wind is up and there's a nice chop

on the water. And if it needs a lot of faith and patience, a solid rise to a dry fly bobbing over deep water in the middle of the day has a lot more going for it than a solid take to anything else fished deep-sunken and unseen. Just a personal view.

A lot of the empirical experience comes second-hand from countless, mainly UK-based stillwater fly fishers, who over the years have increasingly experimented with small midge patterns, often fished static, never mind what time of day or how deep the water.

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Carlen reminded me that we were due in Rhodes the following day to look at a couple of houses that were on the market. My wife Kathy and I had this dream of moving up there, and on one occasion we nearly pulled it off, but the seller turned down our full-asking-price offer at the last minute. I took some pleasure in telling him to get lost.

Apparently it was Thursday, though I couldn't quite get my head around that because it felt so much like it was the weekend. Had we not been in the market for a small cottage in Rhodes, I might just have headed back into the hills on my own. As well I didn't.

We took the back road through the Bokspruit Valley, where from the debris lying around it was clear the river had come over the bridge a few days before. When you have recent memories of a section of river, even in its detail, then arrive back there expecting to see what you remember, it's a shock when you find an entirely different-looking river, with not much you can recognise outside of the broadest detail. It was wide-flowing and discoloured, but I still wasted time looking into the water from the bridge. I don't know exactly what I hoped to see, but the habit is too ingrained to shake off.

We ran into a squall before Rhodes that quickly turned into a minor hailstorm, and although stormy weather isn't anything unusual up here in November, this was a day that got me thinking a lot more about climate change than before.

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In Rhodes we had coffee with Tony Kietzman in his cottage with its red-slatted veranda. Tony wants to put the flora of this whole area on the tourist map and, when he isn't guiding visiting fly fishers, he's often out hunting for rare plants, particularly orchids.

It's not a bad idea to have a plan B up here because guiding is a hard business, even with hundreds of kilometres of river on your doorstep. Again, it's the uncertainty of the weather that unhinges the prospect of anything like a regular run of fishing clients. Tony stepped off the conveyor belt of business life in Johannesburg a few years back, packed his bags and moved to Rhodes; since then he's lived a quiet but interesting life and hasn't looked back, at least as far as I know.

He lifted a pot of coffee off the stove, lit his pipe and said, 'You know, this life is working for me. I have a pleasant job, I know where the trout are and I know where to find orchids. That's enough for the moment.' Compared to a hectic pace of life in the Big Smoke I thought it made plenty of sense, and I was happy for him.

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Carlen and I looked over a few houses in Rhodes. I saw one that might suit, made some notes and took a few photographs. It's perhaps a romantic dream that I have an 80 percent stake in, my wife hovering at around 20 percent but to me living in Rhodes would tick many boxes. To her, those same boxes would likely stay

empty. I just thought it would be nice to settle here, to write, to paint and do a spot of fishing, maybe even practise a little medicine. Kathy wasn't opposed to the idea, at least not to the point where I had to drop it altogether, so I was soldiering on. That property I told you about that I lost out on at the last moment was ideal: a basic, rustic but charming cottage without electricity, on four plots with plenty of fruit trees and birds in the garden.

After seeing the houses, we popped in to greet Dave Walker at Walkerbouts Inn. This place is something of an institution in Rhodes – as is Dave himself, I suppose – at least in the sense that if you visit the village and miss out on popping in here, you'd have to admit you had toured the city of Agra in India but missed seeing the Taj Mahal.

We left Rhodes a little late, around 4.30pm, after Carien had been tapping her watch and pointing at the heaping banks of dark clouds. Five minutes out of town, the godfather of all storms hit us, rain driving in violently like bullets from machine guns. The road turned to mud, raindrops hitting the soaked ground so hard the muddy water bounced back into the air, leaving a hovering brown haze as high as the front bumper. I could see nothing beyond this liquid-brown veil, couldn't pull over – we'd have been in a ditch all night – couldn't stop because I had this vision of someone smacking into the back of my truck. At times the storm lifted its intensity and I relaxed, but as quickly as it lifted, heavy rain would come in again. I did have time at one point to stop and engage four-wheel drive, but it was a long, slow, slippery twenty minutes of tricky driving before the rain settled to just being very heavy.

As we came back along the road to *Birkhall* the storm eased, but the tiny rivulet running down the hill alongside the farmhouse had grown into a braided torrent of fast-flowing water all of fifty metres wide. It left tiny green islands with newly shorn sheep clustered on them like shipwrecked survivors clinging to rafts.

Below us the Sterkspruit had burst its banks.

The farmyard was bedlam. Neighbours had poured in to borrow canoes, rafts, tubes, anything that floated. They were going out to rescue their sheep. Philip Gush's wife swept past me, soaked to the bone, with a canoe on her head. And the rain was still coming in showers that hit us like nails. A lot of sheep drowned that afternoon.

In the evening people gathered in Basie's lounge. Sarel Steenekamp, Basie's neighbour, was there, unable to get home even though you can see his house from Basie's front veranda. The Sterkspruit was a metre over the Lindisfarne Bridge, effectively cutting him off. He eventually left after midnight when the bridge was safe to cross.

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This was the evening I got to meet two young fellows from Cape Town, Gavin Schneider and Gavin Duveen. They had turned up at *Birkhall* rain-soaked and hoping to get some advice – and maybe some moral support as well – on the best route to *Welgemoed*, a farm only twenty kilometres away up the Bokspruit Valley. They got the advice they needed from the farmers gathered around Basie's pub, and then in the fashion of typically crazed fly fishers, the three of us put the storm aside and made plans to fish the Bokspruit on *Gateshead* once the rivers had settled. For the rest, they sat around waiting, just like Sarel, for the water coming over the Lindisfarne Bridge to drop.

Two days later I drove across to *Welgemoed* to show them *Gateshead*. 'We might even be able to fish it,' I said.

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Gavin Schneider, a young Cape Town-based businessman, bought *Welgemoed* on the banks of the Bokspruit River and converted the old farmhouse into a neat fishing lodge. I knew the house from years back, so I could appreciate the changes he'd made. He'd knocked down inside walls, creating open-plan spaces. Now the kitchen flowed into a dining room and on into a lounge, then onto a patio looking out over the river and the mountains.

On the drive up to *Gateshead* we saw signs of storm damage; branches, even logs, trapped against fences and against the mouths of bridges where they threatened to block the flow, flood the bridge and cause the lands on either side to wash away. We saw land-slips on mountainsides, and deep crevices washed out in open fields. We drove up past the *Brucedell* beat of the Bokspruit where you see a wonderfully tall waterfall from the road. It was pumping. I'd never seen it more beautiful.

Naturally the river was up, but at each bridge we crossed the water got clearer until after the long haul up to *Gateshead* we came to the first concrete drift where you could say the water was fishable – just. A section of the concrete drift over the river was missing, but we threaded past it. At the second drift there was a massive cavity on the upstream side of the concrete crossing that could have swallowed the truck's left front wheel. So we stripped off our boots and socks and waded in, carrying rocks to fill the hole. We felt like dentists filling a large cavity in a big tooth. Then I inched the truck across the drift, the two Gavins slowly walking backwards through the water ahead of me, watching the left front wheel, at the same time giving me nervous hand signals that weren't difficult to interpret except when they gave contrary instructions as to where my wheel should be. It might seem like going to a lot of trouble just to catch a few small trout, but what made it worthwhile is that *Gateshead* in many ways is an unspoiled fly-fishing paradise, and we wouldn't lightly give up on fishing it just because a little

bridge-work was needed to get there. Conditions like this call for a developed sense of adventure and, as it turned out, for a sense of humour as well, because later, as we were tackling up, I realised I'd left my boots and socks on the far side of the drift. But I had wading boots and a spare pair of socks.

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The river was wide and running full, and the current pulled hard on our legs. In the deeper runs, the flow felt like it could carry you away. Gavin D went for a hike just to see the countryside. Gavin S put out a dainty dry fly, and a rainbow took it on his first cast. By the time we reached the corner pool above the old settler's cottage, he'd taken half a dozen more. I was supposed to be giving him a little help, guiding him, if you like, but there's not much advice you can give someone casting a short line upstream with trout jumping on his dry fly in every likely hole. So I joined in the fun with a size 16 Elk Hair Caddis and we had a dry fly bonanza.

The fish seemed crazily hungry from days of not eating in the high flows and cold water. Also in our favour was that the river had lost its usually absurd clarity, and I'm talking the cut-glass clarity that so easily gives your game away. *Gateshead* is usually one of those places where if you don't dress drably, lengthen your tippet to four feet at least and slow down your body movements, especially arm and hand movements, you will go home with a light creel. I once fished up here with a fellow who pulled on a pair of white sun-gloves. I told him that unless he kept his hands in his pockets we wouldn't catch a fish. I lent him a pair of my gloves; a dark pair, in camouflage greens and greys. Even they worry me at times, but they're better than bare hands.

*

We had fished our brains loose, but the weather was changing, and when the tall mountain behind the cottage on *Gateshead* suddenly disappeared in cloud, we took a precautionary hike back to the truck. The drifts had been fordable, but only just. Up here in the catchment an inch or two of rain would lift this river like a freed helium balloon and we'd be stranded for who knows how long. Of course, that would have had its attractive side, but not without enough provisions and beer for a protracted stay.

Gavin D joined us after what he said was a spectacular hike. We were chewing on apples and swallowing the last of the fruit juices when the clouds miraculously lifted, the sky dissolved to a wash of soft blue and the wind dropped. The change was so sudden it seemed surreal. So we hiked downstream and fished back to the truck, all of us catching trout on dry flies from the green-tinted places where the water had depth, until none of us was sure how many fish we'd actually landed. We were fished out, as they say, and didn't miss the occasion to celebrate. I opened a bottle of Springfield Estate's *Life From Stone*. After all, this was the kind of day when the fishing, if we were to get any at all, was in the lap of the gods, and could easily have been more moody than electric. We sipped the cool Sauvignon Blanc from enamel mugs, and it didn't taste the worse for it.

My boots were where I'd left them on the far side of the drift, and the drive out was a stroll.

*

On streams like this, dry flies and emergers add some sparkle to the fishing and, without wanting to sound elitist, it is the purest way to catch wild mountain-stream trout. Some days it can feel like it should be the *only* way, but when the fish hold fast, a small nymph is actually just as attractive to fish.

This time we fished RABs, Klinkhåmers and Elk Hair Caddis patterns on 7X tippets, but I noticed that one fussy trout refused them all, then rose nicely to a size 18 spinner pattern. If ever there was a dry fly pattern worth trying on difficult fish this is it. Art Lee, in his book *Lore of Trout Fishing*, refers to spent-spinner patterns as ‘your clarion angels’. But I’m not suggesting there’s just one pattern for fussy trout. The arrival of CDC feathers, alone, changed that horizon forever. Nor is it to say there will ever be a ‘single pattern’ that can be put into the bracket of a panacea, though we all tend to contrive elaborate personal theories that we believe head us in the right direction when it comes to dry fly selection. And so it should be. The best attribute any pattern ever had is your own deep faith in it.

*

Back at Schneider’s place, we poured beers and sat on the veranda. I brought out a stick of Basie’s beef biltong, and Gavin rustled up a plate of assorted cheeses and biscuits. Sitting there, we couldn’t quite see the Bokspruit River running behind a stand of willows, but we were close enough to hear it. We relived the day’s fishing against the river’s swiftly flowing sounds, and then got a little more serious about trying to solve some of the world’s pressing problems. Politics came into it, as did climate change, sport and the precarious state of the world’s financial systems. It was pitch-black by the time I left to head over the mountains to *Birkhall*.

*

After a while on a trip to this part of the world, your pulse slows to the pace of the place, and I was feeling settled, even though nothing about the weather had changed other than its unpredictability.

Someone once told me that a wise local from these parts said you never get a wet autumn and spring in the same year, which I guess is one of those myths that last until they finally get blown out of the water. But I had an uneasy feeling the place would turn into a fly-fishing paradise as soon as I left – which is more or less what happened.

*

The morning was cold, but a shaft of sunlight lit the barn roof outside the kitchen where the dogs gather like rock rabbits in the warmth. I discovered again that *Birkhall* is a hard place to leave, but at least it wasn't a beautifully sunny day with the Sterkspruit running clear as a spring creek, bugs hatching, swallows swooping and fish rising. I suppose this is the one positive side to a recent flood. It makes leaving easier.

*

There was rain on my drive back through the Karoo, with headwinds so strong I had both hands on the wheel most of the way. At Aberdeen I dropped in on Phil McNaughton, and we leaned against his truck, chatting. It was cold and the clouds were low. It looked like he was also about to get rain. Twenty minutes later I hit a storm, and in no time I was driving past lakes of water on either side of the road. The last time this happened on the R61 I came across what I thought was a pig. It turned out to be an armadillo. It's a burrowing, nocturnal animal and a very rare sight during the day. I guessed its den must have got flooded.

At *Melsetter*, I collected my copy of *Roberts Bird Guide* – a really useful, more compact, workhorse version of the well-known *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa* – that I'd left on Mike and Candy's bar

BETWEEN THE STORMS

counter, and the rest of the trip was one long spell of tar bashing, truck dodging, drinking dubious coffee at roadside takeaways and watching out for speed traps. Somewhere along the road, Basie called to say the weather had cleared and the Sterkspruit was dropping fast. It felt strangely as if this trip wasn't actually over, that if things kept getting better I'd have to give in and head back, within the month maybe... although I guessed Kathy might turn down my visa application for that trip.

